3. Burnout

Introduction and Definition of Burnout

Burnout is a state in which people who have been under large amounts of stress in their professional and/or their private lives can no longer function properly.

It involves:

* physical and emotional exhaustion;
* cynicism and detachment and
* feelings of lack of accomplishment and ineffectiveness.

It also can lead to physical illness.

Burnout occurs in virtually all caregivers, whether they are professionals, trained, or untrained, at one point or another.

Burnout doesn’t appear overnight. It builds up over a period of time.

A person with burnout frequently is unaware that it is happening.

Thus, burnout is dangerous for the caregiver and his or her clients.

In this section, we will describe the causes and prevention of burnout, and how to deal with it once it happens.

Activity

Describe an incident of burnout that you have had. What consequences did it have for yourself, for your clients, and for your personal life?

The Causes of Burnout

Burnout is caused by caring a great deal and by working very hard without taking time and making space for yourself. You feel strong obligations toward your clients, toward your family or friends, to a cause, and/or to other things. You wear yourself out physically and emotionally and do that chronically.

Activity

Describe an incident of burnout in yourself or another person. What caused it?

Symptoms and Signs of Burnout

There are quite a number of signs and symptoms. We give a few here. First, the psychological symptoms:

* emotional exhaustion;
* physical exhaustion;
* sleep problems, that is insomnia, because of thinking about the circumstances, and/or sleeping too much, this to escape from the world;
* not being able to concentrate;
* forgetfulness, even of simple things;
* problems with eating, either eating too much to get pleasure or eating too little because of “nervousness”;
* anxiety;
* depression;
* irritability and anger;
* frustration;
* feelings of being detached and isolated;
* a lack of optimism;
* being cynical about everything;
* apathy;
* hopelessness;
* a feeling of being useless in life;
* low performance levels in your professional life and your private life.

Also, there can be a large number of physical symptoms. We emphasize that you *must* get these checked out by a doctor.

* stomach pain;
* headache;
* chest pain;
* irregular heartbeat;
* shortness of breath;
* sexual dysfunction;
* frequent urination;
* other symptoms in any part of your body.

As we will see in the course on psychology and trauma, high levels of stress can lead to serious physical illness. This is still another reason for dealing with and preventing burnout.

Activity

Give the symptoms of an incident that you or a friend or a colleague has had. How did you deal with them?

Dealing with Burnout

The first point in dealing with burnout is realizing that you have it. People with it tend to ignore colleagues and friends who tell them about it. We thus urge you to take it seriously.

The next step in dealing with it is to find someone to talk to. As we already have mentioned in previous sections of this course, supervision and/or intervision are essential. As we have said before, if you don’t have it on a regular basis, whether or not you have burnout, you are not acting as a responsible caregiver. If there is no “professional” supervisor around, find a colleague with whom you can speak. If worst comes to worst, contact us.

In mild to moderate burnout, you may have to stop work and give your other obligations to others. In serious burnout, you certainly will have to do this. The period of your getting out will vary between individuals and with circumstances.

It is essential that you do things that you like and that give you satisfaction that do not have to do with your obligations and the activities that caused the burnout in the first place.

Obviously, it is important that you make a plan for preventing burnout in the future.

Activity

Describe an incident of burnout that you or another person has had and how you or the other person dealt with it.

Prevention of Burnout

There are a number of important aspects to the prevention of burnout.

One of these is prioritization both in your work and in your private life.

Another is creating a balance between your professional life and your private life.

Still another is taking time for yourself, doing activities that give you pleasure and satisfaction.

Again, we repeat that supervision is a key element in preventing burnout.

Much of this takes planning.

For many people, this takes adaptation and changing of their thought processes.

Activity

Make a plan for preventing burnout in your own life.

Final Remarks

Burnout is almost inevitable in people in caring work. It is crucial to have a plan to prevent it and to deal with it when it occurs. Anything less is shortchanging your clients and yourself.