

Avoiding Burnout

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Burnout: Definition and Causes

Dreading the end of the weekend and the subsequent arrival of Monday morning...feelings of exhaustion, depression, and boredom – work starts feeling heavy...the frustration that it seems we're putting out more than we're getting back...joy and inspiration are replaced by apathy and resignation. These are the common telltale signs of *burnout*: the exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration. In a service-oriented generation such as our own, burnout has a very poignant sense about it; having started out wanting to help others, we can run the danger of feeling “used up,” ourselves.

How does it happen? How does a person move from feelings of excitement and growth (such as at the beginning of a new job or career) to this heavy, soul-stifling dreariness? When does the shift take place from the desire to give selflessly to the feeling of being taken advantage of? According to the Institute for the Integration of Technology and Education:

There are many ways for burnout to happen, however generally speaking burnout happens when one over-gives of themselves. This can happen in many ways such as: too much overtime; setting aside (neglecting) your own issues to help others; doing too much of other's work; being in the presence of constant negative energy; constantly handling other's emergencies (and neglecting your own); allowing others to abuse your kindness; continual emotional dependence on other's approval; allowing yourself to be manipulated; under-compensation; and ignoring your need for accomplishment and growth.

It may seem incongruent, but to best serve others we need to be particularly sensitive to *our own* needs. It actually *is* possible to give too much of oneself.

Recovery

If you have ever felt burned out before, you recognize that the last thing you really want to do when you feel that way is expend even more energy to “fix” the problem. In fact, it may seem like the more energy you devote to overcoming burnout, the more burned out you become! Well-known guru Ram Dass, together with the executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, Paul Gorman, wrote an amazing collection of stories and reflections on service titled *How Can I Help?* They suggest that recovering from burnout is entirely possible, but that it takes skills we often do not think to employ: Reperception and Witnessing (a non-religious method of dispassionate assessment), both of which lead to self-work.

Reperception is a valuable tool for any circumstance in which there is struggle. In essence, reperception is simply looking at a situation differently, using “fresh eyes” to see what has been bothering us so deeply. Dass and Gorman state:

Reperception itself, we've found, has the power to transform situations. Things change as they are seen differently, not necessarily because we are busy altering circumstance. From these shifts in perspective, in turn, we ourselves change. As we reach a deeper sense of who we are, we discover how much more we have to give. (Page 187)

Reperception and witnessing are tied together. To “witness” in this sense is to step back from a situation and simply acknowledge (or “witness”) *what is so*, without judgment of ourselves or of others. It is simply a fair witness of our own humanity and the human experience. If we are able to stand back from our burnout – take a mental step away from it so as to see it more clearly – and then just acknowledge it with a sense of dispassionate assessment, reperception can occur, allowing us to see deeper and more genuinely to the heart of what is really going on.

As long as we remain emotionally tied up with the circumstances at hand, we are far more likely to *react* than to actively *create* an appropriate response. This is certainly not a call to disengage entirely from our emotions. Rather, this suggests that at time of heightened emotional sensitivity – such as in stages of burnout – we might benefit from a less impassioned look at what is really happening.

One way to be sure that we are truly witnessing our experience is to note whether we are emotionally reactive to it. Dass and Gorman write that “the ability to remain quiet and open – simply to observe, never to judge – is what prevents the Witness from becoming reactive and self-conscious.” (Page 187) As we practice this technique of dispassionate assessment, we open ourselves to shifts of perspective that have the ability to change and deepen our character. Repeated use of witnessing and reperception may lead us to observe that the seeds of our burnout are often sown in how we enter a helping situation, revealing our motives, needs, expectations, etc.

In this manner – witnessing to our situation and then reperceiving it appropriately – we can start to do some inner work with ourselves. Psychology attests that the things that bother us are intimately connected to our own sense of self, with all our beliefs, fears, and preconceived judgments. “Self work” happens when we approach ourselves in a firm but gentle and compassionate way, exploring the areas of our inner landscape that don’t readily show up for close scrutiny. Witnessing and reperceiving may actually reveal insights that are either unsettling or reassuring, but if we are infused with a steady, conscious commitment to discovering the truth about ourselves and our situation, we can recognize that our reactions are simply thus. We can notice them and let them go.

Facing burnout is never easy, and often seems to demand more energy than we think we have. Stepping back from a burned out situation, setting aside our emotions and trying to reperceive what is really going on, are steps that can help us recover from burnout. Rather than trying to change the outside circumstance, this is an approach that works from the inside out, and thus is more likely to affect a deeper and more lasting level of change.

Prevention

In their moving and thought-provoking book *In the Spirit of Happiness*, the Monks of New Skete address the issue of work's relationship to a healthy sense of self and spirituality. "Misguided, cynical thinking hides from us the inherent dignity of work," they write. "Whenever we exert ourselves, whenever we strive to accomplish something...it presents an opportunity to make our love and humanity more visible." (Page 265) The monks go on to say that work "is a natural and necessary part of human life. Most of us have to work to survive, but all of us have to work if we are to become whole." (Page 281) Work is good – producing something, doing something, experiencing the fruits of our labors can feel good and actually affect our mental, emotional, and spiritual health in positive ways.

One way to keep burnout at bay is to keep a "wide view" of our work and what it is that we are doing in the world. Reconnecting with *why* we are doing what we are – our values and desires – can be a powerful way to maintain an expansive state of mind. Do we think about why we are in our profession? What draws us to this form of service to others? How are our contributions changing the world, making it a better, healthier place? These are all questions that can help us recall the tremendous value of the work that we do and the time we devote to such work.

And what about doing work that we just don't want to do? Slogging through a project that may seem less than attractive can bring us closer to burnout. An answer to this problem is to re-perceive the relationship to the work at hand. Indeed, if we view work as a vital part of our own journey toward wholeness, *what* we do is far less important than *how* we do it. A correct attitude can transform any situation into a tool for growth and integrity. The monks of New Skete propose that "with the right frame of mind, we can even attain a certain satisfaction with work we enjoy the least." (Page 277)

Where preventing burnout is concerned, a "right frame of mind" certainly includes wanting to do our best. Regardless of the project at hand, doing our best and raising our personal bar of excellence will transform work from something that has to be done outside of ourselves, to valuable work that is happening inside ourselves. With this viewpoint, even scrubbing the floor can help us grow!

When we decide to do work conscientiously, honestly, wholeheartedly – at whatever we might do – we will gradually find inner peace, because we no longer permit ourselves to be affected by outward circumstances and our own negativity. This process isn't easy, but it certainly is possible. That is the real meaning of good work. (Page 282)

Conclusion

Burnout is a difficult, emotionally and spiritually draining state. It happens when we give too much, neglect our own wellbeing, chain ourselves to our expectations, and then become sour and allow our emotions to lock us into a view that is depressing and saddening. We can overcome burnout by learning to witness to our situation – standing back and setting emotions aside so we

can see what is really going on. This allows us to re-perceive the situation, and then to make clear and healthy choices that can move us out of burnout and into wellness. Preventing burnout is possible, and requires that we examine our attitudes and beliefs about work. Recognizing that work is an integral part of life, we would benefit from acknowledging its part in our journey toward wholeness. As we strive to give and do our best, we maintain our integrity and continue to stretch and grow.

References

Dass, R., and Gorman, P. (2000). How Can I Help? ISBN 0394729471

The Monks of New Skete. (1999). In the Spirit of Happiness. ISBN 0316578517

<http://iite.org/lifestyle/burnout.htm#Defining%20Burnout>