Breathe Out or Burnout: Lessons in Self-Care for Nonprofit Workers

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What is Burnout?

Most common definition -
“As a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity“ (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996, p. 4)

A process of emotional, physical, mental, psychological, social, and spiritual depletion in response to (a) chronic stressor(s) that can lead to a breakdown in most or all of the above personal dimensions. The journey of exhaustion to dysfunction to failure may have long lasting or permanent effects depending upon timeliness of intervention.

Stress is not burnout but can be the first stage
Who are at the highest risk of burnout?
YOU
Those who are at highest risk for work-related burnout are people whose jobs are characterized by both high ethical and social responsibility.
Individual vs Organizational Impact

The workers who experience burnout will likely experience a combination of the following:

- Persistent overwhelming exhaustion (physical and emotional)
- Increased anxiety
- Increased depression
- Decreased feelings of accomplishment/failure
- Increased risk of coronary heart disease
- Impaired memory/thinking
- Frequent neck and back pain
- Increased frequency of flu-like symptoms
- Increased bouts of gastroenteritis
- Increased alcohol/substance use
- Decreased motivation for work/life

Organizations can experience a financial and human capital cost to burnout. Such costs can be measured in the form of:

- Decreased commitment to organization
- Increased damage to general organizational morale
- Increased use of sick days/sick leave
- Increased absenteeism/lateness
- Increased job dissatisfaction
- Reduced fidelity to evidence based interventions (reduced positive outcomes)
- Decreased quality of overall work
- High turnover rates
- Increased costs to new staff training
- Decreased consistency of staff-client relationships
Client Impact

When experiencing burnout, even excellent practitioners can develop negative habits during client interactions, such as:

- Increased hostility/aggression toward struggling clients
- Increased depersonalization or feelings of cynicism to clients’ plight
- Decreased interest or ability to empathize
- Decreased attentiveness to client’s signs or symptoms
  - inaccurate assessments/diagnoses
- Decreased willingness to collaborate with clients
- Increased client dissatisfaction
- Poorer intervention outcomes
VS. Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious Trauma (also known as secondary trauma) is the development of traumatic symptoms through repeated interaction with traumatized clients.

- Social withdrawal
- Work-related nightmares
- Feelings of despair and hopelessness
- Loss of sense of spirituality
- More negative view of the world
- Increased sense of danger (reduced sense of safety)
- Increased fear for safety of children or loved ones
- Difficulties trusting others
12 Phases of Burnout
By Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North
12 Phases of Burnout - Hyperfocused

Phase 1: A compulsion to prove oneself
- Excessive ambition and perfectionism
- Must give 100%

Phase 2: Working harder
- Exaggerated 1st phase
- Completes tasks urgently
- Problems with delegating tasks

Phase 3: Neglecting their needs
- Views situation as normal
- Neglects social needs – looks down on
- Starts making errors
Hyperfocused . . . In Real Life

“More than a year ago I got a job offer that made me very enthusiastic and gave me a feeling that I finally found the perfect workplace for myself. I was ready to spend days and nights at the office trying to make more than I was asked, reaching the goals I established for myself. But in quite short period of time I burnt out completely”
Self Assessment – Phases 1, 2, 3
6-point scale: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – tend to disagree, 4 – tend to agree, 5 – agree and 6 – strongly agree.

Phase 1: A compulsion to prove oneself
- I am often under stress at work.
- It is important for me to do my work exceptionally well.
- I feel weird, when I leave work early sometimes.

Phase 2: Working harder
- I always complete my tasks quickly.
- I feel guilty, when work is left undone.
- I often work long hours or do a lot of overtime.

Phase 3: Neglecting their needs
- I often feel that my life seems short.
- I am usually so tired after work and on weekends that I cannot get myself to do anything else.
- Lately I have to put in extra attention to make sure that I do not forget or overlook anything.
12 Phases of Burnout - Loss of Self

Phase 4: Displacement of conflicts
● Interpersonal conflicts
● Lack of sleep/minor physical issues
● Becoming more irresponsible

Phase 5: Revision of values
● Insensitive/Blunt
● Always in crisis mood/present
● Relationship less valued

Phase 6: Denial of emerging problems
● Increasingly cynical
● Slowly cutting off from world
● Issues becoming more pronounced
Loss of Self . . . In Real Life

“The first sign [of burnout] I experienced was when I began to yell at the patients when they would get pushy with me, I usually can maintain self control, but this began to crumble first . . . Then my personal life away from work suffered and I would get angry with people.”

“I and a few other social workers had huge caseloads that were not balanced equitably throughout the staff, pressure to discharge and [I had] no support from upper management. I would leave there every day angry, feeling like the weight of the world was on my shoulders, pulled in all directions and totally overwhelmed”
Self Assessment – Phases 4, 5, 6

Phase 4: Displacement of conflicts
- I fall ill more frequently than before.
- I have trouble falling asleep or I often lie awake at night.
- I often find it difficult not to talk about work.

Phase 5: Revision of values
- I feel considerably more stressed at work than before.
- I have more frequent conflicts with my colleagues than before.
- There is more frequent friction within the family.

Phase 6: Denial of emerging problems
- I can handle more stress than the others.
- I often feel that others do not understand me.
- I have little time for sports or hobbies.
12 Phases of Burnout - Detachment

Phase 7: Withdrawal
- Social life is a burden or hostile
- Feelings of disorientation and helplessness
- Vicarious pleasures
- Try to work by rules

Phase 8: Obvious behavioural changes
- Apathetic/Anhedonia
- Avoid work demands
- Feelings of paranoia and being attacked

Phase 9: Depersonalisation
- Loss of contact with the self, like a machine
- Lives feel meaningless - feel trapped
- Not taking care of self
Detachment . . . In Real Life

“The only time I've ever burnt out is when I no longer had an interest in what I did, and I lost purpose and passion for what I was doing. I no longer knew why I was doing what I was doing, and had lost my purpose for doing what I was doing.”

“There was this one time I was so burned out I [internet] stalked Acacia Brinley, that 13 year old tumblr girl who used to be famous. I had just finished taking a 5 hour test in the morning with minimal sleep and I felt so tired I couldn’t read a book or do anything that I usually did. I didn’t even want to go out for food.”
Self Assessment – Phases 7, 8, 9

Phase 7: Withdrawal
● I rarely meet my friends anymore.
● I do not really feel happy about anything anymore.
● I drink alcohol or take medication to relieve my stress.

Phase 8: Obvious behavioral changes
● I have to often force myself to find time for friends.
● I would like to be left alone by others when I am at home.
● I watch too much television or surf the Internet in order to switch off.

Phase 9: Depersonalization
● My family and friends worry about me.
● I often push myself beyond my health limits.
● I function more and more like a machine.
12 Phases of Burnout - Out of Gas

Phase 10: Inner emptiness
- Feels dejected, blank, useless, exhausted
- Bouts of anxiety and panic attacks

Phase 11: Depression
- Feels deep despair, self-hatred, exhaustion
- Suicidal thoughts, not wanting to wake up

Phase 12: Burnout syndrome
- Physical, mental, emotional collapse
- Rock bottom
Out of Gas . . . In Real Life

“This Trader was under a lot of pressure due to his market position and the likelihood of making a massive loss. All of a sudden he stopped: put the phones down, and standing on one leg exclaimed that he was a tree! The whole trading room burst into laughter, thinking he was just playing around. After 20 minutes, [he was] still standing on one leg, we realized that this was now serious and [called an ambulance].

“The man was sedated and taken to hospital, in the meantime still persisting he was a tree and crying because "he was being cut down". It is probably one of the most frightening things I have seen. Needless to say he never traded again.”
Self Assessment – Phases 10, 11, 12

Phase 10: Inner emptiness
- I sometimes have a feeling of real panic.
- Newer challenges at work feel more like an ordeal.
- I have an unpleasant feeling about work already on the weekend.

Phase 11: Depression
- I sometimes have a feeling of emptiness inside.
- There are days when I feel a sense of total despair.
- I often want to just lie in bed and sleep.

Phase 12: Burnout syndrome
- I often cannot get myself out of bed in the morning.
- I do not want to go on like this any longer.
- I just cannot do anything anymore.
Identifying Burnout in Others

- Showing signs of or expressing feelings of overwhelm
- Requests or complaints over need for greater support
  - Objectively - Is the job doable with existing level of support?
- Increasing out of character behaviors
  - Irritability, forgetfulness, exhaustion, making mistakes, irresponsibility, carelessness, crying/aggressive outbursts, lateness/absenteeism
- Increasing disengagement from clients
  - Irritated, discompassionate, apathetic, blaming (resistant), cynical/pessimistic
- They’ve lost their “fire”
- Increasing ill health
  - Calling out sick, coming in but being sick all the time
- Decreasing tolerance for normal activities and tasks
Factors of Burnout

- Work-life conflict

Organization
Factors of Burnout

- Work-life conflict
Factors of Burnout

- Work-life conflict

Vicious cycle

Organization

Individual
Factors - Individual/Personality

● Greater personal demands
  ○ New(er) professionals
  ○ Higher educated
  ○ Member of discriminated group - relative to organization

● Gender differences
  ○ Men - depersonalized and cynical
  ○ Women - general exhaustion

● External locus of control

● Passive, passive aggressive coping vs Confrontive

● Low self esteem

● Controlling

● Higher job quality expectations

● Higher job success expectations
Factors - Organizational

- Prolonged use of certain management styles
  - Pacesetting
  - Autocratic
  - Coercive
- Lack of trust between staff and management
  - Safety
  - Closed door
- Excessive work demands
- Lack of sufficient support/resources
- Insufficient training
- Confusing/unclear policies/procedures
- Negative atmosphere
What Can Be Done?
When to intervene?

“Often the problem with burn-out is that it creeps up on you and you don’t realize you were burned out until after you’re past it.”
PREVENTION
is the best intervention
Self-Care: Individual Level

● Create Self Care as a priority
  ○ Be self-centered

● Creating Boundaries - Learning to say “NO”
  ○ Especially as a human service worker

● Aim to Thrive

● Diversify your identity

● Accept and use support

● Active coping mechanism

● Therapy

● Manage health

● Time management

● Vacations *
Mindfulness Exercises

- Deep or square breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Exercise/Yoga
- Take a walk in nature
- Meditation
- Acknowledge - Accept - Allow
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Care: Organizational Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Create an environment for self-care with education</td>
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<td>● Management (watch own care)</td>
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<td>● Assess general work atmosphere</td>
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<td>● Get real feedback from staff - Be humble!</td>
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<td>● Ask staff for what you need</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Routine Check-ins for Wellness</td>
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<td>● Assess workflow for gaps, confusion, redundancies</td>
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<td>● Work – Home boundaries</td>
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<td>● Supportive response to symptoms of burnout</td>
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<td>● In Service Training</td>
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<td>● Require people take lunch/breaks</td>
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<td>● Flexible schedules when possible</td>
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<td>● Alternative to financial rewards</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Be sensitive to change process for new initiatives</td>
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<td>● Time Management</td>
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What can you commit to today?
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