



Preventing Professional Burnout in the Workplace

When we work “petal to the metal” in the workplace without stopping or pulling over, we run out of gas and end up on the side of the road. Another name for this is Professional Burnout.

I once had a mechanic look at a car I was considering buying since I don’t have a mechanical bone in my body. Without even getting in the car, he said, “You don’t want it.” I reminded him that he said he wanted to take it for a test drive. He then told me it wasn’t necessary because the Chevy Nova I was considering had a tow hitch on the bumper. He went on to say that it most likely had transmission problems because “Chevy Novas were never designed to tow anything anywhere.” Good point!

I was headed for burnout in my career at that time and I remember thinking that an over-the-top busy life and a Chevy Nova have some similarities. We aren’t designed or advised to carry more emotional, mental, or physical weight than we can possibly handle on a professional level without some kind of breakdown.

Like a tow hitch on a Chevy Nova bumper, I’ve listed some obvious signals that can suggest possible professional and personal burnout:

Burnout Inventory

1. The passion and joy I used to have for my work is gone on a consistent basis
2. I’m thinking about changing to a new job more often
3. I have a lot of responsibility with a very little sense of control
4. I’m forgetting things more and more on the job
5. The sounds of phone calls, texts, and notifications vibrate through my nerves
6. Monday mornings I dread waking up and going to work
7. Irritability with those closest to me is increasing
8. I find myself suspicious of co-workers’ and administration’s motives
9. I feel guilty of taking all of my benefited vacation days
10. I’m dealing with insomnia some nights and the nights that I do sleep the allotted hours, I wake up feeling exhausted



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In addition, there are a few facts of interest to note regarding the burnout phenomena.

- It seems to happen more frequently with those who work in the service industry—specifically, the service of people in need as is seen in health care, ministry, social work, counseling, corrections, disability services, human resources, education, law enforcement, customer service, and in various types of leadership
- More times than not, it has to do with internal forces rather than workload (the inability to say no, striving for perfection, desire to please and impress someone or win approval)
- Once recognized, burnout CAN BE managed
- Changing jobs or careers isn't always the solution, because you bring yourself with you
- I spoke about recognizing the symptoms of burnout and some of the causes behind it, but how can we minimize and/or prevent it altogether?

Preventing Burnout

Redefine what a real emergency looks like

I just worked with an organization who managed adults needing employment and housing. The focus of the discussion was how to distinguish between an emergency and non-emergency. Management defined it before the day was over.

Unplug from the electronic leash

Unless you are “on call” or there is an understanding of your availability, unplug. Anyone with an emotional open door policy is eventually going to drain out.

Distinguish between a busy season and lifestyle

Every career seems to have seasons that are incredibly busy. Anyone can survive that type of pace if they know where the end is.



Sharpen your highest priorities

When what's most important in your life is threatened, it's time to recalibrate where you spend most of your energy.

Separate the vital from the urgent

Perhaps you've heard of the professor who held up a large jar of rocks and pebbles in front of his business students. He then asked if he could fit anymore large rocks in the jar. The jar was half filled with pea gravel and topped off with large rocks. The class indicated there was no way he could fit in anymore rocks. He then poured out all of the contents, added more rocks than he had before and poured the same amount of gravel through the spaces and crevices of the rocks. He then told the class to focus on what was most vital (rocks) in their lives and career because the urgent (pebbles) would constantly pull them away from what is most vital if they didn't stick to what was most urgent (by the way, a good exercise for a staff meeting).

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Recapturing the Joy of Your Job

As I mentioned earlier, one of the symptoms of burnout is a lack of joy and passion. Thus there are ways to reverse that process and get reignited with the job you used to love.

Create a life outside your work

I once ran into a physician who was a friend of mine that recently retired. I said, “Joe, how is retirement going?” He said it wasn’t going well at all. Then he went on to tell me that since his life was his work, now that his work was done, he felt his life was over.

Once I jokingly said to my wife about retirement, “I’m just going to follow you around the kitchen,” and she jokingly (with emphasis) said, “I will stab you! Get a hobby now!”

Take time off immediately

Whether it’s a long overdue vacation, a leave of absence, or a sabbatical, the work will go on without you. What if you had a nervous breakdown or broke your leg and instantly weren’t available? The work would go on without you.

Take care of yourself first

When we fly on an airline, the attendant tells us that when the oxygen mask drops down from the ceiling, you must put yours on first and then help put another’s on. If you can’t take care of yourself first, everybody loses. A burned out employee is of little help to the organization, himself, or his family and friends.



Be honest with your supervisor

I think it is imperative to take a risk and tell your supervisor if the workload, responsibilities, or whatever are starting to affect your health or your family and that you need to brainstorm with him/her about a possible solution. If your supervisor shuts you down, then maybe it’s time to work for a company that has your best interest at heart.

Change the scenery and expand your talent

Whether that means asking for new training possibilities, taking classes to advance your career, or asking for new and different responsibilities, go for it.

Conclusion

A balanced life is a fulfilled life. There was a time I almost lost my family because of the grind of my career. A consultant in no uncertain terms told me that if I didn’t take control of my life and work situation, no one else would do it for me. After heeding his advice, I’ve never looked back and today I’m grateful!



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture’s needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill’s strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.