



Understanding
BURNOUT



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*Transforming a Trap into
a Blessing for People Workers*

By
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Books to Read

1. *Too Busy Not to Pray*
- *Slowing Down to be With God*
by Bill Hybels, IVP 1988
2. *Finding God in the Fast Lane,*
Joyce Huggett, Eagles 1993
3. *Listen to God's Whispers,*
a ReconRe book, 1996
4. *Looking at Creation,*
a ReconRe book, 1996
5. *Listen to the Children,*
a ReconRe book 1996
6. *Listen to their Heart Cries,*
a Reconre book 1996
7. *Healing Grace*
[new title: Freedom from the Performance Trap]
by D.A.Seamands, Victor Books 1985
8. "What Causes Burnout?"
by David G.Congo, an article in
Theology, News and Notes,
March 1984 ... p.7-8
9. *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*
-a workbook to help readers examine
themselves and act on the need to
forgive and be forgiven
by God, Lee Bee Teik,
ReconRe Sdn Bhd 1997

UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT

*"Arghh, I'm so stressed I'm gonna'
explode and burnout soon!"*

Quite often, the word 'burnout' seems to accompany the words such as 'stressed out' and 'depressed'. Are they the same? We shall see ...

Our topic here is burnout and most folks with burnout aren't exactly hoppin' mad but, rather, demoralized and withdrawn most of the time.

We'll look at what exactly burnout is and what it's not so that we can effectively identify it before we or other people get into this condition ... and ... don't think that burnout is just among adults.

Young people can get it too and, perhaps, they are even more vulnerable because people tend to pile up responsibilities on youth, thinking ...

"they got all the free time and holidays in the world"!

Before we look at what burnout is in terms of symptoms and signs, let us just clear the air by considering what burnout is not



WHAT IT IS NOT



Firstly, burnout is not always a result of sin, as Jesus showed us in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Secondly, burnout is not a mental illness and anyone or everyone is at risk to experience burnout because we live among people (including ourselves) all the time.

Now for a textbook answer ...



WHAT IT IS



Burnout is...

“A syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do people work of some kind”

Sound's pretty bad, eh? Well it is. Burnout is a way people respond to the strain of always being around other people and their problems. It's real tough sometimes to work with people constantly, but we can find our best model in Jesus. At the Garden of Gethsemane He knew that He was soon going to suffer His most on the cross because of people's sins. That's a recipe for burnout if you ask me; taking the sins

of the world upon Himself. But look at what He did, He poured it all out to His Father...and was rescued from complete burnout. Thus, anybody who works with people likewise needs to spend precious time alone with God.

Symptoms and Signs

OK, just how do we go about recognizing burnout? Here are 5 common signs of burnout. The person feels:

1. Demoralized
He *believes* that he is *no longer effective* in his ministry as a pastor, social worker or cell group leader, etc.
2. Depersonalized
He *treats himself and others* in an *impersonal* way.
3. Detached
He *withdraws* from all responsibilities.
4. Distanced
He *avoids* social and interpersonal contacts.
5. Defeated
He *feels "beaten"* and gives up any hope of being able to avoid defeat.

Note:

2-5 above tend to give others a false impression that the person is shirking his/her responsibility. “*Sigh ... last thing they need is people who criticize them even more.*”

BURNOUT, DEPRESSION AND DISTRESS

Three things here:

Burnout, Depression and Distress

How do we differentiate them?

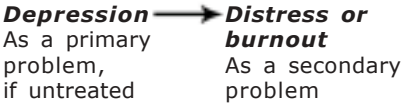
Firstly, let's look at *Burnout*.

Actually, burnout is supposed to protect rather than destroy us. How?

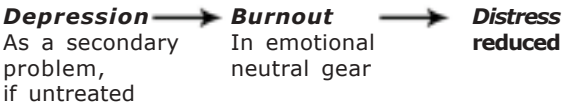
It makes us lethargic or tired and we kind of go into an “*emotional neutral gear*”. If we are able to recognise these signs, they will help us prevent a blow up/ distress. We can “*give up*” before we experience a “*blow up*”.

Before going on into depression, let's look at 3 flow charts showing how burnout, depression and distress inter-relate and often overlap.

1. may lead to



2. may lead to



3. may lead to may lead to



The causes of burnout may be very different, as we shall see when compared to those of distress or depression.

Therefore, anyone experiencing **Depression** should be aware that they are either close to burnout or they are actually having an illness with no known cause (yes, depression is classified as an illness/disorder by doctors). We're sure you've probably seen it before when a

tired worker is almost reaching burnout- a normally cheerful energetic person tells you that he feels lousy and doesn't care for other people anymore. If these signals are persistently ignored, then burnout may happen sooner.

Stress ... Ahhh here's a common word. If you're asking what it is exactly, then we're afraid that there's no straight answer we can give you. However, try to understand that it's a natural bodily response to any kind of demand or pressure that you face. Thus, it can be good or bad. Stress that has affected the well being of a person is called Distress.

“Huh? Good stress?”

I'm not kidding you, it can be good but that's not our focus here. Unfortunately what happens is that if you're stressed too often or all the time, there'll be a lot of this chemical called adrenaline racing around in your body. Here's a short list of what happens when your adrenal glands go overtime – an increase of, for example, heart rate, teeth grinding, headaches, insomnia, muscle tension, gastritis and hypertension. So watch out, workaholics!

Now, if people would learn to recognize these symptoms and slow down, then serious damage may be avoided. But if we push ourselves any more, there is a chance that our bodies may get seriously affected (imagine worse things than those we've already described in the above paragraph).

Basically, what we've been trying to get at is that we need to see that burnout should be prevented OR treated as soon as possible to prevent worse consequences.

WHO GETS BURNOUT?

As we said before, it's people workers of all types. For example, pastors, social workers, CF teachers and leaders, missionaries, youth workers; perhaps you're one of them e.g. a good daughter or son taking care of a sick relative.

WHY?

Now let's look at the causes of burnout. We'll divide them into Internal and External Causes.

Internal Causes

What we're going to explain is a brief summary of all the pressures people workers face that come from 3 areas in the work they do: From the job itself, from other people or from themselves.

Now, *the job itself* is tiring because the results of their labour are often delayed or not seen at all, especially since people can change at any time.

Sometimes *people expect too much of people workers when there is a job to do*. They want leaders to give them direction all the time AND help out in the job. To be directors and implementers at the same time is not really the Creator's way of functioning for us. Look at Jesus, while He was on earth He implemented what the Father directed (John 14:24, 5:19).

Besides that, the situation is often that leaders have the greatest exposure to people's problems although they have the least resources to help people. In fact, sometimes the leaders themselves don't have enough funds to survive because those that they are serving overlook their monetary need.

Sometimes, though, the cause of burnout lies within the **leaders themselves ...**

- 👑 They don't care enough for their own self-recovery and ignore their personal needs.
- 👑 They care too much all the time (Matthew 14:23). There is, I suppose, a rhythm of human life and even Jesus knew when to withdraw from people and recharge Himself by resting with the Father, who was the source of His energy.

Besides that,

- 👑 They could be caring for all the wrong reasons. For example, they care out of guilt and not gratitude to God especially if they feel that they have been a failure in their ministry in the past.
- 👑 Some are workaholics or need to be approved all the time and can develop a kind of "Messiah Complex", meaning, that they purposely do away with rest and relief even if they are very stressed.

Further,

👑 Overall, many have unrealistic goals, which is not often what God requires of His followers. Sadly, many end up with unrealistic goals, which aren't met.

👑 They begin to doubt how God can work in broken earthen vessels. Thus, they can become discouraged followed by getting disillusioned when things don't happen as expected. Eventually, they end up bitter and burnt-out.

However, even if burnout is reached, let's not be skeptical or cynical. It is just that we really need to learn to accept that God's glory is contained in earthen vessels like you and us.

Always remember that God is here to redeem us, not only from our sinful nature, but also from our shortcomings that still arise after we are saved.

External Causes

There are two often neglected external causes that can contribute to burnout:

1. Wrong theology of who God the Master is really like. If we see God as compassionate and yet firm, we will joyfully serve Him out of gratitude and not mere duty. If we see Him as like the Pharaoh of Moses' time, then we will serve Him grudgingly when things don't go well with ourselves or family.
2. Misunderstanding caused by others, especially when those involved refuse to clarify the existing problem in order to serve God better.



BURNOUT CAN GO EITHER WAY

Here's where we apply what we've been reading. Now that we know what burnout is and what causes it, we need to be careful not to let it become a trap for us. What do I mean by "*trap*"? It becomes a trap when we feel we're a failure in ministry if we feel burnt-out. This is dangerous because, if burnout is not stopped, it leads to our wasting even more energy. This will be self-destructive and selfish.

The *flip side* is that

Burnout need not become a trap to the wounded healer.

Take it as a *warning sign* that our bodies, minds, emotions or all are being pushed too hard AND too far. Thus, we need to *change our daily routine* according to what God has intended for us. Then, miraculously, it will lead to *hope for renewal*.

We just want to say something simple here: when God's gifts are wasted, be it through burnout or some other way, then His name is dishonoured. We need to learn from those Christian traditions that make sure their workers spend enough time alone with God. A good example is Mother Teresa's ministry where she introduced this principle among her workers who worked with the poorest of the poor.

It needs divine intervention to have reached such a conclusion!

TREATMENT

OK, this is the serious part; now that we know what it is, why it's bad and that it needs to be treated, we need to know how to treat it. If you know any emotionally exhausted people helpers (it could be you, even) then here are some important steps that they need to do:

1. Acknowledge burnout and the need for change.
2. Accept external help for rest and recreation.

3. Work on the internal causes.
Look for someone who is able to interpret the road signs with you and help you find your bearing on the map of your pilgrimage in Christ (Get information from Reconre House in Seremban)
4. Renew the mind with right/good theology.
5. Take Jesus as the model for ministry (John 17:18). He was set apart for God and lived by His physical and spiritual laws.
6. Reflect on the correlation between His ministry and ours daily/regularly.
7. Be willing to be His sheep and be ministered to through others by e.g. getting involved in informal and intimate simple-non-demanding social gatherings to unwind and enjoy His abundant life.
8. Look at and listen to creation and hear Him speak (Get books for reflection from Reconre House in Seremban)

9. Read widely about His world, not just "Christian" literature e.g. biographies may help a lot when you discover others have gone through your paths as well and learn from them how they carried on living ...
10. Be with children and be infected by their simple trust in God.
11. Lift up every heart cry to Him and not keep it to yourself.

Some of the above advice need us to reach out and ask others to help us while some are just simple things that we just need to teach ourselves to be aware of and take action. Whatever it is, realize that burnout can be treated and should be treated as soon as possible. This, of course, is a choice that we have to make in order for us to begin to receive help.

PREVENTIVE ACTIONS

Here are 6 principles that we would like you to read through and that you could apply in your lives to prevent burnout from happening.

Heed basic principles

that govern our bodily function, psychological (emotional and mental) make-up and spiritual condition. Understand our own strengths and weaknesses and care for ourselves through e.g. diet, exercise, sleep, laughter, humour. Each of us is different and unique and we need to know our individual limits as well as our strengths.

Be a member of a relay team instead of a rat race!

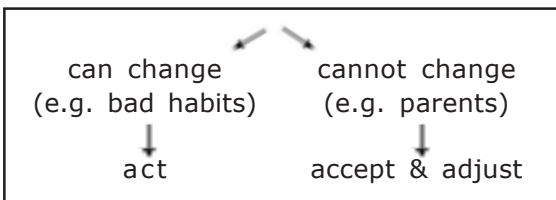
To get an idea of this, read the "Internal Causes" section and understand that doing everything on our own can really lead to burnout.

Gain a clear sense of your purpose & priorities.

Carefully plan the direction you feel God is leading you into. Be careful not to stretch yourself too thin and learn to say 'no' when you know you'll have too much on your hands.

Organise changes in environment to lower stress:

This can be illustrated with a simple diagram where we can classify every single stressful event in our life into two categories and act accordingly:



Be gently assertive in resolving relational conflicts and differences.

This will prevent pent up anger and long-term resentment, both of which can cause debilitating illnesses like heart problems and chronic fatigue, for some ... or arthritis for others (though these diseases may have many other causes, of course).

Rest, Relax & have Recreation with family

You know what? It's OK to take a break; in fact it's good. So, take a break, be restored through rest and recreation with friends and family (e.g. take a monthly fast from weekend meetings.) Also, be humble enough to receive professional help if necessary. You may look macho on the outside, but it's no good at all if you're dying inside.

Here we are then, the end of this section! Yup, we've covered the basics on burnout and if you're interested to know more, then ask an older Christian or do some further reading, OK? Don't hesitate to ask people ... burnout is definitely a topic which could do with more discussion. I just want to close with a passage from Scripture that reminds us that though we face a lot of tough times in life, God sees us through to perfection eventually, followed by lyrics from a lovely song "*Come To The Water*" that we can make into our prayer to God in times of frustration.

Finally, dear Brethren,

*"Now unto Him who is able to keep
Able to keep you from falling
And present you faultless
Before the presence of His glory
With exceeding joy
To the only wise God our Saviour
Be glory and majesty
Dominion and power both now and forever...
Amen."*

Jude 24-25

May this be Your Prayer and Jesus'
Response to You ...

**Come to the Water
(For Those Tears I Died)**

*You said You'd come and share all my sorrows,
You said You'd be there for all my tomorrows.*

*I came so close to sending You away.
But just like You promised, You came there to stay.
I just had to pray And Jesus said,*

*“Come to the water, stand by My side.
I know You are thirsty, you won't be denied.
I felt every tear-drop when in darkness you cried....
And I strove to remind you that
for those tears I died.”*

*Your goodness is so great I can't understand,
And dear Lord, I know that all this was planned.
I know You're here now and always will be.
Your love loosed my chains and in You I'm free....
But Jesus, why me ... ?*

*Jesus, I give You my heart and my soul,
I know that without You I'd never be whole
Saviour, You opened all the right doors.
And I thank You and praise You from earth's
humble shores*

Take me, I'm Yours ...

(Marsha J. Stevens)



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About the Author

Dr. Lee Bee Teik (MBBS, Monash University) practised medicine till she turned fulltime homemaker.

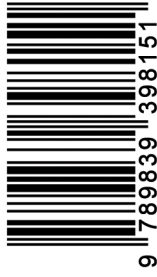
She is married to Dr. Hwa Yung and they have three adult children.

Having heard God's call for her to write in 1992, Bee Teik has penned books on prayer, pastoral counseling and her experiences as a Malaysian Christian woman.

This series of 18 titles, classified under the overall theme, *On Being Human*, is drawn from the positive feedback from her seminars.

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