Understanding stress and burnout

BURNOUT: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Burnout is the gradual process by which a person - in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental and emotional strain - detaches from work and other meaningful relationships. The result of burnout is usually lowered productivity, cynicism and confusion. A person at this stage feels like they are drained, exhausted and have nothing left to give. Burnout can happen in different areas of your life (school, relationships) but the most common area is work. How do you know if you have reached the point of burnout? Some common signs are:

- no longer laughing or having fun at work
- more irritable toward co-workers or customers
- seeing work as a chore
- having chronic worry about your job
- feeling lethargic and empty in your work
- physical problems which may include loss of appetite, and a prolonged feeling of fatigue or over-exertion
- feeling overwhelmed all the time - even routine tasks feel like enormous challenges to be overcome.
- an inability to focus, concentrate or forgetfulness

Factors Leading To Burnout

Though we live in a stressful society, not everyone experiences burnout. The potential for burnout can increase depending on who you are, where you work and what your job is.

- *Individual characteristics*: A person who does not have a balance between work and personal commitments is at higher risk of burnout. Also at risk is the perfectionist who gives 110% and who has unrealistic standards and expectations of themselves, their job and others.
- *Organizational characteristics*: Jobs that are very stressful and where there are not enough hours in the day to meet the responsibilities of the position put employees at risk of burnout. Other factors that increase this risk are:
    1. a lack of control over one's workload, schedule and deadlines;
    2. absence of feedback so that an employee cannot see or appreciate the results of his or her efforts;
    3. conflict among workers, or between workers and management; and
    4. anxiety about job security or the possible consequences of failure at a job task or project.

The Road to Burnout

Burnout is not something that happens overnight. It actually goes through several stages that blur together so that you rarely realize what is happening. These stages include:

Physical, Mental and Emotional Exhaustion: In the beginning you loved your job. You had faith that it would meet all your expectations, and you had boundless enthusiasm and energy for it. As time passes however, you begin to feel drained - not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well. You begin to get a sense that something is wrong but you can't seem to put your finger on it.

Shame and Doubt: The job isn't working out the way you expected and you begin to feel disappointed and disillusioned. You try to work harder to fix the problem but this only leaves you feeling more exhausted and frustrated. You begin to question your ability and competence and your confidence level drops. You may even begin to question or discount your previous achievements.

Cynicism and Callousness: In response to feeling inadequate and insecure, you begin to blame others for your difficulties. You become detached and put on "armour" to protect yourself, adopting a "look out for #1" attitude. The negativity in your attitude increases and you may openly criticize the organization, management or coworkers. You may engage in escapist behaviours (i.e., drinking, eating, shopping) to cope with worry, powerlessness and disillusionment.

Full Scale Burnout: You reach the point where you feel like a failure, overwhelmed and with no resources to cope with your situation. Helplessness sets in and you may adopt a "damned if I do, damned if I don't" attitude. You feel despair. You have reached a crisis point.

So what do you do when you reach this crisis point? Even better, how can you prevent yourself from reaching full-scale burnout? Here are several tips that have been suggested to prevent burnout or to rebuild yourself once you have experienced it.

- Get proper and sufficient support around you. Let others know you are having difficulty and ask for help. Be specific in your requests, whether this is needing them to listen and provide emotional support or performing concrete tasks that will make your life easier.
- If you believe you are nearing or at the burn-out stage, seek professional guidance and support.
- Cut back on responsibilities. If you feel the main issue is an overload of work, prioritize tasks and identify which ones can be eliminated or delegated to others.
- Focus on what you can control. Make a distinction (and a written list if you want) between the things in your personal or work life that you can control and those you can't.
- Pay attention to your health. Eat a balanced diet, get enough rest and be sure to exercise.
- Leave work behind. Don't bring work home with you. Try to create a balance of activities you enjoy outside of work and be sure to set aside at least one day of the week to focus on anything but work.
- Pace yourself at work. Try to take a mini-break every hour or so. Stand up, stretch, take a short walk and focus on deep breathing.
- Create some diversity for yourself. Many of us become bored and frustrated with the same routine day after day. Try to change something even if it is small. For example, decorate your cubicle, take a different route to work, try to negotiate a different start time.
- Change the way you think about a stressful event. Instead of saying "I can't do this" or "I'll never get it done" say "I will break this project into small, manageable pieces and talk to my boss about negotiating more time". Choosing to interpret an event in a different light can decrease the amount of stress and burnout we feel. Try to become aware of negative words you use often such as "can't, hate, no way" and replace them with neutral words or phrases.