

# **DON'T BURNOUT; GET TURNED ON!**

**By Leonard Szymczak, MSW, LCSW**

If you have hot flashes, singe marks on your clothes, clouds of smoke, or smoldering coals, it doesn't necessarily mean that you're suffering from burnout. It may mean you just need a fire extinguisher! However, if you have periods of exhaustion and fatigue from excessive demands, are working harder and accomplishing less, feel irritable with customers or colleagues, or your enthusiasm for your work sinks lower than a slug's navel, you may be suffering from burnout.

The symptoms of burnout are varied. They may include physical problems such as nervousness, loss of sleep, RSI (reduced sexual involvement), change of eating habits, headaches, or lethargy. Some of the mental and emotional symptoms include obsessing about work even when at home, avoiding personal relationships, arguing with loved ones for no apparent reason, or feeling anxious or depressed.

The symptoms, if ignored, will ignite a slow fuse which passes through 3 stages, the last of which leads to exhaustion. The **Alarm State** is the stage where you start to smell the smoke. You become alarmed that you no longer have that zest for your job. You start to experience physical, emotional, or mental symptoms and begin to feel burnt out. People may comment on the fact that you look haggard and run down. When you arrive home, you might have the feeling that you've given everything you've got at the office and there's nothing left for the family.

Smoke, unnoticed, eventually leads to fire. This brings on the second stage, **Resistance**. In an attempt to deny that there is any smoke or fire, you build firewalls or rather, you mobilize your energy to stop listening to the messages. The more your body tries to communicate with you that something is wrong, the more you resist paying attention. The more you resist paying attention, the greater the signals become. Your body screams at you, "Pay attention. I'm stressed out!" If the messages are ignored, the flames engulf the firewall.

The final stage takes you past the raging fire and into a state of **Exhaustion**. Having emotionally and mentally battled the flames, you feel drained and used up. You are no longer able to manage job-related stress. You lack enough energy to face another day and your emotional resources are depleted. It feels as if there is no way to replenish yourself. The fire has raged fiercely and now you are burnt out.

Fortunately, there are warning signs along the road. It's important, however, to pay attention to the signs of flaming stress as soon as possible. It's much easier to extinguish a smoldering rag than it is to put out a raging forest fire.

## **TIPS TO INSURE YOU ARE FIRE RESISTANT TO BURNING OUT**

- **MAKE A COMMITMENT TO YOUR LIFE.** A commitment to yourself, your family, work, and other important values and belief systems will promote an inner sense of satisfaction. Commitment to self also means that you consciously take care of yourself. Good self-care includes looking after your emotional, physical, spiritual, and financial health as well as your relationships. Obviously, if you don't nurture and care for yourself, you will be more vulnerable to stress.
- **ESTABLISH PERSONAL CONTROL OVER YOUR LIFE.** Taking control of your life engenders power and hope, feelings that put out the flames of being overwhelmed. You can't control lightning or various crises but you can control your response to them. Change those parts of your life that you do have control. It may be as simple as changing your body posture when feeling overwhelmed, or releasing tension through vigorous exercise. Similarly, you can train your mind by deliberately selecting and focusing on positive mental states when facing negative challenges. You can also alter your environment. You may not be able to install a window but you can bring in pictures, flowers or plants.
- **SEE CHANGE AS A CHALLENGE.** Change is often seen as an interruption to your security and safety. However, if you can view problems as opportunities and challenges, you are in a better position to learn from them. Change, stressful situations, and even tragedies offer important lessons that can enrich you. For example, getting burned out may teach you about taking better care of yourself.
- **KNOW THYSELF.** Awareness of your physical and emotional state will help you monitor your levels of stress. Take a periodic check-up during the week using a 10-point scale with the number 1 being calm and relaxed and 10 being ready to fry. If you hover around 10 throughout most of the week, it's either time to buy that fire extinguisher or take some of the following anti-stress remedies.
- **TALK WITH SOMEONE.** A friend, colleague, or supervisor may help you put out the flames. Talking helps to not only relieve the pressure of stressful feelings but it also enables you to view your situation from a different perspective. Asking for help can be the first step toward resolving a problem.
- **DEVELOP A SUPPORT GROUP.** Surround yourself with friends who are positive and care about your well being. Satisfying human relationships can be the most healing "medication" of all to help you through the difficult times in your life. No amount of stress reduction exercises, massage, positive affirmations, or broccoli is an adequate substitute for love and affection for relieving stress and promoting health.

- **TAKE PAUSES.** Intermittent breaks or rest periods help you rejuvenate. This could be as simple as stretching after a long stint on the computer, taking a quiet pause during lunch or it may mean scheduling vacation breaks throughout the year. Take long deep breaths periodically. Schedule time for exercise and rest to help your body discharge stressful emotions and recuperate. Relaxation or meditation exercises can be practiced at home to help you refresh yourself after a particularly hard day at the office.
- **INTRODUCE VARIETY.** When feeling in a rut, it may be time to think of adding variety to your job. You could vary your job activities such as starting an afternoon project in the morning or interspersing your job with some of your more enjoyable tasks. If you work on the computer, you can alter the position or height of your chair to prevent muscle fatigue. Occasionally change your rhythm. Drive slower or walk faster to alter your pace.
- **SET REALISTIC GOALS AND LIMITS.** Knowing what you can and can't do within a defined period of time may relieve stress. Incorporating Time Management Principles into your life may help you use time more effectively and eliminate the wasted parts of your day.
- **REMOVE ENERGY DRAINS.** Make a list of 10 things that burn your energy. People, places, and things will burn your time, money and emotions. Think of practical ways to eliminate the clutter and negative patterns in your life. As you clear your life, you will make room for new possibilities. A quality life often has more to do with what you remove from your life than what you add.
- **FEED YOUR MIND.** Marcus Aurelius once said, "Our life is what our thoughts make it." Every day you have approximately 60,000 thoughts. They can either encourage or discourage you. Beginning or ending the day reading inspirational passages will both stimulate and motivate your mind.
- **CREATE A LIFE AFTER WORK.** Set clear boundaries between job and home so when you leave your job, leave it psychologically as well as physically. When you bring work home, you essentially never get a break. It's important to create a life that involves pleasurable activities with enjoyable people. Fun and laughter will rejuvenate you and replenish your energies.
- **SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT WITH YOURSELF EVERY WEEK.** Write it in ink on your calendar for the next 6 months. Plan anywhere from an hour to a half-day. Make this time sacred. This creates a powerful message that your life is, indeed, valuable and you are prepared to invest time and energy to make sure you are fire resistant. Use the time to replenish yourself with pampering activities such as massage, exercise, reading, writing, meditating, time in nature, solitude, affirmations, spiritual practices, etc.

- **UTILIZE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES.** Stress can be viewed as an opportunity for spiritual and emotional growth. Seeing events within a spiritual framework can add a dimension of meaning and purpose to life. The practice of Mindfulness helps to keep one's consciousness in the present reality. Prayer offers an empowering experience of the heart through healing and connection to the realm of the holy.
- **DEVELOP A MIND OF GRATITUDE.** As you reduce the stress and feel rejuvenated, your life will take on a very different meaning. Maintaining a mindset of gratitude will help fuel the process of change. Accept compliments when they come your way. Be gracious and allow them to make you feel good. Then pass them on to others. Remember, being grateful for your small accomplishments will prepare you to accept and appreciate the major victories.

As you adopt these anti-stress tactics and take better care of yourself, you will be well armed to combat stress. You can throw away the fire extinguisher and get burned on to the excitement and challenges of life.

**Leonard Szymczak, MSW, LCSW**

[www.roadmaphome.com](http://www.roadmaphome.com)

**Phone: 949 443-4888**

[leonard@leonardsz.com](mailto:leonard@leonardsz.com)