

Beating the Burnout Blues

Paul L. Walker, Ph.D.
Executive Bishop
Church of God International
Cleveland, Tennessee

Senior Pastor Emeritus
Mount Paran Church of God
Atlanta, Georgia

On a rainy morning in Georgia, an over-worked, hassled pastor got out of bed, made sure his wife had gone to work and his children had left for school, took the telephone off the hook, and then went back to bed. In his words, “I was burned out. Two months later I resigned from the ministry. Now, what do I do?”

What?

What happened here? What is meant by burnout? We often talk about being stressed out, but what is burnout?

By definition, burnout is perhaps best described as emotional fatigue. It is a kind of exhaustion marked by chronic negativism toward work, life and other people. It is a persistent feeling of gloom that threatens our lifestyles and changes our moods. It has a profound affect on the kind of persons we are and the degree of happiness or unhappiness we experience. We sometimes call it by many different names – melancholia, lethargy, withdrawal – but it all boils down to the same thing. Our spirits are down, and we feel like giving up. This condition is sometimes referred to as the burnout blues.

So, what happens in burnout? While stress is certainly a component factor and an interactive force yet there are some differences.

As Dr. Arch Hart explains,

Burnout is a defense characterized by disengagement;
Stress is characterized by over engagement.
In burnout the emotions become blunted. In stress the emotions become over-reactive.
In burnout the emotional damage is primary.
In stress the physical damage is primary.
Exhaustion or burnout affects motive and drive.
Exhaustion or stress affects physical energy.
Burnout produces demoralization.
Stress produces disintegration.
Burnout can best be understood as a loss of ideals and hope.
Stress can best be understood as a loss of fuel and energy.
The depression of burnout is caused by the grief engendered by the loss of ideals and hope.
The depression of stress is produced by the body's need to protect itself and conserve energy.
Burnout produces a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.
Stress produces a sense of urgency and hyperactivity.
Burnout produces paranoia, depersonalization and detachment.
Stress produces panic, phobic, and anxiety-type disorders.
Burnout may never kill you but your life may not seem worth living.
Stress may kill you prematurely and you do not have enough time to finish what you have started.¹

No wonder the statisticians have a field day with pastors under duress. In this same regard, gleaning from the research of leading publications, the numbers tell a somber story:

1500 pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their church.

70% of pastors constantly fight depression.

80% of pastors and 84% of pastors wives feel unqualified and discouraged in their role of pastors.

70% percent of pastors do not have a close friend, confidant or mentor.

50% of pastors are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way to make a living.

¹ Footnote off the Internet. See article Stress and Burnout in Ministry by Rowland Croucher from the book by Archibald Hart Coping with Depression in the Ministry and Other Helping Professions: Word 1984 (no page)

80% of seminary and bible school graduates that enter the ministry will leave the ministry within the first five years.

80% of pastors' spouses feel their spouse is overworked.

80% of adult children of pastors surveyed have had to seek professional help for depression

85% of pastors say their greatest problem is that they are sick and tired of dealing with problem people, such as elders, deacons, worship leaders, worship teams, board members, and associate pastors.

70% of pastors felt God called them to pastor before their ministry began, but after three years of ministry, only 50% still felt called.²

Obviously, this is an alarming picture. Even though surveys and polls do not tell the entire story and often have a wide margin for error, yet, it is a situational problem that cannot be ignored.

Why?

The question is, "Why?" If, as pastors, we are called to preach, teach, and live out the "good news," of the spirit-filled life, why such negative statistics? While it is true the reasons vary from individual to individual, yet the research shows such contributing problem areas as: (1) the disparity between expectations and hard reality; (2) the lack of clearly-defined boundaries with regard to job description and work load; (3) the "peter principle" characterized by a sense of incompetence; (4) the conflict of roles found

² Footnote from Internet "Crisis in Leadership" statistics are from the denominational lines have been gleaned from various sources such as "Pastor to Pastor," "Focus on the Family," "Ministries Today," "Charisma," "TNT Ministries" and a few other respective ministries [Richard will have to help us find out where this comes from – or (VR Nellie may know the method for footnoting that will encompass all without individual listings) Shiloh Place Ministries- note at bottom of the printed pages

in attempting to balance the need for strong leadership and the call to servanthood; (5) the lack of positive self-image resulting in a diminished sense of self-worth; (6) the burden of administrative overload accompanied by the difficulty of efficient time management; (7) the emotional drag involved in attempting to achieve “win-win” solutions in conflict situations; (8) the inability to “unwind” emotionally and live spontaneously; (9) the feeling of loneliness and isolation; (10) the paucity of perks and tangible rewards for service rendered.

By now we all get the picture, and, as it is sometimes said, “the beat goes on.”

How?

This poses the next question, “How do we beat the burnout blues?” We are aware of the situation, but what is the solution?

To start with it is important for us to strive to practice what we preach. This means we turn to the living Word of God to find the formula to live a life that beats the burnout problem.

In this regard, the Apostle Paul is our model. Here was a man called of God who was literally stretched to the limit. In comparing himself to the parade of false prophets in the church of Corinth, he presents a resume with all the potentiality not only for burnout but a disastrous flameout. In his words:

To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! What anyone else dares to boast about-- I am speaking as a fool-- I also dare to boast about.
Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.
Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.
Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.
Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,

I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying.

In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me.

But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. 2 Cor 11:21-33 (*NIV*)

As we read this account, we have to ask, “What was the formula that enabled him to hang tough in the face of such adversity? What can we learn from him that will help us beat the burnout blues?” In response, we pick him up in the Roman jail when he was faced with a death sentence for preaching the gospel. While there he writes to the church in Philippi and makes a startling statement for a person facing execution – “Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say, rejoice” Philippians 4:4 (*NIV*). From the natural standpoint, such an affirmation makes no sense, but from a spiritual standpoint, the apostle Paul found a formula that gave him the inner resources he needed regardless of the circumstances or situation. As a clarion call to each one of us, we hear him say in Philippians chapter 4 verses 6 through 8, this is the way to beat the burnout blues.

1. Pray in Detail

As the Phillip’s translation puts it “... tell God every detail of your need in earnest and thankful prayer...” Philippians 4:6 (*NIV*). This is the beginning point of effective prayer, tell God the details. As one pastor stated, “When I traveled down the road to

burnout, the first thing that went was my prayer life. Then when I started on the road to recovery, if the first thing I had to do was to establish a new dialogue with God through intimate and intercessory prayer.”

As we all know, God is the source. This means we have to trust his Holy Spirit to transcend whatever the causal factors may be in the burnout experience. It is a matter of growing in grace and living by faith. It is breaking through to a new interactive relationship of communication with God. It is taking God at His Word that we can cast our anxieties on Him because He cares for us. (2 Peter 5:2)

2. Practice Peace

Following the affirmation of prayer, Paul gives us the second step by stating, “The peace of God which transcends human understanding will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus” Philippians 4:7 (*Phillips*). Of all the statements in the Bible this is perhaps the most profound. Think of it! There is a place in Christ where the peace of God stands as a guard over our hearts and minds. We can actually rest in Christ Jesus as a hedge against worry, stress, and burnout. In fact, this is the legacy Christ has left us. In His words, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you; I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”

John 14:27 (*NIV*).

The problem is, “How do we get to that?” How do we learn to practice peace in a way that enables us to handle burnout? In this regard, the research presents some peace practices which bring us into a life of resiliency, which really means achieving and

maintaining balance between action, thinking, feeling and doing. It is a sense of well being because of a lifestyle of fulfilled living. These practices include:

- 1) *Control the schedule:* Learn the principles of time management so that, barring unforeseen emergencies, we control the schedule rather than the schedule controlling us
- 2) *Strive for variety:* Get out of the rut! Vary the schedule. Do things differently; try activities that change the routine! Broaden the horizon through relaxing activities designed to counterbalance the stressful things. Move off the center stage and enjoy the life of being first and foremost a disciple of Christ rather than a title with a positional image to maintain.
- 3) *Plan mini vacations:* The old adage says, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Make days off – days off! Find places to “get out of Dodge” and relax in the beauty of God’s creation. Take time for reflecting interludes that rise above the mundane and reach for the majestic.
- 4) *Exercise regularly:* As one physical instructor puts it, “Sweat reduces stress.” Develop a regimen and stick to it. Also be prepared to change the activity when the routine becomes common place. The body is sometimes compared to a machine and exercise keeps it running efficiently.
- 5) *Balance the diet:* Someone once said, “We are what we eat.” The body also demands appropriate fuel to function effectively. To feel

better is to eat better. As one pastor said, “My major problem is feeding my anxiety.” The options for better eating are legion—find the one that fits best and make it work.

- 6) *Cultivate partnerships*: In other words, cultivate close friends outside of the parish. Become involved with persons who are not associated with the local church activities; spend quality time with professional peers for discussions of topics unrelated to the ministry and the pastorate—people who know how to laugh—people who will keep confidences—people who will make prayer for personal needs a priority—people who know how to have appropriate fun.
- 7) *Develop diversion*: For one pastor, it is photography; for another, it is golf; for others it may range from dirt bike riding to refurbishing antique furniture. The point is to change the mindset by developing a hobby that requires mental diversion.
- 8) *Relate to a trusted mentor*: At some time or other every pastor needs a pastor—a trusted fellow minister—one who will listen to new ideas, current problems, spiritual struggles and unfulfilled dreams with empathy and ability to give honest feedback. Too often burnout results when negative emotions are repressed deep in the unconscious. At some juncture, such masked feelings may be manifested in psychosomatic disorders, emotional debilitation and a general loss of well being. Emotional exploration with a purpose often leads to gaining a productive perspective for personal growth.

- 9) *Extend education*: Life is a continuing process of learning. By introducing new intellectual stimuli we are better able to throw off persistent, stressful thoughts as we engage in the assimilation of new knowledge for better understanding of ourselves, our ministry, and the persons to whom we relate. The danger is to get caught up in the rehashing and recycling of material in which we have no passionate emotional investment.
- 10) *Maintain objectivity*: Be careful not to over personalize the problem situation. Take an objective stance; filter the facts. Usually, we are prone to overstate and give three “knee jerks” when one “knee jerk” is sufficient.
- 11) *Enlist intercessors*: Knowing that there are those people who daily make intercessory prayer gives an inner resilience that enables us to face the “fray” with confidence that God will truly see us through. Sustained prayer support is an under girding power that gives us the assurance that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

These are the principles for practicing peace. Is such peace really a possibility?

Here is a letter from an aspiring pastor:

Three years ago when I was 26 years old, I learned what it means to have joy in the midst of trials. At that time I was a successful systems analyst, had a wonderful marriage, and became a father for the first time in June of that year. That summer in response to prayer and God’s guidance, I quit my job; we moved to a new town, and I entered seminary full-time to prepare myself for the ministry.

This was a stressful time for me because, in addition to having to adjust to a new baby, my self-esteem took a beating due to the lack of income and status together with the difficulties of my studies.

Finally in November, two weeks before my first set of final

exams, my wife became ill and died. Suddenly, I was a widower with a five-month-old daughter, over five hundred miles from the nearest relative. It seemed that my world had collapsed.

Yet I didn't despair because I knew that the Lord was real, that He loves me that He is in control of events even though they are not pleasant and I don't understand them.

The verses that I held on to and believe that became real to me were Romans 8:28; Isaiah 41:10; and Philippians 4:13.

In my experience the strength and joy of God were activated by faith and belief in His complete goodness; by praise in the face of heart-break; by prayers of myself and many others on my behalf; by the body of believers coming to my aid in so many ways, I found that the Lord is able to sustain us through anything if we turn to Him.³

How does the Apostle Paul put it?

And of this gospel I was appointed a herald, an apostle
And a teacher that is why I am suffering as I am. Yet
I am not ashamed because I know whom I have believed
And am convinced that He is able to guard what I have
Entrusted to Him for that day 2 Timothy 1:11, 12 (*NIV*)

But there is also a third step –

3. Program Thinking

Finally, Paul brings the entire plan into focus with the statement ...

“Fix your minds on the things which are holy and right and pure and beautiful and good”

Philippians 4:8 (*Phillips*)

The apostle knew we would be confronting a brainwashed world. He was aware of a coming pressure-cooker age, designed to stretch us to the breaking point. He foresaw a time when the forces of evil would threaten to cause us to skew our sense of objectivity, challenge our sense of absolutes, test our sense of divine identity, and dull our sense of spiritual values. That is why he calls for a positive mind set in this text and a renewed mind in Romans 12:2.

³ Paul Walker, *How To Keep Your Joy*. Etc etc

You see, the brain is the most complex mechanism ever created. In one way, it is like a telephone switchboard that connects incoming and out going calls. In another way, it is like a computer that makes decisions about which circuits to link and which calls to connect. However, the crowning achievement of the brain is the capacity to think, perceive, and experience. Further, the way in which these three processes combine determines what we call learning. In turn, what we learn and how we evaluate this new information shapes our behavior, the kind of lifestyle we pursue and how we avoid the burnout blues.

In a very real sense, we are what we think. Proverbs 23:7 says that as we think in our hearts, so we are. Paul says that we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (see Romans 12:2).

To be transformed is to change form completely, as illustrated in the transfiguration of Christ (see Matthew 17) or the transition of a caterpillar to a butterfly. It is to undergo a spiritual metamorphosis. To be renewed is to experience a thinking renovation with a subsequent change in character toward the excellency of Christ. It is to program our brains with the power of Christ to the point where we can truly fix our minds on “the things which are holy and right and pure and beautiful and good” (Philippians 4:8, Phillips).

The process here is to trust the Lord to help us convert bad stress to good. In this regard, it is apparent from the research that bad stress can inflict real bodily harm and cause burnout. The studies make the point that if bad stress is occasional, the immune system can bounce back. If it is prolonged, the immune system is thrown out of whack. Further, repeated and unremitting episodes of bad stress mean repeated release of

adrenaline. If the problem prompts no physical exertion to use up the adrenaline—the most stresses in modern life are of a mental rather than a physical nature—then excess adrenaline will remain in the system and can play a part in the build up of cholesterol in the arteries to the point that it will eventually lead to heart disease.

The strategy here is to ward off burnout by changing the course of the stress tide through re-programming our thinking by changing our self-talk.

Instead of “stressing out” because of the endless weights and hassles of everyday living we can talk to ourselves differently. For instance, while waiting in a line we can make our inner voice be comforting and reassuring by saying something like, “I don’t like waiting in this line, but there is nothing I can do about it now; so, I might as well relax. Look how tense everyone else is getting. It’s actually rather humorous.”

Another help is to stop thinking about the time. “Hurry sickness” is a key personality trait of the heart attack prone person. In this context, one way to relieve pressure is to stop wearing a wristwatch or carrying a cell phone for a week—the results may be surprising. Usually, we are not nearly as important or needed as we like to think we are. The point is to reduce the constant need to be somewhere, on time, and meet a deadline.

In the same vein when preparing to face what is expected to be a stressful meeting, we can visualize what may take place. The inner rehearsal of the agenda and its possible directions is often advantageous in facing the event relaxed and confident.

Further, during a tense situation, such as taking an exam or confronting a problem situation or meeting a tight deadline, we need to talk encouragingly to ourselves rather than putting ourselves down. Even though things may not go well, it is better for both

our mental and physical health to appreciate the relief that comes by knowing that the crisis has passed, the meeting is over, or the problem situation has been faced. In this process, it is important for us to avoid self-criticism and second-guessing with an inner voice that offers perspective, praise, and encouragement.

Now, “How about it?” It is one thing to talk about stress and burnout and it is another thing to check out the fatigue the brings on burnout. Here is a self-test. Take the time to answer the checklist and give thought and prayer to the things we have been discussing. The point of all of this is that when we recognize any of these signals, we should stop what we are doing – if only for two or three minutes – take several deep breaths and try to relax. In a state of relaxation, it is then important for us to pray in detail, practice peace and program our thinking.

From the Biblical standpoint we are told to be transformed in our minds into the very image and mindset of Christ.

Perhaps this entire process is best illustrated by the testimony of an early church Christian martyr who found power over stress and burnout while imprisoned in a deep, dark dungeon:

In a dark hole I have found cheerfulness; in a place of bitterness and death I have found rest. While others weep I have found laughter, where others fear I have found strength. Who would believe that in a state of misery I have had great pleasure; that in a lonely corner I have glorious company and in the hardest bonds perfect repose? All these things Jesus has granted me. He is with me, comforts me and fills me with joy. He drives bitterness from me and fills me with strength and consolation.

This is the scripture plan: Pray in detail. Practice the peace of God. Program thinking. It will work! The Bible is true! “Don’t worry over anything whatever” (Philippians 4:6, Phillips). We can beat the burnout blues!

~ - Self-test page-