



Cultivating Inner Peace to Prevent and Recover from Burnout

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This article is a reprint from

Energy magazine

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Burnout. The very word conjures the metaphor of a fire losing its flame. When it happens to you, the exhaustion and devastation are frightening and cause many to question their true purpose.

Burnout occurs when passionate, committed people become disillusioned with a career or life from which they have previously derived much of their identity or meaning. As a life and career coach, I have seen increasing numbers of burnout among my clients across all industries, especially since the recent financial depression, as companies strive to do more work with less people. One of the most critical industries affected is healthcare. Those in the healing professions are often stretched beyond their limits – physically, emotionally, mentally – and the prolonged demands can take a spiritual toll as well.

There are four stages to burnout, as identified by Christian Korunka, PhD. Recognizing the signs and patterns early is key to a successful and quicker recovery – as it can take several months to recover from full blown burnout.

- **Stage One** is characterized by high demands, high stress, and high expectations. At this stage, the demands on you exceed your resources and you feel as though you are not able to fulfill your own expectations of what you should be achieving in your life.

- **Stage Two** is distinguished by physical and emotional exhaustion – a chronic exhaustion that causes you to expend more energy to complete tasks for which you normally would not have to make such an effort. Sleep disturbances and aches and pains also become evident in this stage.
- **Stage Three** is defined by depersonalization, cynicism and indifference. You find yourself with a negative attitude toward others who require something of you - and you withdraw from anything requiring effort. This stage is also known as compassion fatigue.
- **Stage Four** is described as despair, helplessness and the desertion of oneself and of others. At this stage, feelings of guilt and insufficiency are added to the extreme exhaustion from earlier stages.

While burnout is often precipitated by increased demands from the environment, its causes are also personal. It occurs when individuals regularly and repeatedly put others needs – real or imagined – before their own. It is those of us who are the most compassionate, giving and self-less who are most at risk, and in healthcare, burnout and compassion fatigue create a handicapped healer.

The healing must begin from within. Without proper fuel, a fire quickly burns out. We also must continue to fuel ourselves to maintain our abilities. In crunch



times, quick sources of fuel can be found in carbohydrates or in the adrenaline spike that comes with fight-or-flight. However, these quick fuels can have devastating effects if they are overused.

If you recognize the signs of burnout in yourself, it is important to acknowledge it and begin taking steps toward recovery.

The first step is to rest. In our busy culture, we rarely take time to deeply rest, yet that is exactly what is first required. (Hint: Deep rest does not include electronics.) Many find that time in nature is particularly beneficial.

when it is offered, helps you to be in balance with the natural give and take that occurs in all of nature.

In my own experience with burnout, and in helping clients who have experienced it, **dismantling the thoughts and beliefs that create the conditions for burnout to occur** is key to preventing it from happening again. Often, burnout is caused (in part) by thoughts such as “If I were better, it would be better.” A thought like this drives us to do more, striving to be “better,” which keeps us on the hamster wheel of overdoing it. Question your thoughts – is this really true? Could the opposite thought be just as true? (Byron Katie has a powerful method for this at TheWork.com.)

“The healing must begin from within.”

Second, learn to say “No.” One of my teachers, Byron Katie, says, “A Yes to you is a Yes to me. A No to you is a Yes to me.” By truly evaluating the things you spend your time doing and by using these qualifications, you will begin to take better care of yourself. Since burnout occurs when we regularly put others’ needs, whether those needs are real or imagined, before our own, we have to start saying No to some of those requests. A great place to start is with those imagined needs. Ask yourself, where are you taking on responsibilities that others can do for themselves?

The next step is to **nourish yourself with good fuel.** Clean, whole foods – not processed food or refined carbohydrates – and regular exercise help support your body for healing. Nourishment for the mind and soul are also important. Think of those things that give you energy, rather than deplete your energy. Sometimes, it is the simplest things. What did you enjoy doing as a child?

Another key step in recovery of burnout is to learn the skills of **asking for and accepting help.** So many of us try to do everything ourselves, and while this independence can serve us, it perpetuates the cycle of burnout. As humans, we are meant to be in relation with others. Asking for help, and accepting help

Finally, make a new practice of **finding peace.** I have three easy pathways to peace that I regularly practice:

- **Three Breaths** – One of the simplest ways to calm your body from fight-or-flight is to take three deep belly breaths. Shifting your focus to your breath, relax your stomach and inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale through your mouth, and imagine releasing some of the tension held in your body with your exhalation. Do this at least three times, and you will start to feel a shift.
- **Gratitude** – The mind cannot do fear and gratitude at the same time. Make a list of the things in your life for which you are grateful, and keep in mind the simple things, such as a hot shower, a comfortable bed, or the ability to breathe easily.
- **Beauty Way Prayer** – This Navajo prayer and way of being helps reconnect us to the natural world all around us by directing our attention to seven directions. I repeat it in my mind or aloud and have been amazed at the shifts inside me as well as in those around me: “*There is beauty before me. There is beauty behind me. There is beauty to the right of me. There is beauty to the left of me.*”



There is beauty above me. There is beauty below me. There is beauty within me."

While I am not in a constant state of peace – I am not sure I will ever be – I have found that the more I recognize when I am out of it and return again to these practices of self-care and the pathways to peace, I spend much more time in contentment and joy. With the increasing demands on those in healing professions, there is no time like the present to take exquisite care of yourself and cultivate your own inner peace. It is only by finding our own peace that we can ever hope to create peace on a broader scale. €



Emily Downward is a master certified life coach and intuitive who helps people find their purpose and live their lives more consciously. With a variety of tools that integrate the mind, body and spirit, Emily leverages her experience and knowledge to help people create a life they love with less stress, more inner peace and the joy of accomplishing their dreams.

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