

Burnout

On two occasions, I have come close to burnout, even after running seminars for Christian leadership on this subject. Burnout can develop gradually, often going unnoticed in the early stages. It first gained public attention in 1980 with the book 'Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement.'

During one of these seasons, a counsellor and friend, Brian Massey, described burnout as 'the inevitable outcome of unattended cumulative stress.' It can also be understood as 'a state of emotional, physical, social, and spiritual exhaustion.' Those in practical ministry are especially vulnerable, and the consequences can be severe, with many leaving ministries altogether. Since you are not superhuman, it is vital to plan for long-term health rather than simply reacting to immediate demands. On a scale of 1 to 10—where 1 means no signs of burnout and 10 means severe burnout—where would you place yourself?

Parker Palmer describes burnout as 'a state of emptiness, to be sure, but it does not result from giving all I have; it merely reveals the nothingness from which I am trying to give in the first place.'

Biblical Perspective

Scripture is full of people approaching burnout. For instance, Moses, nearing emotional exhaustion, received timely counsel from his father-in-law, Jethro. Jethro advised him to delegate much of his work, which he wisely did (Exodus 18:17-27). Similarly, after a great victory in defeating the prophets of Baal, Elijah found himself in despair, hiding in the wilderness from Jezebel and crying out for death (1 Kings 19:4). Many other biblical figures also struggled with the pressures of leadership and ministry. People operating in burnout can harm themselves, those around them, and even discredit God's work.

Reasons for Burnout

1. Cultural Upbringing – I was raised in a home where hard work was expected. My mother often recalled rising very early to milk cows before school, and I absorbed the belief that I should work just as diligently. Letting go of that mindset can be deeply difficult. Even in retirement, I found myself close to burnout, so I eventually limited my work to mornings and kept afternoons free to restore my health.
2. Work Addiction – This differs from cultural upbringing. Many people genuinely enjoy hard work and gain satisfaction from it. Seeing lives transformed by Jesus is rewarding, but if we are not careful, ministry can deplete us entirely.
3. Poor Self-Esteem – We may overextend ourselves to prove our worth, putting undue pressure on our abilities.
4. Seeking Approval – Living for the praise of others and avoiding criticism can be exhausting. Self-awareness is crucial in addressing this issue.
5. Meeting Others' Expectations – Ministry is demanding, and unless we set boundaries, we may be overwhelmed by the expectations placed on us.

6. Neglecting Sabbath Rest – An insightful story illustrates this well: ‘Someone applying for an associate pastor's position was told, ‘Rich (his name), there’s only one way to get fired at this church.’ Expecting an example of moral failure, he was surprised when the interviewer said, ‘If you don’t keep the Sabbath, you will get fired, because you won’t have the kind of life that will sustain pastoral work.’ (Rich Villodas, Christianity Today).
7. Understanding Sabbath – Eugene Peterson defines Sabbath as ‘uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from the frenzy of our activities so we can see what God has been and is doing.’
8. Vicarious Trauma – Constant exposure to the pain and suffering of others can lead to emotional exhaustion. This could include Moral injury (doing something against your value system) is now recognised as a significant stressor.

Ways to Overcome Burnout

1. Assess Your Pace – If Jesus took over your ministry, would He operate at your speed? Needs do not always constitute a call. Jesus frequently withdrew for solitude and prayer. *‘Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.’* Mark 1:35. Meditation and listening to God are just as important as speaking to Him.
2. Seek Knowledge – Reading books and articles on burnout and attending seminars can help you take stock of your well-being.
3. Exercise Regularly – One specialist noted that 95% of burnout cases he treated involved people who did not exercise consistently.
4. Find a Confidant – I set aside monthly time with a godly mentor to share joys, confess failures, and pray in a confidential setting. James 5:16 says, *‘Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.’* John Wesley also advocated for small group confession and accountability.
5. Prioritise Rest – Take a weekly Sabbath and engage in activities that replenish your energy. What restores you?
6. Maintain Quality Relationships – Invest in meaningful relationships, particularly with your spouse and children if married. Limit time with overly negative individuals who drain you.
7. Set Boundaries – Manage your schedule wisely, leaving time for recovery between appointments. Postpone meetings if necessary.
8. Recognise Your Limits – Avoid the temptation to impress others at the expense of your well-being.

Jesus invites us, saying, *‘Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest’* Matthew 11:28 (The Message.)