

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Burnout

You find it hard to get up and go to work in the morning. Work used to be exciting and you used to look forward to what you did with people, but now you are just tired and it takes a great deal of effort to get out of bed. You wonder what is wrong. Could it be that you are suffering from burnout? Could a really committed missionary burn out? You may only be in your first term; certainly you couldn't burn out in just a few years, could you? Wouldn't God keep you from burning out? Is it better to burn out than to rust out? What about that old gospel song that says, "Let me burn out for thee, dear Lord?" Let's consider some of these questions.

## How do I know if I'm burning out?

Although feeling tired and not wanting to go to work may be a part of burnout, there is more to burnout than that. Burnout happens to those in the helping professions, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, pastors, and missionaries. Three major symptoms of burnout are:

- Emotional exhaustion  
The exhaustion is more than physical it is emotional, "compassion fatigue." You feel drained. You feel used up. You feel overwhelmed by the needs people come with. It is not that you don't want to help, you just do not have what it takes to help any more.
- Depersonalization  
To shield yourself, you begin to reduce your close involvement with others. You begin not to notice the nationals who need

help. You ignore their requests. You begin to be discourteous to the very people you came to serve. You tend to become tough, hard, and cynical, putting nationals down. You view people as objects. You used to view nationals through rose-colored glasses; now you wear rust-colored glasses.

- Reduced personal accomplishment  
Whether or not you actually become ineffective, you feel ineffective. You begin to sense you are becoming the kind of person people do not like. You used to be sensitive and caring, but you realize you are becoming cold and indifferent. You see that you are not accomplishing what you felt God called you to do, and you wonder if you still hear him.

Burnout is the result of continual stress over a long period of time rather than great stress over a short one. Burnout does not happen overnight, but it creeps up on you without your realizing it. Other missionaries usually notice it long before you do, but if you check yourself periodically, you can detect it. Burnout is not a psychiatric disorder, but is a phenomenon that will greatly reduce your effectiveness as a missionary in addition to what it does to you and your family.

## What causes burnout?

There are three major sources of burnout, and whether or not burnout occurs depends on all three. Knowing these can alert you to the causes, and help you evaluate whether you are at risk for burnout.

- Social  
You can't be a missionary without being involved with people, and that is a source of burnout. The "problem people" require much more of your attention than do the "pleasant people." As a result you begin to see even good people as problem people. You are

supposed to be polite, tactful and caring, so you feel like you cannot express the disappointment and frustration that you feel down inside. You smile and make some evasive remark rather than expressing your feelings. Rather than getting a "thank you" from someone you have helped, you get suspicion. There are nationals you really like, but you hesitate to get too close to them because you know that you will soon be returning to your home country. It is easier not to establish a close relationship than to create one, then have to break it in a few months.

- System  
Your job setting may be a source of burnout. Language school was so frustrating. When you arrived on the field, that seemed even more overwhelming. So many people to get to know, so much to do, and so little time to do it. You were doing God's work, and there was such a need that there was no time for breaks or for vacations. Your fellow missionaries had projects that they were trying to get funded, and you knew that they were requesting funds from the same people. Your field director was to be an encouragement, but he had so many criticisms, and every compliment seemed to end with "but...." There were the plans, policies and procedures. There was so much red tape before you started a project, followed by progress reports as you were doing it and more reports when you completed it.

- Self  
You may be a source of burnout yourself. If you lack self-confidence or have low self-esteem, you are a candidate for burnout. If you are unassertive, submissive, passive, anxious and blame yourself for failure, you are a candidate. If your needs for achievement, approval and affection are too high, you are a candidate. If you are

impatient, irritable, and do not know how to handle anger and conflict, you are a candidate.

## Can a really committed missionary burn out?

Not only can committed missionaries burn out, but the more committed they are, the more likely they are to burn out. If people slip through the screening process with major motives of travel and excitement, they can succeed at that quite readily. However, the more "ideal" missionaries are, with hearts to win people to Christ, concern for others, and high expectations, the more likely they are to burn out.

A related question is, "Can first-term missionaries burn out?" Again, the answer is that they are at greatest risk for burnout. The time of greatest risk for burnout in any people-helping occupation is the first five years on the job. That is exactly the time frame of the first term and language school in most agencies. This new worker is filled with idealism and high expectations. When reality begins to set in, the first-term missionary begins to burn out.

## What are the effects of burnout?

Many pay the price when missionaries burn out. It affects everyone who comes into contact with them.

- Personal: In addition to the emotional and physical exhaustion, one may experience disturbed sleep, nightmares, illness, depression and sometimes resort to drugs or alcohol.
- Family and other missionaries: Missionaries burning out begin to expect perfection from others. This leads to

impatience, bickering, and fighting at home and in the office. They are available to meet the needs of nearly anyone, except their own families and other missionaries.

- Nationals: In addition to being rude, thoughtless and treating others as objects, missionaries burning out may begin to miss more days at work, move to educating others, ask to work with work teams, or move to administration. All of this is to avoid contact with nationals, but this motive may not be conscious.

### Can burnout be treated?

Yes, if caught in time. Missionaries who burn out to the point that they actually leave the field are unlikely to return. Such people recover from their burnout, but they typically move into some other type of work. Therefore, it is important to detect burnout as soon as possible and take steps to prevent it from becoming any worse. When burnout is far along, you will likely know that you are burning out, but you are not likely to notice it in the early stages. The best early warning system is not yourself, but others who are willing to point out symptoms of burnout in you. Of course, you are their best early detection system, so check up on each other regularly.

### Can burnout be prevented?

Yes! You can do many things that will prevent burnout. Following are some suggestions:

- Set realistic goals. Set specific goals so that you will know when you have achieved them. Of course, you want to

save the world, but you are not going to do it alone.

- Don't get in a rut. Vary the way you do things so that they do not become routine.
- Take breaks. This includes different kinds of breaks: (1) Coffee breaks—morning and afternoon. (2) Lunch—don't catch up on work during that time; leave the office. (3) One day a week—you were made to take a Sabbath; leave town if you have to. (4) Vacations—you can't go all year, year after year.
- Don't take things personally. You are not responsible for everything that goes wrong.
- Leave your work at work. When you come home to your family, enjoy them.
- Learn to laugh at yourself. You are not indispensable, and you do some pretty funny things.
- Have a support group. You need someone to encourage you and serve as a yardstick against which you can measure yourself realistically.
- Live a life of your own. Have some hobby or activity that you just enjoy doing regularly.
- Change jobs. If all else fails, ask for a different assignment in your mission.

All of these things are easier said than done, but they can be done. Jesus modeled this for us in a well-known cross-cultural incident in John 4. He was tired from his trip, so he sat down by the well and sent his friends shopping for a lunch. He asked someone for a drink because he was thirsty, and then he struck up a conversation with her. If Jesus can sit down to rest, have a cool drink, and chat with someone passing by, we certainly can do so ourselves. The alternative is misery for yourself and those you live and work with, often followed by leaving your work.

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