
BURNOUT -

IT'S AFFLICTING A GROWING NUMBER OF UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Overwork, fatigue, constant job stress – these are the conditions that cause burnout, an increasingly serious health problem among the “helping” professions such as teachers, nurses, social workers and union representatives. It's not just an individual problem – it's one that has very harmful effects on the victim's families, on the members they serve, and on the union itself. Moreover, it has its roots in the way the union is run and how responsibilities and resources are allocated.

Here are the **FACTS**:

- Burnout is a health condition caused by job stress. It is mental, physical and emotional exhaustion. It is battle fatigue.
- It is the worn-out feeling that eats away at your sense of purpose on the job. It comes when you are assaulted daily with repetitive, unending demands and problems. Problems solved in one worksite crop up in another. They were there yesterday, and they'll be there tomorrow. It's systemic.
- Burnout is the feeling that you will never get out from under. It's a feeling of a lack of accomplishment and dead-ending in your job.
- When exhaustion becomes so great that your ability to relate to other people around you – co-workers, members you represent, even family and friends – is affected, you are burning out.
- The downward spiral begins. Hagglng between members, petty grievances, alcoholism, etc. These are all symptoms of stress and they have a debilitating effect on you and the union.

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- Members feel powerless; you feel overwhelmed, disgusted and cynical. Only through concerted effort, planning and organization can things be turned around.

THE CAUSES OF BURNOUT

There is no one specific cause of burnout. More likely it is the result of a combination of factors. Here are some possibilities:

- Lack of clear boundaries – irregular work hours and schedules
- Dealing with repetitive, unending problems
- Feeling caught in between – the mediator between the boss and the workers or among workers, worker’s perception that you stand between their desires and the employer
- Not appreciated by co-workers, members, or leadership within the union
- Dead-end job with no real possibility for advancement
- Work overload – territory too large or lack of skills to do the job effectively
- Bad managerial practices and policies – conflicting instructions, lack of priorities, constantly changing policies
- Lack of resources
- Fighting and haggling for a living; feeling cold and callous
- Lack of sense of accomplishment
- Excessive paperwork

Even though burnout is a social problem, people who suffer from it tend to think of it as their own individual problem, because they experience it in a very personal way.

Burnout is a form of stress. Some of the symptoms of burnout are feelings of listlessness and lack of energy. You begin to lose positive feelings, sympathy and respect for the members you represent. You just don’t care.

There are many stress-related health conditions that are symptomatic of burnout. These include:

- Ulcers, colitis, and gastro-intestinal problems
- Hypertension, heart disease and other cardiovascular problems
- Back pain, eyestrain, chronic fatigue and depression

Not everyone will experience these problems. Burnout affects different people differently. For example, one person under stress will lose appetite, another will eat more. Some people get migraine headaches, others suffer insomnia.

Other common health problems that are associated with stress are: bladder infections, menstrual irregularities, and low resistance to colds and viruses. Stress can also aggravate existing conditions such as skin rashes, diabetes and asthma.

And finally, stress has an effect on a person's moods and emotions. Irritability, anxiety, feelings of guilt, boredom and low self-esteem are common expressions of the psychological effects of stress.

WHY DO HEALTH PROBLEMS OCCUR?

Burnout occurs because the body's mechanism for reaction to stress begins to wear out. Normally, when the body is faced with a stressful situation, it mobilizes energy to resist the challenge. A number of physiological reactions occur:

- Blood pressure goes up, heart beats faster, stomach acids increase their activity, breathing speeds up.

When these reactions occur, the energy level remains elevated to provide the mental and physical strength necessary to handle crisis. When the crisis is resolved, the stress is reduced and the mind and body return to normal.

Burnout results if the resistance stage lasts too long. This can happen when the sources of stress are constant, and when there is not enough time to rest between them. The body tires over time and has less mental and physical energy available to meet the challenge placed on it.

WHAT SIGNS TO LOOK FOR

Besides constant exhaustion, many people experience the following:

- Dreading coming to work (wanting to pull the covers over your head)
- Increased smoking, increased drinking
- Becoming irritable and short-tempered with co-workers, family and friends
- Avoiding phone calls, missing meetings, forgetfulness

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- Distancing oneself from members (ridiculing them or telling off-colour jokes about them; using “lawyer” talk to separate yourself from their personal problems; not looking them in the eye)
 - Feeling unappreciated and untrusted by members, co-workers, and leadership
 - Losing the ability to develop creative solutions (applying rigid rules)
 - Losing the ability to laugh
 - Feeling that nothing can be done to improve your working conditions
 - Feeling overwhelmed at work
 - Compensating for your burnout by trying to work harder
 - Wanting to quit the job and leave the field entirely
 - Thinking about asking for a demotion
 - Losing interest in life outside work
 - Losing interest in sex
 - Developing marital problems
 - Being accident prone
 - Needing tranquilizers and sleeping pills
 - Dreaming about work a lot
 - Feeling that your inability to resolve problems at work is the result of your own failure

Burnout rates begin to soar whenever the separation between job and home – your work and private life – fall apart and the job takes over.

Because union representatives tend to be on “24 hour call, 7 days a week”, this creates a real problem. Marital and family conflicts are almost certain to occur, and home life can deteriorate. Consequently, it is critical that the job be contained with reasonable limits and not be allowed to spill over into home life.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT BURNOUT?

Because burnout is primarily an exhaustion syndrome, it requires real changes – not merely more insight. Burnout is a signal that there are organizational problems where you work. Reducing or eliminating burnout requires a coordinated effort. To do this effectively, you need to identify and document specific sources of burnout and then develop a systematic plan on a number of different fronts. It incorporates individual solutions with organizational ones.

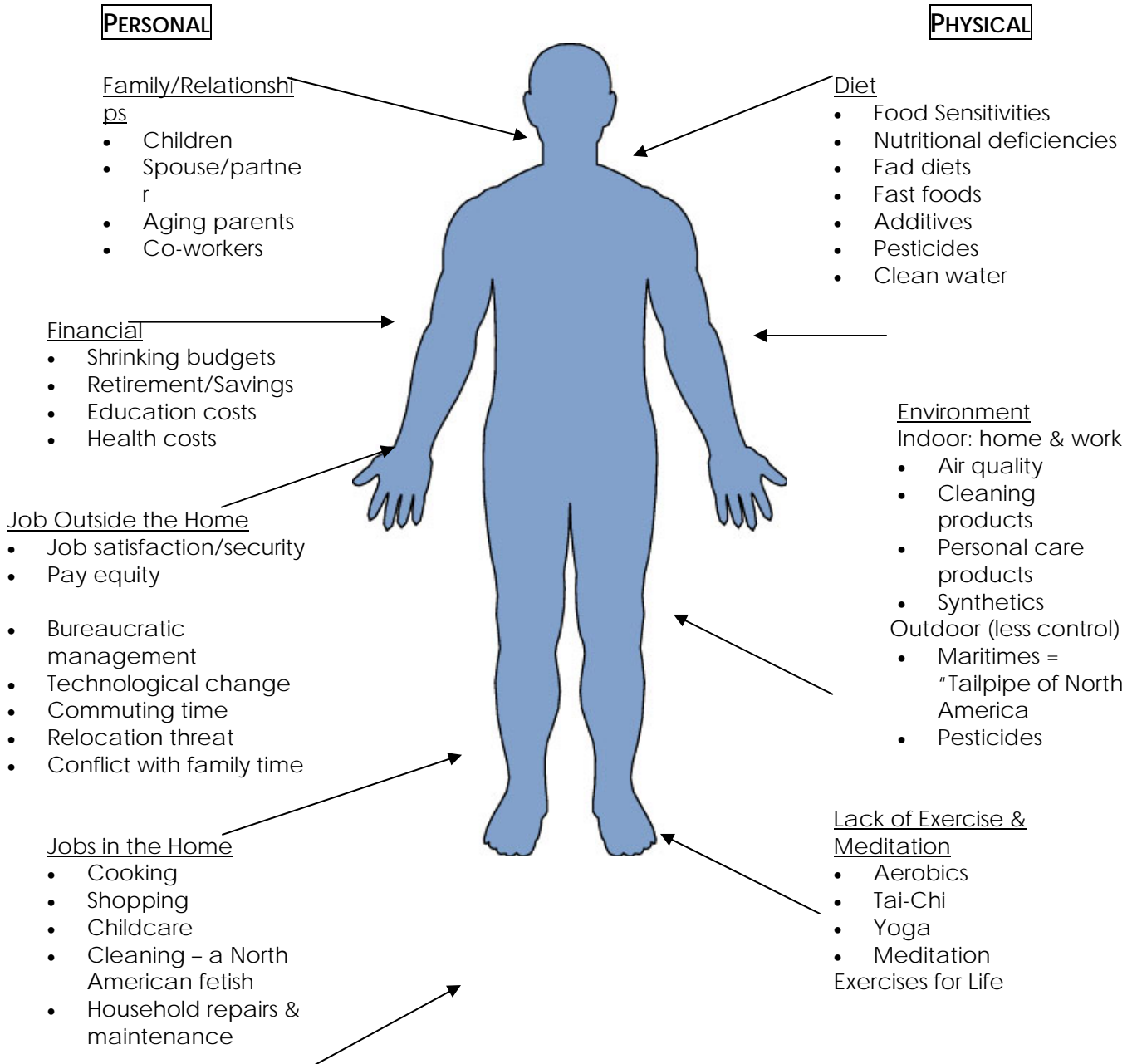
Remember, a union is more than a business with a profit and loss statement. For it to be healthy, it must have a vision, and the organizational structure and policies – how it works – must mirror that vision.

(written by Deborah Nagin, Montefiore Hospital & Medical Center, Department of Social Medicine, Program in Occupational Health. Portions of this article were adapted from a CWA 1180 fact sheet on burnout prepared by Marsha Love)



WELCOME TO THE 21ST CENTURY

STRESSORS



SOCIAL

- Entertainment/entertaining
- Keeping up with the Jones's
- Keeping up with the Jones's kids
- Superman/Superwoman myth

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Being thin & always looking good
- Medical & health fears
- Aging – menopause, prostate
- Media Intrusion
- Fewer personal growth & creative opportunities
- Loss personal “quiet” or “down” time

CUMULATIVE STRESS

It has been popular to refer to chronic or cumulative stress as “burnout.” The word *burnout* was meaningful when it was first used, but with overuse the term has become less meaningful because it has been diluted. People started using the term in a negative way, which did not make stress a believable problem. People got the idea that when others talked about burnout, they were just making excuses to avoid work. The term became a catchall for every type of stress problem. Burnout became an irritating term, rather than one that helped us to understand how people become exhausted and worn out by their work.

A much cleaner, clearer term is cumulative stress. This term implies that a person is suffering through the build-up of a variety over a period of time. Cumulative stress reactions come about as a result of a build-up of work as well as non-work related stressors. It usually takes a long time to build up enough stress for it to show up in a cumulative stress reaction. In most cases cumulative stress reactions do not show up for months or even years.

Cumulative stress reactions are made up of a collection of stressful events, such as critical incidents combined with home or family stressors. They may also be mixed together with organizational stressors, routine stressors on the job, and leftover stressors from one's early development as a child.

Cumulative stress reactions are a combination of acute, delayed, and chronic stressors, which have developed in work and non-work areas. They are difficult to diagnose properly and to cure because they have so many interrelated features and have taken many months or years to develop. The development of a cumulative stress reaction is often so slow and subtle that frequently it is not even noticed as it develops. Most of the time a cumulative stress reaction is so complex that it takes specialized help from medical and psychological professionals to resolve it. By the time it is noticed, people who have a cumulative stress reaction may be sick or have experienced marital problems, alcoholism, and other problems. Some may have undergone personality changes or may be dysfunctioning on the job. If their condition has

deteriorated significantly, they need outside professional assistance to get back on track. Those who wait too long to get help jeopardize their jobs, their families, and their health.

FIGHTING BURNOUT

The job of a union rep is difficult and demanding.

Because of the nature of your job, changes must occur at different levels in order to reduce or eliminate stress. Burnout is a health condition caused by organizational problems where you work. Solutions must consequently address those problems.

BE GOOD TO YOURSELF

- **Develop a daily/weekly work plan:** Don't make it too long. Review it at the end of the week. It will give you direction and a sense of accomplishment and closure.
- **Start doing exercise at work:** If you are driving in a car all day, stop and take a walk. Whether car-bound or desk-bound, simple exercises will relax your mind and muscles and stimulate blood circulation when you've been sitting too long. Doing exercises at home will also help.
- **Change your diet:** Union reps eat a lot of restaurant food, so it's hard to maintain a healthy diet. If you snack during the day, stick to high protein foods like cheese, nuts, hard-boiled eggs or eat some fruit. These give you more long lasting energy. Try to cut down on coffee, soda, donuts or other junk foods high in sugar. These give a quick energy boost, but it's temporary. Sugar strips Vitamin B from your nervous system, contributing to nervousness and irritability. Caffeine in coffee and soda makes it worse, as do cigarettes. Eat foods that contain anti-stress vitamins. For example, oranges and grapefruits contain Vitamin C, which helps fight colds. Apples, bananas, milk, cheese, eggs, liver, and whole-grain cereal contain Vitamin B, which assists the body during stressful times.
- **Eat at regular times of the day:** Don't skip meals. You'll only overeat later in the day. Eating on a regular schedule is healthier. It also gives you more control over your day.
- **Try to do something you enjoy every day:** This is not only important for you, but also for your family. It is a good way to cool down and relax.

CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

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- **Vacations:** They should be scheduled and taken with no exceptions. Other reps should be assigned to handle emergencies in your area.
 - **Sabbaticals:** Sometimes you need a change of pace, some time to get away and do something different, or simply relax.

THE UNION OPERATIONS

These are the hard ones. They require commitment – creative solutions – on the part of the organization.

- **Staff meetings:** Are they a supportive group effort, or the “Inquisition?”
- **Training:** To develop your skills, expertise and knowledge.
- **Team concept in organizing and servicing.**
- **Developing speciality areas of expertise among staff members.**
- **Reduced paperwork:** Accountability through staff meetings and involvement with each other’s work.
- **Job rotation:** To change the scenery and develop other areas of expertise.