

**BURNOUT, COMPASSION  
FATIGUE & BOUNDARIES:  
FINDING A WORKABLE  
BALANCE**



Consider this situation:

You and someone you care about are on a hike, enjoying a beautiful day in the woods. Suddenly, your companion slips on a muddy bank and falls into a swiftly moving river. What do you do?

- Jump in and try to rescue your companion?
- Find a branch to hold out and tell the person to grab the branch?

What if you had a rope? Then what would you do?

If we anchor the rope around a tree, and throw the other end to the person in the river, we are able to stay on the bank, grounded, and help in a way that provides a means for the person to struggle their own way out of the river.

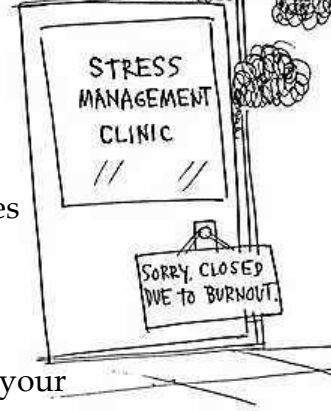
As advocates, our "rope" is our knowledge, training and experience. We can use this to help our clients, but we must be careful maintain proper boundaries and our core strength, in the process.

## BURNOUT<sup>1</sup>

Signs of burnout (check any that apply):

- You used to love your work but now it exhausts you emotionally or physically
- You feel you're accomplishing much less compared with your past performance
- You're dedicated to your clients and colleagues but no one seems to appreciate it
- You feel cynical about your work, your employer, and/or your clients
- People wonder why you look tired or "not so good"
- You need more time alone than you used to
- You feel tired rather than energetic
- You're no longer interested in the hobbies or pastimes you used to enjoy
- You're increasingly forgetful about appointments and overlooking deadlines
- You're more irritable now when driving in traffic or waiting in lines
- You're getting unexplained headaches, stomachaches or backaches
- You find yourself frequently feeling angry and striking out at others
- You believe only you can do the work you do as well as you do it, and that your clients and colleagues would be harmed if you quit

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If you checked any of these boxes you are likely exhibiting symptoms of burnout. How many did you check? \_\_\_\_\_

### BURNOUT:

**Burnout is an unacknowledged state of exhaustion that occurs when you consistently make choices for the benefit of others at the expense of your own needs.**

### Another Definition of Burnout:

A State of fatigue or emotional depletion brought about by adherence to a professional or volunteer role that has failed to produce the expected rewards -----

<sup>1</sup> Burnout materials taken from What Can you do With a Law Degree? by Deborah Arron

**Or:**

"Burnout is not simply excessive stress. Rather, it is a complex human reaction to ongoing stress, and it relates to feeling that your inner resources are inadequate for managing the tasks and situations presented to you. The signs and symptoms of burnout are similar to those of stress, but burnout includes an emotional exhaustion and an increasingly negative attitude toward your work and, perhaps, your life."

**In some cases:**

***The Perfect is the Enemy of the Good (Voltaire)***

Because it could be the case that satisfaction with real achievements is limited because of feelings of not meeting the high standards which could be self-imposed;

**OR**

In some cases there is a sense of feeling "driven" to produce that could go beyond a satisfactory solution to a problem because of feeling overwhelmed by all the demands of the situation.

## Compassion fatigue<sup>2</sup>

- Compassion fatigue is similar to burnout in that it has some of its roots in being overwhelmed by the volume of work, limited support and a frustration stemming from the disappointment that occurs when our expectations of our work roles and of ourselves are significantly different from the reality of the job.
- The difference is that compassion fatigue has been described as *a form of professional burnout which results from the **empathic connection** created with their clients.*
- It is often related to a breakdown of the boundaries between self and other and the resulting activation of our own unresolved issues or traumas.
- The symptoms are similar but compassion fatigue may emerge suddenly and, depending on the severity of the client situation, may include elements of secondary trauma.

Rate your current level of burnout/compassion fatigue									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

## Outcomes

- Untreated burnout and compassion fatigue will often lead to destructive behaviors such as eating, drinking, or smoking to excess and some may engage in self-injury or risk-taking behaviours.

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<sup>2</sup> Materials on compassion fatigue (including the rope metaphor) taken from “Empathizing or falling in the river? Avoiding and addressing compassion fatigue among service providers” by Deborah Gough (JADARA Vol. 40, No.3, 2007).

## Healthy Boundaries<sup>3</sup>

- Burnout is actually not a primary problem – it is a symptom of poor boundaries. **You can't have burnout or compassion fatigue without poor boundaries!**
- A boundary is a limit that promotes integrity. By the limits you set, you protect your psychological and physical wellbeing.
- Healthy boundaries require the ability to know who we are, what we like and don't like, how we feel and the kind of person we want to be.
- Healthy boundaries require the ability to say no. When we were 2 years old, we had no problem saying no. In this culture, this is drilled out of you by teachers and parents so that by the time you are an adult, you have trouble saying no to anyone.
- Poor boundary setting has many underlying causes: people pleasing, poor boundaries in family of origin, lack of understanding of your core values and poor emotional self care. Let's take a closer look at a few of these:
  - **Values** - some people are unwilling or unable to live their lives consistent with their values because they are unclear about their values. People who are clear find it easier to make tough decisions – if you value time with your children you will not give this time away to clients.
    - Many people say that family, spouses, friends, physical health are important, but this does not correspond with time spent on these activities. Remember: every time you say “yes” to someone or something, you must say “no” to someone or something else.
  - **People Pleasing** – another reason people have a hard time saying no is because they are overly concerned about what others think about them (this is called “other-esteem” and is a way of giving away your power and genuine self esteem).
    - In your 20's you are very concerned about what others think about you, in your 30's and 40's you start to care a little less, in your 50's and 60's you realize that no one was thinking about you in the first place!

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<sup>3</sup> Boundary materials were taken from an article by Jennifer J. Ator for the GPSolo Oct/Nov 2008, Vol. 25 Issue 7, P 8-12 and from the books Boundaries and Where to draw the Line by Anne Katherine.



"It's come to our attention that you have a personal life."

### Work Boundaries (managing expectations)

- You must truly believe that there should be boundaries in the relationship with your clients and you must communicate this in your words and actions. Helpers who respond to emails at 10:00 pm and check messages 3 times a day on vacation develop relationships where clients (and employers) will expect this!
- Clients like to be able to be in communication when they need to, but sometimes, it could be case that people looking after the clients are almost equally guilty of liking the fact that they are needed and wanted.
- It is the helper's **job** to manage the expectations of the client; both in terms of the results the helper hopes to achieve and the relationship that will exist with the client (if you don't set boundaries, other people will set them for you).
- Clearly define your role and responsibilities, set out the desired outcomes and the realistic expectations. What is yours to do and what is the client's to do.
- Helpers and advocates establish boundaries by modeling appropriate behavior and managing expectations – once you set the boundaries the clients will adapt.

### Work Boundaries (maintaining emotional integrity)

- Do you know where to draw the line? Are you doing for others what they could be doing for themselves?
- Becoming too involved emotionally in our clients problems, and feeling overly responsible for them and their wellbeing is a boundary problem. People who are in a helping relationship to others can sometimes be at greater risk because they may have experienced a personal event that inspired them to help reduce other's suffering<sup>4</sup>

What boundaries are you good at setting and where do you need to do some work?

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<sup>4</sup> Compassion fatigue: Are you at risk? Kelly Stazyk, Firstline July 2008

## Recommendations: other strategies to improve your life and avoid burnout<sup>5</sup>

*“Your in-box is always going to be full, so you might as well live your life.”<sup>6</sup>*

- People are often waiting for things in their life to change to make things easier. It will be better when .... I'll get to that after .... Research shows that 50% of our level of happiness and stress is genetically preset; 10% is based on life circumstances (how much money we have, our job, if we are married or single); **40% is based on things within our control that are not connected to our life circumstances – this means that you can do these things today to experience greater happiness and fulfillment in your lives!**

### 1. Take care of your body, your mind and your soul

*If you don't take care of your body, where will you live?*

- Sustained high achievement demands physical and emotional strength as well as a sharp intellect. To bring mind, body, and spirit to peak condition **recovering energy** is as important as expending it. The body is our fundamental source of energy ... engaging in self care helps build endurance and promotes mental and emotional recovery.<sup>7</sup>
- **Body:** Exercise is one of the most effective ways to overcome depression and avoid burnout – it is as effective as antidepressants and most forms of therapy. It is as close to a miracle cure as they come.
- **Mind:** Meditation is one of the most extensively research proven ways of creating inner peace.



<sup>5</sup> Information on strategies for happiness are taken directly from “The How of Happiness” by Sonja Lyubomirsky

<sup>6</sup> Article by Jennifer J. Ator for the GPSolo Oct/Nov 2008, Vol. 25 Issue 7, P 8-12

<sup>7</sup>The Making of a Corporate Athlete. [Harvard Business Review](#)

- **Soul:** A growing body of psychological evidence also suggests that **religious and spiritual** people are happier and healthier.<sup>8</sup> It has been shown that people who do volunteer work are healthier.
- Having a healthy body, mind, and soul has been identified as one of the key factors in avoiding burnout.<sup>9</sup>

How am I doing regarding keeping my body in good shape?									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
How am I doing regarding keeping my mind in good shape?									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
How am I doing regarding keeping my soul in shape?									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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<sup>8</sup> If you are recovering from heart surgery, religious people are 3 times more likely to be alive in 6 months!

<sup>9</sup> Compassion Fatigue Risk and Self-Care Practices, Callum Eastwood and Kathryn Ecklund (Residential Treatment for Children and Youth, Vol.25(2), 2008)



## 2. Be Your Self

> **Respect Yourself: Learn how to not tolerate the intolerable**

> **Consider the Five Freedoms as defined by Virginia Satir:**

- 1) The freedom to see and hear what is here, instead of what should be, was, or will be;
- 2) The freedom to say what you feel and think, instead of what you should;
- 3) The freedom to feel what you feel, instead of that you ought;
- 4) The freedom to ask for what you want, instead of always waiting for permission; and
- 5) The freedom to take risks on your own behalf, instead of choosing to be only “secure” and not rocking the boat.

> **When the Five Freedoms are not present in a given situation, or are threatened in some way, then people tend to fall into the following survival stances that suspend their human responsibility or involvement and they avoid meeting the problem “head on”. Sometimes people use the survival stances to avoid the “here and now”. The survival stances are:**

- 1) Placating;
- 2) Blaming;
- 3) Super Reasonable; and
- 4) Irrelevant.

*In your daily work, talk to your co-workers and exchange information about abusive clients.*

*Constructive group sharing about how to cope with difficult situations can be helpful, create new positive approach strategies, and reduce stress and compassion fatigue.*

### 3. Practice Gratitude

*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven out of Hell, a Hell out of Heaven*<sup>10</sup>

- How we think is more important than our objective circumstances. We have the power to transform the way we think about and experience our lives.
- Gratitude can be defined as a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation for the way your life is today.
- Gratitude is the antidote to negativity – you can't be depressed and grateful at the same time.
- Your life situation will always be complicated – if all your problems were solved today, a new set will arise within no time – trying to solve them in order to be happy puts the locus of control outside of yourself. Be grateful for what you do have!

*If in our daily life we can smile and express gratitude, not only we but everyone will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

Take a moment and write 5 things that you are thankful for in our about your life today:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

- Research shows that doing this exercise once a week for 10 weeks will significantly increase your health and happiness! How easy is that ☺
- It is also beneficial to express gratitude to someone else directly. When you leave here, call someone and thank them for something that they did (big or small) that made your day/life happier, brighter, better, easier or more comfortable.

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<sup>10</sup> "Paradise Lost", John Milton

## 4. Cultivate Optimism

- Includes looking at the bright side of things, noticing what is right with the world, and assuming a positive outcome.
- Identify barrier thoughts (automatic pessimistic thoughts) and try to replace these with a more favorable point of view.
- Dr. Daniel Amen, a contemporary brain researcher has shown that there is actually a decrease in cortisol ( a harmful stress hormone) when people have a daily practice of getting rid of the ANTS (Automatic Negative Thoughts) and reframing these into positive constructive habitual thoughts that are coming out of their centre of strengths.
- Practice ENCOURAGEMENT. Encouragement is different from praise. Encouragement recognizes effort and recognizes strengths.

Take home exercise – *Best possible selves diary*: spend 20 minutes writing a description of your best possible future. Imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your dreams.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Avoid Overthinking

- Ruminating, obsessing, perseverating .... you know what I'm talking about, you've done it!
- Overthinking sustains sadness, impairs problem solving, saps motivation and interferes with concentration.
- Not only is this unproductive and takes you out of the moment, studies show that it fosters negatively biased thinking (those who overthink also attribute negative evaluations of self with negative events).
- Let's try it out: Close your eyes and imagine a negative event – you have just lost a case, or failed something, or been criticized by someone whose opinion you value. Now: complete these words without thinking

<sup>11</sup> This exercise has been shown to cause a significant lift in mood



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- You can overcome overthinking from detaching from your thoughts and becoming an observer. You are not destined to be tormented by your own thoughts – you can stop your thinking!



"It's amazing what you learn when you decide to spend more time with your family. For example, today I learned my family moved away 7 months ago."

## 6. Increase Social Connectedness

- One surefire way to increase your sense of connection to others and humanity in general is to **practice acts of kindness**. Not only does this feel good for the recipient, but it is actually more valuable in terms of increasing happiness for the person doing the giving!
- Recognize that everyone has a need to be Caring, Capable, and Connected (Bettner, 2007)
- Research shows that picking one day of the week and performing one new and unique large act of kindness or 3-5 small acts of kindness will improve your happiness immeasurably.
- It is also crucial to **spend time nurturing your relationships** with your partner, family and friends. Happy people are relational people. Having a strong social network is one of the key factors in coping and avoiding depression and burnout.<sup>12</sup>
- Successful marriages are most likely when partners spend at least 5 hours per week talking to each other, express a lot of gratitude, admiration, appreciation and affection for each other, manage conflict well and share their deep inner life.

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<sup>12</sup> Note 11.

## 7. Learn to Forgive

- One of the worst things we can do to ourselves is to harbor feelings of hostility and resentment. Something my mother used to say is “hate stays with the person feeling it” and this has scientifically been proven to be true. Resentment often causes much more damage than the original act did.
- This DOES NOT mean that you need to resume a toxic relationship or excuse or condone what someone has done, but it does mean that you have to let go of the negative feelings. It starts with an acceptance of what is.
- To help you do this you can: try recalling an instance where you were seeking forgiveness from someone else, imagining the circumstances of this person and trying to feel empathy for their situation, or writing a letter explaining the impact of the other person’s behavior and then make a strong statement of forgiveness.
- Here is the kicker – you never have to even tell the person you have forgiven them. Forgiveness is for you!

## 8. Living in the Present with Mindfulness

- In the “Power of Now” by Eckhart Tolle he reminds us of the ancient wisdom of living in the present moment. **Yesterday** was history, **Tomorrow** is a mystery, but **Today** is a **present**. It means *enjoying the present moment or activity fully*, not considering it as a means to an end.
- Anxiety and depression are the symptoms of failing to live in the moment – anxiety is worrying about what may happen in the future and depression is thinking about what has happened in the past. If you stay focused on the present moment, all is well.
- **Mindfulness** as defined by Jon Kabat Zin is: *Paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment without judgment*. This is a conscious direction of our awareness. In order to be mindful, one has to be aware purposefully of oneself, not just vaguely or habitually.
- Each day you can relish ordinary experiences, celebrate good times, and be open to beauty and excellence.

## 9. Take short breaks from work daily and take a vacation!

- Taking time to nourish yourself has been identified as one of the key factors in avoiding burnout.<sup>13</sup>

## 10. Live According to your Values

*If a person has a WHY they can always find a HOW.*

*Viktor Frankl*

- For the purposes of this workshop our definition of values is “core psychological driving needs or priorities in life”.
- These values are intangible guiding principles and goals that bring meaning to your work and your life in general and motivate your involvement and commitment.
- Values tend to be fairly basic and simple and can usually be expressed in one or two words-if it is more than that it is usually a story or a description of a behavior
- Being clear about what our values are allows us to make good choices about important matters such as work, use of time, leisure activities, choice of partners, friends, clients.... etc.
- We typically have many values but it is most useful to be conscious of our top 5-7 values-We need to know them in some useful order of priority.
- Clarifying values takes some time and introspection. Values clarifications exercises are useful in this process.
- Once you are aware of your values the question is: **Are you living your life in accordance with those values?** If you value friendships and physical activity how much of your time do you actually do those things? Are you pursuing money and prestige when these things really don't mean that much to you?

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<sup>13</sup> Note 11.