

AM I SUFFERING FROM BURNOUT?

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I think we have covered enough information to convince us that we are quite vulnerable to burnout. The next question: How do I know if I am suffering from burnout? What are the symptoms? Even though a chiropractor is gifted and successful, he may fail to recognize his own emotional stress. Lary M. David, in an article in the Journal published by the Indiana State Medical Association, described the first warning signs of burnout: We may not be willing to admit that we are suffering from burnout. We attribute it to stress from all the paper work, a growing or ailing practice, our spouses, insurance companies. But we know that something is not right. We are sleeping poorly, have developed erratic eating patterns, don't converse with the family, act impulsively and develop unwarranted anxiety. A common request coming from physicians in stress workshops is for someone to teach them how to say "no". They are constantly doing more and more to enhance their self-esteem so that others will say they are great and they are in control. We need to learn that we should not get caught up with being in control. In fact, it's okay to let God be in control, to have faith in Him. It's perfectly professional to take times for leisurely visits with friends and just being ourselves. We must not be devastated by our deficiencies. Even doctors are allowed their fair share of them. We must balance our time spent with friends, family, God and practice. We don't have to act like a doctor all the time. We can learn when to say no and yes.⁶ How can I know if I am experiencing burnout? Are there any warning signs? Yes, there have been several warning signs identified. It's very subtle at first, but as the condition progresses, they are much easier to identify.

Let's look at some of these early warning signs as discussed in a brochure called "Clergy, Stress and Burnout":

1. I am no longer excited about my practice. I go through all the motions; but I am just not really getting any joy from my work.

2. My mind is not receptive to new ideas. In fact, I don't even hear what is said to me and I forget much of what I do hear.

3. I have a narrow vision for the future. I don't seem to be able to see alternative courses of action.

4. I seem to be regressing to childhood; I break things and want to hide my head like a child.

5. I am unable to change bad patterns. Things are just too complicated to say "No". So I just keep on over-committing myself.

6. My body seems to require more sleep and rest than normal.

7. I feel depressed most of the time.

8. Physical signs begin to develop, such as glandular upsets, high blood pressure, tension, susceptible to colds, muscular aches, ulcers, heart irregularities, stroke. Later symptoms then begin to develop such as the following:

1. I want to run away from people and be alone.

2. I feel like I have failed in my practice.

3. Feeling of self-pity - what am I getting out of this after all I have put into it?

4. Sense of helplessness in solving problems.

5. Cynicism and negativism.

The brochure goes on to tell that with members of the clergy, there is usually a classic cycle on the way to burnout. It begins with enthusiasm and perhaps unrealistic expectations for achievement, combined with over-identification with their role. Then stagnation sets in as the mundane realities of personal, financial and career-development requirements begin to press. Then comes frustration, a sense of being inadequate to accomplish what needs to be done and doubts about whether or not it's all worth the effort. Actually, the brochure states, the stage of frustration can be a turning point for the victim of burnout. It can either be an upward trend to enthusiasm and new effectiveness or it can turn in the opposite direction into the next stage of apathy and complete burnout.⁷ In our articles to follow, we will discuss how to remedy burnout and give further information on prevention.

FOOTNOTES

6. Paul Meier, M.D., Focus on the Family Physician, Vol.1, No.1, pg.3, Burnout.

7. Stress, Power and The Ministry, John C. Harris of the Alban Institute of Stress Management for Ministers, by Charles Rassieur, Westminster Press, 1982.