

# How to Prevent and Overcome Job Burnout

**D**iscouraged! Depressed! Suicidal! Two highly successful preachers stirred vast audiences with their convincing rhetoric and dramatic presentation. Yet they teetered on the brink of self-destruction.

With fearful, empty eyes, they stared into a hopeless future. Clenching their fists, they struggled to repress the fury in their hearts as they raged at God. The prophets Jonah and Elijah both suffered the classic signs of job burnout.

Burnout didn't happen overnight for these prophets, nor does it occur suddenly today. A Christian educator may be blindsided by a sudden emotional barrage, but more often, the attack is underway long before the victim becomes aware of it.

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## Symptoms of Burnout

People begin a new job feeling invigorated and challenged. But over time, the excitement naturally evolves into a routine. If the person maintains the delicate balance between overwork and enthusiasm, this stage can last a lifetime. However, without balance, the employee will begin experiencing the early warning signals of job burnout:

**By Kay D. Rizzo**

1. Unhappy at work;
2. Debilitating fatigue;
3. Difficulty concentrating and making decisions;
4. Withdrawal from friends and family that may include escape into food, TV, the computer, sports, etc.;
5. Feeling out of control and very angry;
6. A sense of hopelessness; and
7. Sleep disturbances.

Without intervention, the situation can become chronic. Exhaustion, illness, anger, and depres-

sion become a part of daily life.

For many Christian teachers, the chronic stage is exacerbated by the repression of personal feelings. The educator remonstrates with himself or herself, “I was called to do God’s work. How can I feel resentful and overwhelmed?” The consequences of such repression include denial, projection, rationalization, passive-aggressive behavior, displacement, and Pharisaism. An individual can remain in this stage for years before spiraling further down to the “crisis” level.

In the final stages of burnout, the chronic symptoms become critical. Sufferers grow pessimistic and doubt their self-worth. They become obsessed with their frustrations and cannot function effectively. They develop stress-related ailments and may abuse alcohol or drugs, suffer a mental breakdown and uncontrolled rage, and attempt suicide.<sup>1</sup>

Psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger, who coined the term “job burnout,” says: “Burnout is a problem born of good intentions. It happens when people try to reach unrealistic goals and end up depleting their energy and losing touch with themselves and others. The irony of burnout is that it happens to the same person who previously was enthusiastic and brimming over with energy and new ideas when first involved in the job or new situation. . . . As time goes by and all the goals aren’t achieved, the enthusiasm dies and a sort of listlessness sets in. Instead of lowering objectives or accepting reality, frustration is bottled up and the individual tries even harder. The result is burnout.”<sup>2</sup>

Freudenberger’s description of job burnout suggests that Christian educators are prime candidates. Each year, the Adventist educational system loses some of its brightest and best classroom teachers because of this pernicious, yet preventable problem. Overwork, discipline problems, school downsizing, disagreements with supervisors or colleagues, and lack of resources cause employees to feel stressed, insecure, undervalued, and alienated. What can be done?

Identifying the causes is the first step. The *Maslach Burnout Inventory*, the standard research measure in this field, lists the following conditions that lead to burnout:

- Workload—too much to do, too little time, and too few resources;
- Lack of control—either rigid policies or a chaotic work environment;
- Reward—low pay and lack of appreciation;

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- Community—tension on the job;
- Fairness—a feeling of being treated unfairly by one’s supervisor; and
- Values—conflicting values between employer and employee.<sup>3</sup>

Just as office furniture and computer keyboards are constantly redesigned to prevent injury and disability, so the social and psychological aspects of work need to be continuously monitored and modified to prevent burnout.<sup>4</sup>

Let’s go back to the prophets Elijah and Jonah. To ease their job stress, their heavenly Employer addressed their immediate needs before delving into secondary problems. The astute

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administrator can do likewise. For instance, if due to staffing shortages or lack of funds, the supervisor can’t reduce a teacher’s workload, he or she can seize every opportunity to recognize and commend the employee for faithful service, thus meeting the teacher’s need for affirmation.

#### **Suggestions for Supervisors and Administrators**

**Project morale:** Letting people know they’re appreciated takes so little. Get creative. Christian teachers don’t expect huge cash rewards for their service. They didn’t join the workforce to get rich. A box of candy, a quick note, or a simple “give yourself a pat on the back” word of praise during faculty meeting can do wonders for a staff member’s flagging morale.

**Praise and thanksgiving:** Thank teachers for what they do and praise the quality of their work. “Ah, but that takes time,” an administrator might say. “I have more important things to do.” Wrong. Listening to and affirming employees produces an enthusiastic, effective staff.

**Attitude adjustment:** The simplest, most inexpensive way for an administrator to improve the work environment for teachers and students alike is to adopt an attitude of gratitude. Remember 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (NIV). Giving thanks in all things makes us receptive to whatever God has planned for us. The preposition in

this text is significant. Giving thanks “for” all circumstances would be ludicrous. However, giving thanks “in” all circumstances acknowledges that God is in control and will work things out to His glory.

**Open discussion:** The administrator should consider employees’ points of view and try to empathize with their concerns. This requires careful listening as well as the commitment to implement change.

By discussing with employees the signs of job burnout, plus the promise of healing, the principal can save the careers and possibly the lives of good teachers. And together, they can search for ways to improve working conditions.

Employees should be encouraged to bring to faculty meeting ideas for changes in policies and procedures that will reduce their stress levels and make things run more smoothly at school. The principal should avoid becoming defensive when staff members express honest criticism and make suggestions for improvement.

Setting up a “buddy system” may help, too. Experienced teachers who are empathetic and enthusiastic can

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mentor and encourage their peers who are struggling.

By being aware of the warning signs and the working conditions that can produce job burnout, an administrator will be able to intercede to help over-stressed employees teetering on the brink of disaster.

### **Why Are Christian Teachers at Risk for Burnout?**

Unfortunately, the very idealism that convinces college students to go into teaching is what contributes heavily to burnout. Freudenberger defines job burnout as a state of fatigue or frustration brought on by devotion to a cause, a way of life, or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward.<sup>5</sup>

Freudenberger’s definition places the Christian teacher at high risk for burnout. Add the tendency for religious people to repress their resentment, and the probability of burnout increases.

### **Dealing With Difficult People**

In their book, *Personality Puzzle*, Florence and Marita

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Having a network of friends can help you prevent and cope with burnout.

## *The social and psychological aspects of work need to be continuously monitored and modified to prevent burnout.*

Littauer write: “Getting along with co-workers is an increasingly important skill. A survey of the top three traits employers preferred in employees revealed a surprising top pick. Eighty-four percent of the respondents included good interpersonal skills. Only 40 percent placed education and experience among their top three.”<sup>6</sup>

Getting along with others is a learned skill. Understanding personality differences can help further this process. Sanguine (loud, enthusiastic), Choleric (take-charge, forceful), Melancholy (quiet, organized), and Phlegmatic (laid back) are four basic personality types that think, dress, communicate, and behave totally different from one another.

As delightful as these personalities and their various combinations can be to study or observe, combining them on a school staff will produce differing opinions on everything from wearing blue jeans on campus to where to park the cars on graduation day. Add a jerk or two to the personality pot, and simple conflicts can reach chaotic proportions.

In his book, *Don't Let Jerks Get the Best of You: Advice When Dealing With Difficult People*, Paul Meier addresses what he calls “the three levels of jerkdom.” Simply put, being a jerk means being selfish. The affliction ranges from mild to severe. On one end of the spectrum, the First-Degree Jerk is merely self-centered, in contrast with the Third- or Nth-Degree Jerk, who has a sociopathic personality and enjoys manipulating and hurting other people.<sup>7</sup>

While you can't change a jerk (unless that jerk is your-

self), you can learn how to deal with one. You can ease difficulties between yourself and a First- or Second-Degree Jerk by lovingly expressing your feelings and standing up for your rights. Your best approach to Nth-Degree Jerks is to confront and, if you get no favorable response, flee.

### **Avoiding Burnout**

Since you can't change other people, only yourself, what can you do to avoid being destroyed by job burnout? First,

arm yourself for battle by identifying your enemies.

*Enemy No. 1.* While physical and emotional components do contribute to burnout, licking the problem is primarily a spiritual battle. Knowing our weaknesses and shortcomings, the father of lies takes pot shots where we are most vulnerable. Renewing your relationship with God on a daily basis will help you cope with whatever the Enemy throws at you.

Rather than fretting about your situation, take charge. Be a leader, not a complainer. Look for concrete and creative ways to correct or ease some of the problems.

*Enemy No. 2:* Enemy No. 2 isn't the principal, another staff member, your students or spouse, your kids, or your dog. It's attitude—yours. You may say, “The school is falling down around my ears, my life is in the pits, and I'm supposed to change my attitude?”

It is when your life is falling apart that attitude is most important. “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10, NIV). This verse is not a clever cliché, but

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Taking time to just “kick back and relax” will help you deal with stress.

God's law of cause and effect. Joy begets strength; strength begets faith; and faith begets healing.

The prophet Habakkuk understood this when he wrote, "Though the fig tree does not bud; though there are no grapes on the vines; though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food; though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls; yet, I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God, my Savior" (chap. 3:17, NIV).

### Positive Suggestions

And now, some positive suggestions for dealing with burnout:

1. *Give thanks.* Thank God for the positive facets of your life—for life, nature, friends, and good books. Constantly look for things for which to be thankful. The list is endless!

2. *Praise God.* Peter says that God's chosen people praise Him (1 Peter 2:9). Why? Because He called them out of darkness into His wonderful light. The darkness produced by burnout can be the black hole of despair. I know; I've been there. And I know that praise works to dispel the darkness.

Praise isn't an emotion; it's a choice you can make regardless of your circumstances. It's the physical act of redirecting attention from the problem to the Problem-solver.

Put Post-it notes all over your house, your car, and your classroom reminding you to praise instead of complain. Record your praise daily in a journal. Sing your praise. Play praise CDs and cassettes as you ride in the car or work in your office.

Hold a consecration service in all the places where you've practiced the habit of negativity. Dedicate your desks, your chairs, and your chalk boards to praising God. You may feel silly walking up and down the aisles of your empty classroom, pausing at each desk, praising God for the student who will occupy it, but remember, you aren't alone. Heaven's power team is right there with you.

3. *Look for ways to praise others:* When you are busy finding ways to praise others, you won't be thinking about what is wrong in your life. Commit random acts of kindness that no one can trace back to you. This will also help restore the playful, adventurous spirit of your childhood.

Mail praise postcards to parents throughout the year, telling about the good things their children have done. (Have students address the cards at the beginning of the year so they are ready to go at a moment's notice.)

4. *Surround yourself with positive people.* Avoid gripe sessions. Negative co-workers and friends will tear down your resolve to praise.

5. *Develop the art of forgiveness.* Forgiving yourself and others brings healing to the soul. Let go of all that old baggage of regret and guilt. If you've hurt someone else, even if you feel you were in the right, go to that person and ask for forgiveness. Allow yourself to be vulnerable.

6. *Improve your health habits.* A healthy diet, regular physical exercise, daily worships, and adequate rest will for-

tify your system against burnout. Make time in your schedule to just "kick back and relax." Get involved in a hobby.

When asked to do more than you can handle, learn to say "No." Delegate responsibility when possible.

7. *Renew old friendships.* Find a safe and positive person with whom you feel comfortable talking about your frustrations.

8. *Establish your goals.* Get in touch with your values. Determine who you are and what you want out of life. Then write down your personal and professional goals. List all the big and little things you want to accomplish in your lifetime.

### Conclusion

For the Christian teacher, job burnout does not need to be fatal. The Saviour promised to give you knowledge, wisdom, and understanding for the healing of your mind; strength for your body; and the antidote of praise for the healing of your spirit. (See Psalm 103:1-5.)

If you trust Him to lead you, God will either open new horizons for you or give you peace with where you are. Remember, if He chooses not to move your mountain, He will make you a champion mountain climber.

And remember God's promise: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:15, NIV). ✍



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