



## **MOOD DISORDERS ASSOCIATION OF MANITOBA INC.**

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### **Avoiding BURNOUT**

Source: Adapted from *The Stress Solution* by Lyle H. Miller, PhD  
and Alma Dell Smith, PhD

If in the beginning your job seems perfect and the solution to all your problems, you have high hopes and expectations, and would rather work than do anything else, be wary. You're a candidate for the most insidious and tragic kind of job stress – **burnout**, a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by unrealistically high aspirations and illusory and impossible goals.

Potential for burnout increases dramatically depending on who you are, where you work, and what your job is. If you're a hard worker who gives 110 percent, an idealistic, self-motivated achiever who thinks anything is possible if you just work hard enough, you're a possible candidate. The same is true if you're a rigid perfectionist with unrealistically high standards and expectations. In a job with little recognition and few rewards for work well done, particularly with frequent people contact or deadlines, you advance from a possible to a probable candidate.

The road to burnout is paved with good intentions. There's certainly nothing wrong with being an idealistic, hardworking perfectionist, or self-motivating achiever, and there's nothing wrong with having high aspirations and expectations. Indeed, these are admirable traits in our culture. Unreality is the villain. Unrealistic job aspirations and expectations are doomed to frustration and failure. The burnout candidate's personality keeps him striving with single-minded intensity until he crashes.

#### **What is BurnOut?**

You are at risk of burnout when:

- You find it difficult to say "No" to additional commitments or responsibilities.
- You have been under intense and sustained pressure for some time.
- Your high standards make it difficult to delegate to assistants.
- You have been trying to achieve too much for too long.
- You have been giving too much emotional support for too long.

Often burnout will manifest itself in a reduction in motivation, volume, and quality performance, or in dissatisfaction with or departure from the activity altogether.

## **Symptoms of BurnOut**

BurnOut will normally occur slowly, over a long period of time. It may express itself in either physical or psychological ways. Symptoms of burnout are:

- A feeling of lack of control over commitments
- An incorrect belief that you are accomplishing less
- A growing tendency to think negatively
- Loss of a sense of purpose and energy
- Increasing detachment from relationships  
(This may cause further conflict and stress, adding to the problem.)

## **Avoiding BurnOut**

If you work hard, then you should take great care not to burn out.

You can avoid mental burnout by ensuring that what you do remains fun: there is a limit to your mental energy that you should respect. As you get better at what you do, people may want increasing amounts of your time and will rely on you more and more. It is easy for commitments to get bigger: people tend to be quite happy to consume other peoples' mental resources without worrying about the consequences. You must learn to say 'No' to commitments that you do not want to take on – otherwise you will be in severe danger of burning out as you become unhappy with your situation.

## **If you are in danger of burning out ...**

If you feel that you are in danger of burning out, or are not enjoying what you do, the following points can help you correct the situation:

- Re-evaluate your goals and prioritize them.
- Evaluate the demands placed on you and see how they fit in with your goals.
- Identify your ability to comfortably meet these demands.
- If you are over-involved, reduce the commitments that are excessive.
- If people demand too much emotional energy, become more unapproachable and less sympathetic. Involve others in a supportive role. You owe it to yourself to avoid being bled dry emotionally.
- Learn stress management skills.
- Examine other areas in your life that are generating stress, such as work or family, and try to solve problems and reduce stress.
- Get the support of your friends and family in reducing stress.
- Get adequate sleep and rest to maintain your energy levels.
- Ensure that you are eating a healthy, balanced diet -- a bad diet can make you ill or feel bad. Limit your caffeine and alcohol intake.
- Get regular, adequate aerobic exercise.

- Perhaps develop alternative activities such as a relaxing hobby to take your mind off problems.
- Acknowledge your own humanity: remember that you have a right to pleasure and a right to relaxation.

### **Late stages of BurnOut**

If you are in late stages of burnout, feeling deeply de-motivated and disenchanting with your job or life, get help from a good psychologist.

### **If you have burned out ...**

If you are so de-motivated that you do not want to continue with what you do, then take some time off. Alternatively try to switch to another area of activity within your organization. If you come back later, you may find that you start to enjoy work again, and can take on only those commitments that you want.

You may, however, find that you have absolutely no interest in continuing with what you are doing. In this case it may be best to drop it altogether. If you are the sort of person who has burned out, i.e., highly motivated and hard-driving, then a complete change of direction may be appropriate. It is very likely that you will find another area in which you will excel. You will discover that you are only de-motivated and listless in the area in which you have burned out.

The difference is that you will have already burned out once: next time you now know the signs to look for and the things to watch. Providing that you learn these lessons you will be able to pace yourself and control your energy much more effectively. This will help you to control stress so that you operate at stress levels where you can give your optimum performance.

**“The single largest barrier is ignorance.”**