

# How to Recognize, Avoid and Recover from Burnout

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Burnout is a damaging condition caused by stress that affects a person mentally, emotionally and physically. Burn out is like a car that doesn't have the proper fuel and fluids running through its system, so it overheats and breaks down. This condition affects a minister's well-being and can even lead to moral failure, termination or resignation. Burnout is not God's plan for His servants. God wants His people to experience His abundant life, so why is it that so many ministers experience some level of burnout?

## **Possible Causes of Burnout in Ministry**

### Overbearing Work load

The work of the ministry can be demanding because operating a church, if done correctly, takes a lot of hard work. If there isn't money to hire needed staff, the pastor or church leaders could end up overtaxed by carrying most of the work load. If a minister has to work a secular job in addition to working for the church, the minister could be overburdened with responsibility. Ministry is often required during the days and times most people are off work, so if a minister isn't able to take time off during other days and times, the minister may not be getting the proper rest.

### Financial Stress

When the money is not there to operate the ministry, the financial responsibility falls on the leadership of the church. When the church tries to expand or build, the aspects of financial decisions can be a cause of stress. If pastor or ministry leader has personal financial trouble, their personal struggle can negatively affect the church.

### Difficult People

One common cause for burnout in ministry is the challenge of working with people whose actions are stressful. We love people, but some people can be exhausting. For example, while it is beneficial to have people with different points of view, there are some people who struggle with control, always causing strife and division. Others might be dysfunctional in relationships, with unhealthy ways of behaving and communicating.

### Family

Another grounds for stress is when the enemy attacks a leader's family. For example, when a child is sick or a dear one fights an addiction. It could come from a family member who is in opposition to Christ and the church or has a deep resentment to the demands of ministry life.

### Personal Struggles

Stress can also be overwhelming when a leader is dealing with personal temptation, hidden sin, inappropriate relationships, mistakes, failures, sickness, loneliness, lack of a personal life, trying to be everything to everyone, or not being empowered to do the job, discouragement from disappointment in people or the church.

## **Don't Minimize the Symptoms**

Don't ignore or minimize the symptoms of burnout. There is a saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." It is admirable when someone works hard, but when life is tough because of stress, pushing harder is only going to make it worse. Burnout can lead to sickness like high blood pressure, heart attacks and a poor immune system. Burnout can destroy marriages, family and friendships.

## **Recognizing Burnout**

If you are near burnout, you are probably experiencing some of the symptoms below. They might start off seeming insignificant, but if not heeded, these symptoms can grow to be more extreme.

### **Physical Signs of burnout:**

- Chronic fatigue. There is a lack of energy and feelings of tiredness. There is a challenge in getting the day started. In later stages, there is a sense of dread for the tasks ahead.
- Insomnia. In the beginning, it may be hard to go to sleep or stay asleep one or two nights a week, so you stay up longer than you should watching tv, getting online, etc. In later stages, insomnia develops, affecting you every night, no matter how exhausted you are.
- Loss of appetite. In early stages, you skip a few meals because you stop feeling hungry. In later stages, you stop eating and lose significant weight.
- Addictive behavior. Some try to overcome the symptoms of stress by eating, drinking alcohol, taking drugs or other behaviors that become addictive.
- Heart problems: Some have chest pain, heart palpitations or shortness of breathe.
- Gastrointestinal problems. Some suffer with bowel changes, nausea or heartburn.
- Headaches: There can be dizziness, lightheaded, fainting headaches or migraines.
- Weakened immune system. Stress can cause a person to be more vulnerable to infections, colds, flu, etc.

### **Mental and Emotional Signs of burnout:**

- Lack of focus. In early stages there can be trouble with forgetfulness and a lack of concentration. In later stages, you can't function, and work begins to pile up.
- Anxiety. Some have edginess, tension, frustration. Some worry more. Some get upset over tiny things.
- Depression. In early stages, there are signs of unhappiness and feeling hopeless. As it progresses, there are feelings of being trapped and thoughts that the world would be better off without you.
- Anger. Early on there is irritability and tension, but in later stages, it turns into angry outbursts, and the person is argumentative, even violent.
- Becoming cynical and critical. People who were once positive and inspiring can begin to point out faults and expect disappointment.
- Loss of enjoyment. Stress can cause a person to stop wanting to be at work or with people. The person wants to get there later and leave earlier. A person is reluctant to take on new projects.
- Pessimism. People can begin to have a negative feeling about self. It can extend to having trouble with trust issues.
- Isolation. In the beginning, it seems like mild resistance to socializing. In later stages, you are bothered by people coming to you, even angry, avoiding interaction whenever possible.
- Detachment. This is a general sense of feeling disconnected from others or from your environment. You begin to remove yourself emotionally or physically from your work or other responsibilities. You stop returning calls and emails, come in late, call in sick often. You feel dissatisfied. You stop caring.
- Feelings of apathy and hopelessness. It's a feeling that nothing is going right or nothing matters. Later, the feelings become immobilizing, having thoughts like "What's the point?"
- Increased irritability. It stems from feeling ineffective, unimportant, useless, and an increasing sense that you're not able to do things as efficiently or effectively as you once did. There are feelings about a lack of accomplishment. You grow more impatient with people.
- Lack of productivity and poor performance. Chronic stress prevents you from being as productive as you once were, which leads to incomplete projects and an ever-increasing to-do list. At times, it seems like no matter how hard you try, you can't climb out from under the pile. You become ineffective.

## **Avoiding Burnout**

There are actions, in addition to a person's spiritual care, that can be taken to avoid overworking so the minister can be in ministry for the long haul.

### **Take time off work**

- Every 6 days, take a day off
- Every 6 weeks, take a weekend off
- Every 6 months, take a week off

### **Establish boundaries**

- Trim unnecessary tasks.
- Say "no" even if people don't understand or try to guilt you into giving your time.
- Create buffers between yourself and anyone who is compromising your time or peace.
- Be in services and let others preach.
- Don't be available 24/7. Get help for emergencies. Turn off your phone when you aren't working.
- If a minister is bivocational, establish expectations. Let go of people that demand too much from what you are able and willing to give.
- Sometimes it is wise to come in after a church service starts, so you can focus on the ministry you are about to do without distraction.

### **Remove yourself from the environment**

- Remove yourself from the source of the stress.
- Love people, but get a break from people.
- Go to conferences. Get around other ministers that share the same challenges.

### **Delegate**

- Delegate the day-to-day tasks.
- Delegate the caring for people.

## **Recovering from Burnout**

After we planted and pastored our first church, I had a month where I didn't do anything ministry or work related. I found myself unwinding, taking naps in the middle of the day and sleeping longer at night. I was unaware I needed that kind of physical recovery, but I did. I also took some time for reflection on the church experience and was surprised that I shed a few tears over people that had disappointed or hurt me. The Holy Spirit was repairing and refueling me. After that month, I felt rested and renewed for the next season in my life.

Everyone needs rest. It is not a sign of weakness to take time to take care of our personal needs, but it's actually necessary in order to function at our best. If we don't get the rest we need, we can even cause damage that needs to be repaired.

If someone has been overworked to the point where symptoms have caused harm, the person should look in how to recover from the damage. The following are ways to both avoid and recover from burnout.

### **Evaluate your condition and weigh your options**

- Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal where you are at and what you need to do to walk in peace and wholeness. It could be that God has something else for you to do in the season you're in.
- In some cases, it would be wise to speak with a doctor.
- Discuss change with your leadership to relieve some of the work load or the pressure. Work together to find solutions, such as reevaluating expectations and setting goals with priorities.
- Discuss what the church or ministry can do to help, such as vacation time, an increase in pay, an insurance plan and retirement.

### **Rest**

- Our body and mind recover from stress when we sleep.
- Our body and mind need a break from the stress, so take more breaks from work.
- Get a massage to relieve tension.

### **Exercise and stretching**

- Stretching can help your muscles to release stress.
- Exercise can be an outlet for taking out frustrations.

### **Relaxing or extracurricular activities**

- Make sure you are putting margin in your life for things you enjoy that are not related to work.
- Instrumental music can help for relaxation.
- Meditation on God's Word in prayer is important for spiritual, mental and emotional health.

### **Self-examination**

- Take an honest look at yourself to address any underlying issues with pain, hurts, disappointments or grief that could be a source of stress. Go to prayer and give those things to God for healing and wholeness. If you need additional help, see a counselor.
- Are you struggling with feelings of shame, guilt or fear? Give those to God or talk with a qualified person to find peace.

### **Seek support**

- Get around people who love you and will strengthen you.
- Talk with your team and collaborate on changing the work load to relieve stress.
- Perhaps hire a counselor.

### **Take time off work**

- For some, taking a Sabbatical, or a leave from ministry, is healthy or necessary.
- If a leave is taken, be confident the person stepping in to cover your absence is trustworthy and has your best interest at heart.

Remember that you matter to God. Ministers are typically on the giving end of ministry, and need to make sure they are also taking care of their own wellbeing. Also, remember that you have an enemy who wants to take you out. Don't let him win.

*Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give your rest."*

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201311/the-tell-tale-signs-burnout-do-you-have-them>