

Burning Out and In again

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Summary

This paper is the third in a series on burnout. It is partly taken from notes collected from facilitating workshops on burnout in doctors. It is written as a polemic to challenge the received wisdom on this complex subject. The author posits that burnout is akin to Carl Jung's "dark night of the soul" when the caregiver's disillusion threatens his or her trust in mankind itself. It manifests itself in ways that are unique to each caregiver and these are often secretly held within. There is no specific "treatment" of the condition in the medical sense but it involves a reappraisal of one's own aspirations, ambitions, expectations and capabilities and also those of one's immediate society. It involves a journey into knowing oneself.

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" – **Henry David Thoreau**¹

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What if I told you that your burnout has nothing to do with your work load or your working conditions but was to do with your self-esteem. If I told you that your disillusionment and anger were due to the view you hold of yourself and your definition of yourself as a doctor, would you believe me? Perhaps it is all about your status in the medical world or your social status in your community and partly due to the family that you were brought up in.

How would you react to a statement such as burnout is all about "entitlement" and "status"? And that all the claptrap you have read about external conditions and the environment you work in as causes of your burnout sound wonderful in theory but in fact burnout is all about YOU and your perceived failed achievements measured against your grandiose expectations.

At least this is what the American psychologist and philosopher, William James² put forward in his equation when he said that :

$$\text{Self-Esteem} = \frac{\text{Perceived Achievements}}{\text{Expectations}}$$

Although doctors are seen by others to be achievers they often don't feel like that themselves after a Friday night in casualty. If you divide this by the doctor's expectations of him or herself *and of the system they work in*, you usually get a pretty low score. Much of this has to do with one's sense of security or, more precisely, sense of insecurity, and one has to admit that the environment, in which many doctors have to work, is insecure on many existential levels. So now you are feeling really good about yourself let's have a look at the journey that got you into this mess in the first place.

The journey

Firstly you had those ambitious parents (and probably grandparents) who urged you on in magnificent Dead Poet's Society style, but rather more subtly. You were a keen pupil at school and carried on your chromosomes the goal-orientated, task-obsessed, focused energy of your lineage. Your medical school selected you on these obsessive compulsive traits and once they had got you, they encoded you, almost bullied you, into an unattainable work ethic. You were imbued with a

sense of responsibility for the whole world and its peoples (the Save-The-World Syndrome). You also acquired with this what I would call the Indispensibility Syndrome whereby if you don't turn up to Tuesday's outpatients then the clinic doors will close, the country's hospital systems will collapse and the world stock markets will crash.

They worked on these traits and spewed you out at the end of medical school, an idealistic programmed iatomorph stuffed with technical knowledge. It was a survival course and not much time for tigers who cried and not much mention of self esteem either. My, my, am I on a roll.

So lesson one is that to help ourselves live a more abundant life we are obliged to understand these limits within which we were raised and educated.

Signs of burn out

When you read those ridiculous lists of the signs of stress and burnout, which are now available in your waiting room magazines, they have such things as "irritability". What on earth do they mean? I was born irritable.

Burnout is when you don't care a stuff about the patient in front of you. It is the rust out and hyporesponsiveness to any form of intimacy with your colleagues or your spouse.

The taste of burn out is bitterness at the hand you have been dealt. As Meat Loaf would put it, "life is a lemon and I want my money back". It is that all pervasive feeling of fatigue and being utterly fed up and pointless and a sense of feeling that the receptionists, the nurses and the doctors around you are a lot of incompetents. Now lesson two is to sit down and ask one of the only people who can tell you the diagnosis, your spouse. Do you remember that person who has been warning you for the last few years and whose words don't even faintly register on you any more?

Three cardinal rules to burning out

Firstly three cardinal rules:

Cardinal rule number one is: there are no rules.

Cardinal rule number two is: there are no universal answers

Cardinal rule number three is: everyone burns out in their own unique way.

And these are some of them.

Anger

Because of your A type personality you have something called "free floating hostility"³. This arises when your ability to treat the patient is obstructed by lost files, inefficient staff, incompetent bureaucracy and generally everyone not coming up to your standards. This anger is often difficult to discern in ourselves and can often exist, simmering and unexpressed, for decades. This is a subject of a workshop in its own right.

Anxiety, fearfulness and loss of confidence

I, myself, am not in the anger team but I am a fully paid up member of the

anxiety team. I know when I am starting to burn out because I start to lose the basic Ericksonian trust in mankind. This is a loss of a very deep basic trust that extends not only to the people in my immediate environment but also to the governments and the peoples of the earth. I begin worry that there are more evil and corrupt people on earth than good people. I just give this as an example of an individual warning sign of burn out that applies to myself. Burnout requires encounters with dragons. As Carl Jung wrote "whatever is wrong in the world is in yourself. Learn to deal with your own shadow and you'll do something real for the world"⁴.

Guilt

A colleague of mine in general practice says he knows when he is burning out because he begins to feel guilty about all the mistakes he has ever made in his life and all the bad things he has done to people in his life down to the boy he bullied in standard two. This also overlaps with depression. The literature on guilt is too extensive to go into here.

Loneliness

Another thing, not usually on the list of preburn out symptoms, is loneliness. Insidiously you have left the company of your family and your colleagues.

Being alone can do two totally opposite things to you depending on the sort of person you are. Your reactions can be slowed and the subtleties of feeling begin to disappear or the opposite can happen and you find yourself whistling and you start talking to the dog.

From our workshops, I have one of those boring lists that contains all the symptoms and signs of pre-burnout that cover every human emotion and negative feeling known to man. This exemplifies the variety of options that you have to choose from. I have only given anger, anxiety,

guilt and loneliness as examples. You can apply for others such as cynicism, poor note keeping and difficulty in decision making in order to join the club. I have a personal impression that forgetfulness and memory loss is one of the most subtle and ubiquitous of symptoms of early burnout.

Getting to know yourself

Over the entrance to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi the priests inscribed the admonition, "'Know thyself". We all know this to the point of clichéd repetition yet the action to do just this seems to pass us by.

I believe there are different forms of burn out depending on what decade of your life you are in. There is the young burn out of the disillusioned intern, the burn out of the end of the thirties, when divorce and disillusion are often at their peak, and then the burn out that comes after a long war of attrition.

Now lesson three is that you can't get to know yourself by yourself. You need someone else. You have to surrender to someone. I would suggest that almost all doctors should have either a psychiatrist or psychologist or spiritual counsellor much as one would have a general practitioner.

This may often take the form of what is called "buddy therapy" or finding a person, who can guide you along your journey or to whom you can safely reveal your inner self. I would advise you to choose your psychiatrist/psychologist/spiritual counsellor carefully. Shop around and if you wish anonymity go to the next town. If the first one doesn't suit you move on. As a rule of thumb try three psychologists before you give up. I would suggest never going to a friend and find someone who is experienced and over forty or so, who has been around the block a few times, or who is very intelligent, as we tend to keep our emotions and stresses on a theoretical or intellectual level and we are rarely challenged to go deeper.

You may prefer a spiritual or religious counsellor. The American psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck, gives a very good description of how doctors and others can seek help of this kind.⁵

Medication

The twelfth commandment comes after the Eleventh (which happens to be “thou shalt keep a stiff upper lip at all times and not seek help because one is superior to all these weak failing creatures around one”) and is “thou shalt not self medicate”.

If you find yourself bonding with Jack Daniels or if even *the thought occurs to you* that you may be in trouble, then you are. Self medication is very seductive and we will never know how widespread it is in the medical profession, because these things are secret affairs. The pharmaceutical representative, who has the newest SSRI antidepressant will tell you it will help all anxiety, depression and insomnia. It may well do so but it does not treat despair. So you may need chemical help but you need someone else to help monitor it for you and change it if necessary. Again give yourself a few chances on different drug regimens if the first one does not work.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy

As a family physician, managing partner, lecturer and journalist I juggle many balls at once. In my professional and private life I think I must have made almost every mistake in the book. We can define ourselves in many different ways. A recent psychological theory is that of multi-faceted self-concepts⁶ that say, in a nutshell, that if you define yourself just as a doctor (as a one dimensional view of yourself) then all you probably do is work each day at seeing patients and sleep. You kid yourself that you are also giving time to the significant others in your life at the same time, and anyway its them you are slaving away for in the first place (the Justifier,

Martyr or Bon Dieu syndrome). People who hold multi-faceted self-concepts of themselves have many compartments to their lives so that when failure is encountered in one compartment of their lives, they can find consolation in another aspect of their lives that is going well. We can have an almost endless number of compartments or roles which can protect you from stress and burnout. I think they are trying to tell me to stop being a monovalent geek, spending my time in front of the computer writing papers like these, and get out and learn how to play the saxophone.

There are many other theories on protective mechanisms to stress and burnout such as hardiness, resilience, internal locus of control, social support systems, faith, resource holding material and intra-specific fight capacity.

There are also all those wonderfully insightful articles on the relief of stress and burnout which recommend meditation, exercise and a well balanced diet, which is all a load of absolute twaddle, because there's no ways anyone is going to do any of it.

To paraphrase Tudor Hart's Inverse Care Law⁷, those who need the stress relief never do the stress relief exercises, and if I read another article on stress management that talks about vitamins and a well balanced diet, I shall have a large spasm. Most of my patients think a well balanced diet is when you add an olive to a dry martini.

The care of the soul^{8,9}

I have left the most important to last. There is a tendency, nowadays, to lecture rather intellectually about fashionable concepts such as holistic approaches and bio-psycho-social models¹¹ and the spirit, faith and the soul is mentioned as being very important and then, having mentioned this briefly, they move on and nothing

“In the depths of winter I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer”
Albert Camus, existentialist philosopher¹⁰

else is heard about it. The final message is that this whole paper should be about the care of the soul.

We live on a tiny planet and to give ourselves perspective I think it is a mighty good therapy to walk around one's garden each night and look up at the night sky. The visible universe is a million, million, million, million (that's 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) miles across¹². So get in touch with what ever blows your hair back.

It is also never to late to start again as Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote in his poem *Ulysess*¹³ :

“Some work of noble note may yet be done
Come, my friends, 'tis not too late to
seek a newer world,
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”

If you are not confused now, can I come and see you myself as a patient?

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