What Missionaries Ought to Know about Burnout

You find it hard to get up and go to work in the morning. Work used to be exciting and you used to look forward to what you did with people, but now you are just tired and it takes a great deal of effort to get out of bed. You wonder what is wrong. Could it be that you are suffering from burnout? Could a really committed missionary burn out? You may only be in your first term; certainly you couldn't burn out in just a few years, could you? Wouldn't God keep you from burning out? Is it better to burn out than to rust out? What about that old gospel song that says, “Let me burn out for thee, dear Lord?” Let's consider some of these questions.

How do I know if I’m burning out?

Although feeling tired and not wanting to go to work may be a part of burnout, there is more to burnout than that. Burnout happens to those in the helping professions, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, pastors, and missionaries. Three major symptoms of burnout are:

- Emotional exhaustion
  The exhaustion is more than physical it is emotional, “compassion fatigue.” You feel drained. You feel used up. You feel overwhelmed by the needs people come with. It is not that you don’t want to help, you just do not have what it takes to help any more.
- Depersonalization
  To shield yourself, you begin to reduce your close involvement with others. You begin not to notice the nationals who need help. You ignore their requests. You begin to be discourteous to the very people you came to serve. You tend to become tough, hard, and cynical, putting nationals down. You view people as objects. You used to view nationals through rose-colored glasses; now you wear rust-colored glasses.
- Reduced personal accomplishment
  Whether or not you actually become ineffective, you feel ineffective. You begin to sense you are becoming the kind of person people do not like. You used to be sensitive and caring, but you realize you are becoming cold and indifferent. You see that you are not accomplishing what you felt God called you to do, and you wonder if you still hear him.

Burnout is the result of continual stress over a long period of time rather than great stress over a short one. Burnout does not happen overnight, but it creeps up on you without your realizing it. Other missionaries usually notice it long before you do, but if you check yourself periodically, you can detect it. Burnout is not a psychiatric disorder, but is a phenomenon that will greatly reduce your effectiveness as a missionary in addition to what it does to you and your family.

What causes burnout?

There are three major sources of burnout, and whether or not burnout occurs depends on all three. Knowing these can alert you to the causes, and help you evaluate whether you are at risk for burnout.

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What are the effects of burnout?

Many pay the price when missionaries burn out. It affects everyone who comes into contact with them.

- Personal: In addition to the emotional and physical exhaustion, one may experience disturbed sleep, nightmares, illness, depression and sometimes resort to drugs or alcohol.
- Family and other missionaries: Missionaries burning out begin to expect perfection from others. This leads to
impatience, bickering, and fighting at home and in the office. They are available to meet the needs of nearly anyone, except their own families and other missionaries.

- Nationals: In addition to being rude, thoughtless and treating others as objects, missionaries burning out may begin to miss more days at work, move to educating others, ask to work with work teams, or move to administration. All of this is to avoid contact with nationals, but this motive may not be conscious.

Can burnout be treated?

Yes, if caught in time. Missionaries who burn out to the point that they actually leave the field are unlikely to return. Such people recover from their burnout, but they typically move into some other type of work. Therefore, it is important to detect burnout as soon as possible and take steps to prevent it from becoming any worse. When burnout is far along, you will likely know that you are burning out, but you are not likely to notice it in the early stages. The best early warning system is not yourself, but others who are willing to point out symptoms of burnout in you. Of course, you are their best early detection system, so check up on each other regularly.

Can burnout be prevented?

Yes! You can do many things that will prevent burnout. Following are some suggestions:

- Set realistic goals. Set specific goals so that you will know when you have achieved them. Of course, you want to save the world, but you are not going to do it alone.
- Don't get in a rut. Vary the way you do things so that they do not become routine.
- Take breaks. This includes different kinds of breaks: (1) Coffee breaks—morning and afternoon. (2) Lunch—don't catch up on work during that time; leave the office. (3) One day a week—you were made to take a Sabbath; leave town if you have to. (4) Vacations—you can't go all year, year after year.
- Don't take things personally. You are not responsible for everything that goes wrong.
- Leave your work at work. When you come home to your family, enjoy them.
- Learn to laugh at yourself. You are not indispensable, and you do some pretty funny things.
- Have a support group. You need someone to encourage you and serve as a yardstick against which you can measure yourself realistically.
- Live a life of your own. Have some hobby or activity that you just enjoy doing regularly.
- Change jobs. If all else fails, ask for a different assignment in your mission.

All of these things are easier said than done, but they can be done. Jesus modeled this for us in a well-known cross-cultural incident in John 4. He was tired from his trip, so he sat down by the well and sent his friends shopping for a lunch. He asked someone for a drink because he was thirsty, and then he struck up a conversation with her. If Jesus can sit down to rest, have a cool drink, and chat with someone passing by, we certainly can do so ourselves. The alternative is misery for yourself and those you live and work with, often followed by leaving your work.