



How to Beat Burnout in 5 Steps!
Bruce E. Roselle, PhD

Have you thought that you might be suffering from a degree of burnout? In the past year, I recognized that three of my executive coaching participants from different client organizations were experiencing the symptoms. All three happened to be in the finance departments of their organizations.

One individual described his situation in this way, “I have lots of direct reports, more than in the past, and most of them are not very friendly. I don’t usually know what’s coming my way, or how to handle it. There’s just so much uncertainty and confusion in my mind.” Another said, “I feel like I’m always on call, where something could go wrong at any moment. It feels like an abyss that I’m in danger of falling into. I can’t live in the moment or experience happiness there, because it’s up to me to figure out what the developing problems might be.”

A third coaching client noted, “I’m having trouble getting past feeling overwhelmed, and I often feel attacked when people make comments about my team. When others dump stuff on me, I feel frustrated and confused. At the same time, I feel like I must take full accountability for everything, because I can’t trust anyone else to actually help me.” Do any of these statements sound like you? If you look closely, you will see four components they have in common—these are the signs of burnout:

Taking on the weight of total responsibility. Do you pride yourself on taking full accountability for your work and stepping in when others drop the ball? Do you feel like you are the only one who seems concerned about work being done correctly and accurately, or who gives tasks full attention? You can manage this for limited periods of time, but, if you will discover that you can only dance so fast, and then you start to trip and fall. In coaching one of the persons, above, I asked if the CEO, CFO, or COO spent as many hours at the job as she did, and if they seemed as concerned about the company problems that were keeping her awake at night. This question seemed to give her some perspective that, if the company founders and top leaders were not stressed about a particular situation, maybe she should take on less personal responsibility.

Being stuck in the moment, with no time to plan ahead. A bit like the arcade game called ‘Whack a Mole’, do you feel like stuff just keeps coming at you and there’s no time to think about your future actions-- only time to react quickly to the next thing that pops up? This is the kind of short-term experience you expect when starting a new job, getting through a seasonal work crunch, or covering for someone who has left and not been replaced yet. However, when this mode becomes the norm and your adrenaline constantly flows, there is a high probability you will suffer from burnout. Even firefighters get burned out (pun intended) when they are constantly putting out fires.

Reacting to others with frustration, anger. Often, the most visible sign of burnout is the ‘edge’ with which you interact with others. Some might describe this aspect as feeling cynical and detached from

people, not connecting affectively with others as you do the work. Has this happened to you? I was initially called in to coach all three of these individuals to help soften their edge with others, because of the degree of frustration and detachment they evidenced with their team and peers. The longer you carry the weight of responsibility and find yourself constantly in reactive mode, the more 'brittle' your approach and sense of humor become. People then react to your attitude, and they become even more angering and frustrating to you.

Feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, confused, exhausted, incompetent. Have you ever felt like this? When feelings like this appear, it is a sign that your mind and body, exhausted with the stress, are starting to shut down. You feel incompetent and powerless to affect any meaningful change, which creates a sense of hopelessness. You lose any sense of accomplishment, because you are inundated with tasks that never seem to get completed. I've seen this in all three of the clients, above, with each wondering if their job or the company were right for them. They were so pessimistic that they began to conclude they just needed to fire everyone on the team, or quit themselves.

How to beat burnout! Here are five steps you can take—and help others take—to avoid burnout:

1. **Take the signs seriously.** Sit back for a moment and assess yourself on these four signs of burnout. Name it burnout and take them seriously—you can't address what you don't recognize. Often, what underlies burnout is irrational fear that others will not accept or respect you, or that your job is not safe. Recognize that these fears lead to taking on too much accountability, reacting rather than responding, and feeling confused and hopeless (I discuss this in my 2006 book, *Fearless Leadership*).
2. **Build a support network.** Find people at work, at home, or in your community you can talk to about what is happening at work, so that they can understand and provide helpful perspective. This network can include spouse, siblings, parents, friends, peers in other organizations, or professional counseling help. Ask them to give you reasonable perspective on the situations, but don't ask them to tell you what you should do—they just need to listen.
3. **Be good to your mind/body/spirit.** Often, the first things to be dropped when you feel stressed by a time crunch are: regular exercise, eating wholesome foods, prayer/meditation, down time with family/friends, and sleep. All of these help you build resilience in the areas of mind, body, and spirit. Don't try to compensate with caffeine, sugar, alcohol, or other unhealthy substances.
4. **Turn work over to others-- let it go.** This is a great way to free time for higher priority, future oriented tasks, as well as to teach skills to team members, so they can take on greater responsibility. With all three of these coaching clients, I encouraged them to delegate as much as possible, to push back on timelines imposed by others, to identify superfluous meetings they could skip, and to block planning time on their calendars. I helped them see how they could take more control over certain aspects of their work, so that they would have greater margin for the crises and surprises.
5. **Establish realistic limits.** I encouraged all three of these clients to take action and accountability in situations over which they had control, but to let go of those over which they had little or no control. You need to know when to ask for help, when to bounce something back to your manager, and when to say you've reached your limit. No one will step in and set limits for you.