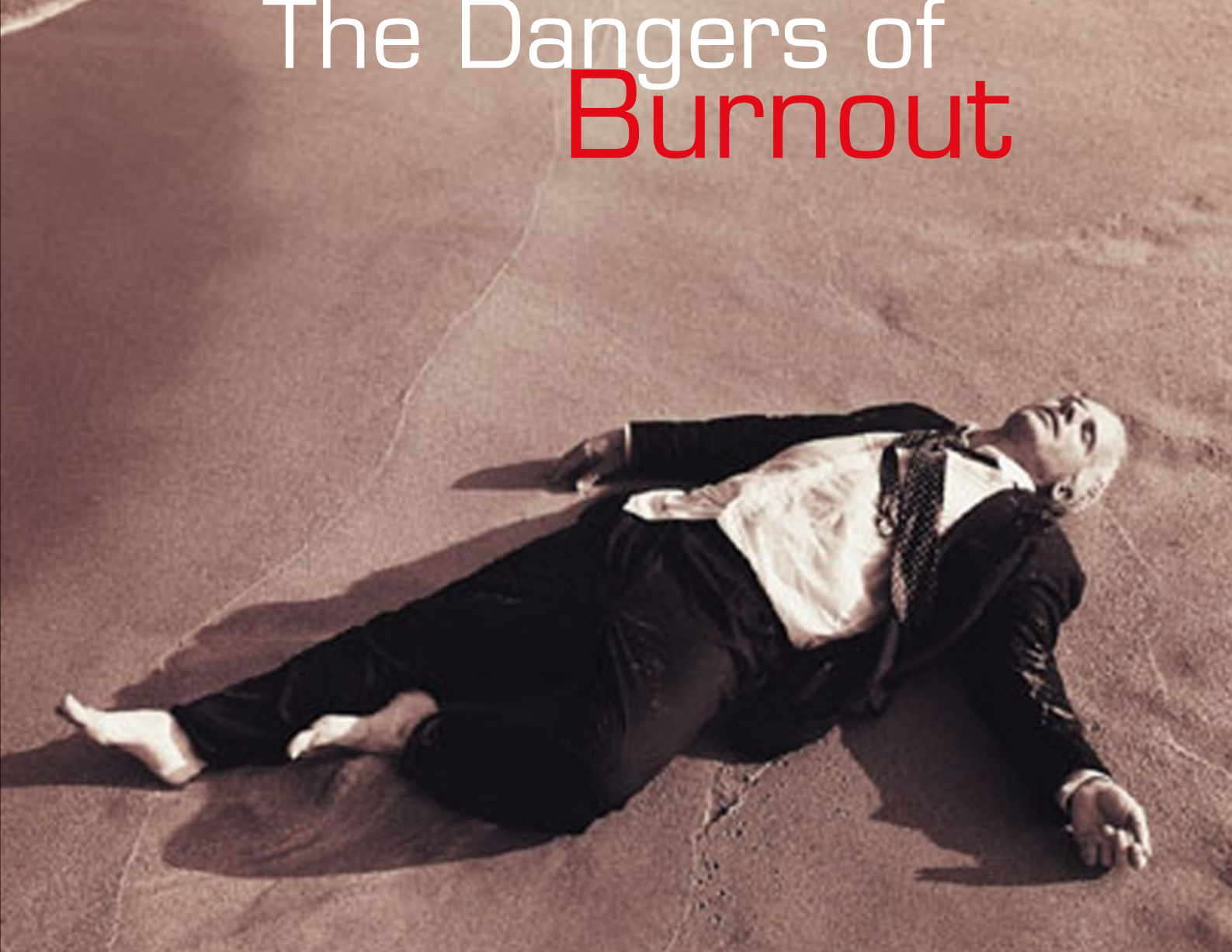


After the Flame Has Died The Dangers of Burnout



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I saw him one night at the ferry pier, on his way back home. He looked strangely haggard, and seemed to be walking with his body tilted back at an angle.

His skin was dry, and his eyes dull. He kept licking his lips like a cornered animal. From the color in his skin he almost looked like somebody who was already dead, but didn't quite know it yet.

"Peter", I asked. "Are you O.K.?"

He looked at me, his face blank for a moment, until recognition slowly reflected itself in his eyes.

"Chris, I've got to talk to you". His voice was rasping, almost inaudible. And we spent the next three hours getting to the bottom of what was wrong.

Initially, I thought that he was on drugs or something. But it wasn't that. It was something much worse, and much more insidious. He had slipped from being in a state of serious burnout, into a cycle of deep depression. He couldn't sleep, but was addicted to sleeping pills. He was eating, but the nutrients weren't being absorbed. He tried to work, but found that he couldn't. His work required him to be creative and he no longer could find that spark of creativity inside himself.

What had happened? It turned out that life had become overwhelming, and a previously energetic and motivated individual had fallen

off a precipice. Like Icarus, he had reached for the sun, but the heat melted his wings and there was nothing left for him but to crash and burn.

A number of business deals had gone wrong for Peter, putting heavy pressure on him to find money that he didn't have. The pressure at work translated to poor relationships at home, and his girlfriend decided to leave him.

Through all of this he remained stoic, until suddenly he crashed. A one-night binge on alcohol and uppers left him in a state that, to him, felt like terminal brain damage. He did not realize it at the time, but he had suffered from a serious case of burnout.

What Is Burnout?

One of the official definitions of burnout is that it is "a state of mental and/or physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress." [Girdino, DA, Everly, GS, and Dusek, DE, Controlling Stress and Tension, Allyn & Bacon, Needham Heights, MA, 1996]

Basically, when you burn out your mind and body have reached a point where they can no longer respond to the demands that you put on them. You need energy to get things done, but that energy is just not available to you. You need your body to respond, but it won't. You need your mind to generate ideas and options for you, but it refuses to do so.



How Do You Know When You Are Experiencing Burnout?

The symptoms of impending burnout can be subtle, or not-so-subtle. They tend to be different for different people, but there are patterns worth watching for. When you are already in a state of burnout, the symptoms are clear.

Sadness and Depression

Depression and sadness are clearly very strong signals that you may be suffering from burnout.

This is especially true if you have historically been a happy and outgoing sort of person. The daily feeling of depression and sadness can be shocking for someone who, for most of their life, has been motivated and happy.

When I first met him several years previously Peter was outgoing, happy, motivated and busy. He had an optimistic point of view, and always felt that he would prevail. A very different person to the one I met on the ferry that night. That night, and for many months previously, Peter had been suffering ongoing sadness and depression. He had spend months obsessively and repeatedly going over and over all the things that went wrong in his life, wishing for a return to the “good old days”.

The realization that the “good old days” could not be recaptured simply added to the sadness and depression that he was already feeling.

Recently I was introduced to Wendy, a lady in her late thirties who was also suffering from “depression”. The note from her psychiatrist indicated that she was taking anti-depressant drugs, and that a period of “cognitive therapy” would be necessary for her to improve. Her story, however, seemed to match Peter’s

almost detail for detail, and burnout seemed to be a more likely explanation of what had happened to her.

She had a history of long hours of work, often winning against unfavorable odds. She claimed to have been a positive, happy, and outgoing person. However, during a period of holding down an old job while simultaneously setting up her own business she suffered a sudden crash. In response she took a mild overdose, and then suffered from subsequent depression and sadness. The depression, coupled with a history of intense work pointed to burnout.

The diagnosis of burnout was strengthened when she decided to go on “sabbatical” from the normal social demands of her life. This created the space she needed to begin to regain her energy and excitement for life.

The Heavyness of Life

Over the course of my career I have personally experienced burnout, or something close to it, on a number of occasions. I know that I’m there when life just seems too heavy. There is a growing sense that, as you look around and you see all of the demands on your life, you know that you can never do all of what is required. And that feels heavy.

You vaguely remember that once you had felt excited by the things that you wanted to do.

Now, just thinking about all the requirements of your job just makes you feel like it’s just too much. You know that you need to move, to do something, but even that seems impossible. It’s like you’re trapped in a field of foggy mud, and the fog weighs down terribly upon you. Even getting up in the morning can, at times, feel like a monumental task.

After the Flame Has Died
The Dangers of
Burnout

Often, the heaviness is accompanied by the total inability to think. It is as if your brain won't do what is needed. You know that, if you could just put some ideas together then you could find your way out of your predicament. But even thinking just feels like it's too hard. Your brain refuses to give you an idea and, even if you can drag one out of your head, the second idea to connect to the first just never appears.

Peter needed to think. In fact, his job required it. As a landscape architect he needed to put ideas together and present them to his clients for approval. Even though, in the past, he had hundreds of ideas after he burned out he was unable to think of even one idea at all. It was as if his head had been drained of every ounce of creativity or memory that he had ever been gifted with. It was like his brain had been burned to a crisp, and it would no longer do what he asked of it.



In Peter's case, he needed to decide on certain courses of action to get out of the predicament into which he had put himself.

There were things that he could do, and those things would help him. However, for the most part, he looked at his choices and his mind either went blank, or he began to panic. Even when he had chosen a particular course of action, he was unable to act. He would say to himself, "I should do this", and then he would start to feel heavy, the fog would descend over his brain, and he would sit there in a daze.

The sense that you just don't know what to do, or what to decide, is a good indicator that burnout is upon you. Even more

Inability to Choose; Inability to Act

The burnout state also brings with it a chronic inability to choose, or to act. The times when I was burned out I remember looking at all of the tasks on my task list and feeling lost and helpless. There was no way that I could do them all, not in the time available. But I couldn't choose any one of the things to start with. Logically, there were one or two things that I needed to start with and complete, but I was unable to think well enough to decide what those should be. So, for hours I sat and looked at the list, feeling more and more panic as my lifted flowed past.

Physical Symptoms

Burnout is frequently accompanied by chronic physical problems of one sort or another. Chronic stomach or bowel problems are very common, as are chronic headaches or migraines.

In Peter's case he suffered a whole range of physical problems from impotence to sudden sharp chest pains, to scaly skin and sores that just would not heal.

The message is clear. Burnout is dangerous, and if it goes too far it can probably kill you.

The Early Warning Signals

The section above talks about what can happen when you are deep into the burnout process. What's important to remember



After the Flame Has Died
The Dangers of
Burnout

about burnout, however, is that it doesn't just happen overnight. Rather, it is a process that takes some time. There are three main phases to the development of stress.

Stress Arousal

The first stage of developing burnout is known as Stress Arousal. Your mind perceives danger in the environment, and responds with normal physiological reactions. You start to feel irritable, or anxious. Sometimes your blood pressure will rise, or you might experience heart palpitations. You may find your teeth getting worn because you are grinding them in your sleep.

A really good sign that you are in the stress arousal phase is that your memory will start to weaken. For me, I know that I'm getting overly stressed when my short-term memory starts to disappear. I find myself walking into the next room looking for something, but find that I have already forgotten what it was that I was looking for.

Energy Conservation

The next stage, energy conservation, happens when you have been stressed for a period of time and the body can no longer keep responding with arousal. Instead, your body tries to protect you in other ways. You either start to "hide", or to "pump" yourself up.

And, whether you are "hiding" or "pumping" yourself up, you really notice that nothing seems fun any more. It is quite likely that you used to think that your job was enjoyable, and challenging. By the time you are in the energy conservation stage it no longer feels like fun. It just feels like a drag.

To protect your energy you start

procrastinating, and avoid taking decisions today that you can put off until next week or next month. You become adept at ignoring requests from others, and at coming up with excuses as to why things haven't been done. Being with other people can seem too much, and you begin withdrawing from friends and family. Often, even though talking through problems with others could help solve them, the energy involved in communicating seems beyond you and so you keep your problems to yourself. You are basically "hiding" from people, decisions, and action.

Even though you are hiding, you still feel tired. And, the more tired you feel, the more likely you are to turn to drugs like nicotine or caffeine to maintain your energy levels. Sometimes, people turn to alcohol to alter their mood for the better. Any change in the pattern of using these types of drugs (alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, uppers, etc.) is a good indicator that you may be on the pathway to burnout.

You may also feel strong emotions like anger, or resentment, or both. You feel angry that people are asking so much of you, and resentment that, somehow, your needs aren't being taken care of. And you start thinking to yourself that it's not fair that they don't understand you or your needs. This just makes you feel angrier. So angry that you would never think of sharing with them as a way of solving your problem. You become cynical and hard and non-communicative.

Some of the real danger in this stage is that often you will find yourself desperately trying to come up with solutions to get you out of the situation you are in. From within the cynicism and anger you start making rash decisions. You might decide to quit your job, or sell out a position in a company. Made from a state of cynicism and anger these



After the Flame Has Died
The Dangers of
Burnout

decisions will, over time, make your situation worse rather than better.

What is important is that you take steps to change your physical and mental state.

Exhaustion

The final phase is exhaustion. You can no longer pump yourself up, and there is no longer anywhere to hide. It has all become too much and, like Peter or Wendy, you start to suffer a breakdown. You feel sick, sad, helpless and hopeless. By this time, you're not much use to yourself or anybody else.

This is the phase of Full Burnout.

Avoiding the Burnout Trap

The journey to burnout takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. The way to avoid falling into the trap of burnout is to recognize the symptoms early enough, and take steps to change your situation. If you are experiencing any of the symptoms that I have highlighted above you must first be open to the possibility that you are getting stressed out. You also need to understand that, if the stress continues, you may well be on the path to burnout.

Once you realize that stress is an issue, you need to take certain steps. The three most important steps are: relax, communicate, and share.

Learn to Relax

Stress is both mental and physical, and relaxation is the best way to combat it. There are many different techniques for stress reduction. You can take a short vacation, or learn to meditate. Various forms of exercise or breathing exercises can help a great deal. It doesn't matter what path you choose.

Learn to Communicate

One of the major sources of stress for a person is to feel that you are alone, and that others don't understand what you are going through. This sense of loneliness, often perceived as abandonment, can feel terrifying.

This, in itself, is stressful. The reaction to this feeling can often be one of withdrawal, and communicating less, which makes the problem even worse.

To break the cycle, you have to communicate. Find someone to talk to that can, if nothing else, just listen to your situation.

Recently I did some work with a lady in an Investment Bank. She was clearly suffering from overwhelm, and was on the verge of burnout. I didn't do much to help her, other than listen. She commented later that she knew I couldn't change the business situation that she found herself in. However, being able to talk to someone who understood her situation was enough for her to release her stress and begin the journey back to balance.

Learn to Share the Load

The third thing that you need to do is share the load. Often, stress comes about because of the feeling that you "have to do it all yourself". Often, this is not true. There are people in your organization or social circle who can and will help you, if only you will ask for that help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength. Knowing when you are at the end of your tether, and in need of help, is a sign of wisdom. So, be wise. Ask for help.



Conclusion

In the world today, with increasing demands and more and more rapid change, stress and burnout are more common than we probably like to think. If unaddressed, the personal consequences can be severe. If you happen to be in a leadership position for an organization, the consequences could well go beyond your personal situation. You may find yourself making bad decisions, or procrastinating on actions required for the health of your organization.

Clearly, ignoring stress and burnout is not an option. If you suspect that you have stress levels in your life that could lead to burnout, you need to act rapidly to reverse the situation.

The failure to do so will lead to higher levels of stress, and will take away your capacity to address the problem. The solution is simple. Be wise. Be courageous. Act while you have the ability to do so. ●