

Preventing Burnout and Compassion-Fatigue

Some “authorities” writing in this area believe that burnout is an inevitable condition for care providers. The condition has even been given a name, “secondary traumatic stress disorder.” Once it was actually referred to as “secondary victimization.” That belief is based on the idea that caregivers come to believe that any effect of positive change is elusive and probably impossible. These researchers promote the idea that caregivers see the society they live in as uncaring. They blame the upbringing of caregivers being taught to care for the needs of others before meeting their own needs.

We who work in Rescue Missions have a source of strength that allows us to prevent falling into this debilitating lifestyle. There is truth that sets us free to do what God calls us to do for the hurting people who come our way.

Some burnout is brought on by overextending. We can all work extra shifts for a short period, but too many hours will eventually take a toll. Burnout can also be a result of excessive commitments, when there is not enough of you to go around. In this chapter, we will focus on defining burnout as compassion-fatigue, coming to the point of seeing need but feeling empty of personal resource or desire to meet that need.

My Own Testimony

You will run into people who deny the possibility of burnout. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone who has been through it. God assigned me to go to the Rescue Mission in 1980. I worked hard and long. Three years into my assignment, I experienced burnout. It was a terrible experience. I was empty of compassion. I felt like I had nothing to offer the crowds coming through the doors each day. The next months were amazing. First, God shut down my schedule. “Suddenly” there were many no-shows in my counseling schedule. There was little for me to pay attention to other than to seek His face. It was in that time following that I learned how to do Rescue Ministry God’s way. I came out of that time understanding that God did not need me to do His work, but He would offer me the opportunity to be His mouthpiece if I was willing to let Him be in charge. I learned that I was not capable of generating daily compassion, but I was responsible to go to the “faucet” daily to get my bucket filled from the Source. I learned to give God’s compassion instead of what I generated myself. (The quality and quantity was far superior). I learned that not every problem had to be solved, that sometimes the process was more important for the client than the solution. I came to understand that God’s plan for the client was far better and more long-lasting than mine. I began to do ministry with God’s energy rather than my own.

No one has to go through burnout. Prevention is far better than recovery. When we block the refilling of daily compassion in our life bucket, we are set up to respond in our own strength which can turn ugly. We begin to major in criticalness, cynicism, or plain fatigue.

Our Source of Compassion

God invented compassion. He models compassion. He is the source of our compassion (Psalm 103:13). This is one of many ways He is not like the gods of manmade religion.

Scripture often speaks of the compassion of Jesus. These passages show the God-given energy to respond to needy and suffering people.

Self-Evaluation Tool

Take this quiz to see if you are headed into the danger zone:

- ☐ I have my own personal issues that I am thinking about regularly during the workday.
- ☐ My fellow workers seem to lack understanding of the clients.
- ☐ My fellow workers seem to lack understanding of me.
- ☐ When small changes have to be made, it really bothers me.
- ☐ When something big happens, it takes many hours to unwind.
- ☐ I have little hope for most of my clients.
- ☐ I am fearful of what may come during the shift beginning now.
- ☐ I am overwhelmed with deadlines to be done.
- ☐ I have lost my sense of caring for others.

Avoiding Burnout

Here are some practical ways of building a defense against going through burnout.

Check out how you see yourself. There is no room for a second savior or rescuer. God is sufficient. You are simply the conduit of His truth and grace. You are the mouthpiece for encouragement and challenge. Your clients should get their hope from the same Source you use.

Be careful of identification and comparison. If you have experienced similar crisis as the client you are working with, do not get into one-upmanship in either silent or verbal comparison. The need and path for recovery may be different for your client than your own experience.

Put the experiences of others into perspective. The client who seems to be at the end of his or her rope has probably been there before. How has this person survived in the past without you? What does God want to do in this situation? How can I stay out of His way if He is trying to get the person's attention?

Learn not to take up an offense. Empathy is a good thing, but taking up an offense that is not yours is destructive. As you study the prophets of the Scriptures, you see them asking God to deal with offenders Himself. This leaves you free of a critical spirit and able to help the client with perspective.

Develop supportive relationships on the job. We are not in this alone. Others struggle in the same way. Be honest with each other and learn to debrief, pray together, and share scriptural truth, always pointing each other to the Source. Do not hang with people who major in cynical.

Keep the big picture in front of you. It is easy to get bogged down and lost in the trees and not see the value of the forest. When the issues pile up, order comes by sorting out priorities.

Replace crisis-mode thinking with dependence and trust in God. God's timing is superior.

Don't listen to lies. Struggling in this area does not mean that you should be questioning whether you are meant for this type of work. If you know God called you to this ministry, you know He has a plan for you. He is waiting for you to open your eyes to see it.

Make it your daily prayer to ask for a fresh supply of His compassion. As you dress for the day, turn your thoughts toward God's perspective. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12(NIV)).