
Boundaries, Burnout & The Art of Saying No – Worksheet 5 – Understanding & Combatting Burnout

Understanding Burnout

Burnout is a mental, emotional, and physical condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of inefficacy. It is often experienced in helping professions, and can also occur as a result of helping roles you take on in your personal life, including activist work, volunteer roles, or caring for a family member or friend.

Recognizing Burnout in Yourself

Common clues that you're getting burnt out include: sleeplessness, irritability, lack of motivation, frequent illness, forgetfulness, and low energy. Of course, this isn't the same for everyone, so you need to pay attention to your own signs of burnout. How do you know when you're getting burnt out? Brainstorm some of the signs in each category below.

Physical Signs:

Emotional Signs:

Mental Signs:

Spiritual Signs:

Social Signs:

Behavioral Signs:

Combatting Burnout

Now, make a commitment - "When I notice any of the above signs of burnout, I will take my health seriously and respond immediately by taking care of myself in the following ways":

Physically:

Emotionally:

Mentally:

Spiritually:

Socially:

Additional Tools

When you find yourself in a helping role (in your job, home life, or activism), consider these additional tools to protect yourself:

1. Tuning into your need for self care

Self care can be anything you need to replenish your fuel tank and allow you to continue doing helping work. It involves being tuning into yourself psychologically and physically to identify your needs. In order to do this, it's important to make time for moments of reflection. You can participate in mindful acts through formal meditation, a few minutes of mindful breathing, or simply allowing yourself to be present to whatever is happening in the moment. From there, you can learn to regulate yourself and find a balance in your life. Self regulation includes regulatory processes like exercise, relaxation and diversion, and managing things such as affect, stimulation, and energy. Balance means being able to find a middle ground between dualisms in our life (e.g. work and play) and tend to our needs.

What practices do you have for tuning into your needs, regulating yourself, and finding balance?

2. Maintaining healthy boundaries

Healthy boundaries involve understanding what nourishes you and what drains you, then being intentional with your actions. We all have limited energy and time, so setting boundaries is about deciding which helping actions you are willing and able to say yes to, and which you need to say no to. To make that decision, you may need to examine the cost/benefit ratio of the things you are agreeing to, and use mindfulness to help you decide what types of helping actions are the best fits for you. It also involves going "off duty" from time to time. Just like everyone else, you need space that's just for you.

What boundaries do you already have in place to help protect your time and energy?



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3. Finding and fostering hope

It's so easy to lose our hopefulness when we're focused only on what's not going well or still needs to change. And while we can't ignore the work that needs to be done, we need to recognize that the promise of future change isn't enough to sustain us. We need to be able to notice what's already connecting us to hope in the present. Take the time now to celebrate successes.

What are you aware of happening right now that makes you feel hopeful?

4. Brainstorming and implement ways to foster positive well-being at a larger level.

Burnout often stems from lack of support in structural systems. You are not alone in dealing with the effects of burnout, and you don't need to be alone in combatting it!

Who do you know who's fighting for social justice alongside you? (note: this can be people in your existing community, or folks you are aware of doing work you respect from a distance).

Sometimes just being aware that you're not alone in your struggles is enough to help combat burnout. Other times we need support that's a bit more concrete.

Who in your life would be able to help you advocate for structural change? Make a plan to connect with this person or agency.

References:

1. Maslach, C. & Gomes, M. E. (2006). Overcoming burnout. In MacNair, R (Ed.), Working for peace: A handbook of practical psychology and other tools, (pp. 43-49). Atascadero, CA: Impact.
2. Le, L., & Perry, N (2016). Combatting Burnout Workshop (handout).



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