

floor. I thought, "I can't go on any more" but I realized I had to go back to work almost more tired than when I started the vacation.

Once back in the UK, I continued to lose confidence in myself and went into a period of low mood and self-questioning. I suppressed it by working harder and managing to disguise the symptoms. No one at work was aware [of] how I was feeling. At home it was a different matter; I was impatient with my young children and getting more distant from my wife.

Following a restructuring of the business, I was overlooked for promotion and did not get on with my new boss. Overall the new job was unchallenging. I reconsidered my career and took voluntary redundancy. This led to a period of depression.

Through the support of my wife and close friends, I started to look at the alternative career options available and set about planning a new start that would combine work and home life in a more balanced way.

I attribute getting better to keeping a reflective diary, reading and understanding what was happening to me. I realized I was treating my wife and family as trappings of the success of my career. A friend suggested I try writing down what I thought was my purpose in life. I was surprised when it didn't mention work! I thought hard about what I wanted to be remembered for, beyond my job title and prestige. I tried to develop clear boundaries between home and work. I learned how to say no, to turn off my BlackBerry and give quality time to my wife and children.

I think individuals have to recognize themselves what is happening, and that all too often you don't recognize it until it is too late. Ask yourself if you have a supportive network around you, and whether you have empowered them to give you honest feedback. If you have, are you receptive to it? And try to get feedback from as many sources as are relevant.

Overall, I have gained from having taken the time and effort to really understand who I am and what I am like when at my

best. I have made my life less chaotic and cluttered by saying no to some things; I try to engage fully in all aspects of my life. I am less ambitious and see life as not simply being work-focused.

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Ed's case is a classic one of burnout through overwork. But what is burnout? This first chapter looks at what burnout is, and offers ways we can assess if we are suffering from it.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout can be very difficult to define, even though it is so prevalent and we all think we know what we mean by it. Burnout doesn't happen to us overnight but is the end result of a long and often slow process described as:

being driven by an ideal, working harder and harder, putting one's own needs last, feeling miserable, isolated and denying what is happening, the death of one's values leading to cynicism, frustration and disengagement, feelings of inner emptiness and finally both physical and mental collapse.¹

The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) lists the following symptoms of burnout:

- physical and mental exhaustion and fatigue after minimal effort
- muscle aches and pains
- dizziness
- tension headaches
- sleep disturbance

- an inability to relax
- irritability
- inability to recover after rest, relaxation or entertainment.

All these symptoms need to last at least three months, and they should not be able to be explained by a different illness (such as depression). Is this true of you? Then maybe you are burnt out.

BURNOUT AND STRESS

Burnout comes when we overdo it for too long, and when our energy is used up faster than it is restored. "Burnout is not an event but the end point in burning down."² However we define burnout, we know that it is fundamentally about our levels of stress.

Stress is a normal part of our make-up. We use the word "stressed" when someone is not coping well, but doctors and psychologists talk about a "stress response" to mean a whole range of physiological changes that our brain triggers in order to prime our body to be alert and ready for action. "Stress" has become a catch-all term to describe the body's reaction to pressure (more on this in Chapter 3). But for now, what we need to know is that the body produces an array of hormones in response to a range of things, including danger, but also to normal life events, even meeting a friend. This response is designed to be a short-term reaction; the hormones are produced for specific events, and then their levels in the bloodstream die away. However, problems begin to occur if we are under prolonged pressure (chronic stress) and the stress hormone levels remain very high for a long period. This will mean they do not return to their normal resting state, but continue to be pumped round in the bloodstream. If they become a permanent feature of everyday life, we will eventually get burnt out.

Another writer on burnout, the psychiatrist Glenn Roberts, whose model we use later in this chapter, says, "Burnout is not the result of stress but of mismanaged stress."³ You might like to think over the concept of chronic stress for yourself. Do you think you have pushed yourself beyond your natural limits for too long?

WHERE DOES BURNOUT COME FROM?

One way to see where the excess stress is coming from is to think about internal and external pressures.

External pressures

Burnout is often connected with professional work, and that is where most of the research has been done. Life at work can become so stressful that it takes over and eclipses all else. Studies show that when people feel torn between home and work, work usually wins. But stress within family circumstances, particularly among long-term carers, can prove to be too much. Burnout, however, need not be limited to one scenario. Overstress can result from different parts of our lives all going wrong together and, as we say, "It all begins to get too much." As more people, especially women, balance both a working life and a caring family role, this can lead to excess stress.

Jane had demands on her from work, her frail elderly mother, and her son and daughter, and at times she didn't know who to put first. It was only a matter of time before she began to feel unwell, and she described herself as "stressed". Her resources were overstretched and she pushed herself to the limit. She had no time or opportunity to relax, nor for her stress hormones to return to normal. They were constantly being pumped out to keep her going, and their normal ebb and flow had been lost. If Jane continued like this, she would inevitably suffer burnout.

Burnout can affect young people too. Margaret had her first episode of burnout when she was sixteen and pushing herself