

THE PROBLEM OF COUNSELOR/PASTOR BURNOUT

Mary Stinson

[Statement about Mary Stinson by www.pastorlife.com Editor, J. Mike Minnix: Mary's husband, Ed, is a minister who has personal experience with ministerial burnout. I hope this article, written by Mary, helps those who read it to avoid BURNOUT!]

Ed had always loved his work as a pastor, always going the extra mile, giving of himself beyond his strength. He always felt that God would bless such a course of action, since His word said to deny self and take up your cross daily. He felt that self-sacrifice was the key to serving his Lord.

When he became increasingly fatigued, he thought he must be losing his "first love" and growing cold in his service. He redoubled his efforts. But when the fatigue became exhaustion he asked for time away from the ministry. "Oh, but people are coming to know the Lord because of your message," his church admonished.

Again he dragged himself to the pulpit. But nothing had prepared him for what happened next. He simply could not speak. He felt the emptiness and despair of having

nothing to give. He motioned for the music director to come up and then took his seat, feeling like he had not only failed the Lord, but disappointed Him as well.

Many pastors have come to this place of burnout, perhaps not as dramatically as Ed, but equally as devastating.

Counselors and pastors face a serious hazard in their chosen profession. Because of their desire to be people-helpers, and because they desire to find satisfaction in serving, giving meaning and purpose to their lives, they often find themselves giving beyond their physical and emotional resources. As a consequence of this, they are at risk for what is known as burnout.

Burnout can be defined as "the type of stress and emotional fatigue frustration, and exhaustion that occurs when a series of events in a relationship, mission, way of life, or job fail to produce an expected result."¹ It seems that this issue of expectations is one of the primary elements of burnout. When one has high ideals in the helping professions, and those ideals are not realized, either because clients fail to improve, or the changes one hopes to make are hopelessly thwarted, there follows a discouragement leading to burnout. "Almost all Christian leaders are prime targets for burnout because they deal

continuously with people and their spiritual, emotional, financial and relational problems."² These dedicated Christian leaders, more than any other group, tend to push themselves too hard and too far, feeling guilty if they take time off or slow down to rest. "Burnout is a major problem in the helping occupations, where people give a lot to others but fail to take care of themselves in the process."³

It seems that goal-oriented high achievers who are driven to succeed are good candidates for burnout. Often they begin as the most promising in their field and are highly productive. This high productivity, however, can be destructive in that it produces a workaholic person who by nature tends toward exhaustion. This workaholic nature can take the form of obsessive-compulsive tendencies. "A large percentage of Evangelical Christians have an over-abundance of obsessive-compulsive personality traits."⁴ Those who are highly capable, who feel the need to step in and help, who dislike relinquishing control to those who might not do the job as well, who find it hard to be assertive and say no, who want to please others, and who try to do everything themselves without allowing others to do what they are gifted to do are more likely to experience burnout.

Causes

As mentioned before, burnout can be a result of unrealized ideals. When expectations are not met, the ideals are shattered. Ideals and a sense of purpose are closely related. Everyone, even those in the secular professions, needs a sense of purpose. "Purpose in life is to the high achiever what rocket fuel is to a spacecraft. It provides the energy and power for success in the mission. Purpose motivates them. Loss of purpose creates loss of reasons to go on."⁵ Loss of purpose and shattered ideals, then, are two causes of burnout.

Another cause, specific to the field of counseling involves dealing with emotions and facing painful memories in the clients' lives. These painful memories can trigger unfinished business for the counselor. These counter-transference issues can be stressful and if not faced and dealt with, can interfere with counselor effectiveness, leading to impairment.

A workload that is too heavy can bring about a sense of pressure and over-responsibility, crippling the ability to set priorities and creating imbalance in the life of the counselor. Everything then takes on a sense of being critical. When an excessive workload is combined with a belief that a counselor is responsible for solving the

problems of their clients, this can be a major cause of burnout.

The belief that a counselor has to help every client is not the only stress-producing belief that counselors can hold. According to Corey and Corey and Callanan, many counselors think they have to always work at peak level, cope with all emergencies, always be available to clients, be an example of perfect mental health, be responsible for their clients' behavior and assume failure when their client does not improve.⁶

Because a great deal of our thinking about our heavenly Father is formed by our earthly father, it makes sense that if our earthly father loved us conditionally and rejected us when we failed to perform, we attribute the same responses to our heavenly Father when we fail Him.⁷

Because of this, a counselor may constantly seek to win love and approval through compulsively performing well. As a way of life, this causes anxiety and can lead to burnout.

Because counselors are usually sought out when people are unable to solve their own problems, "those in the helping professions may experience demoralizing hopelessness when confronted with what may appear to be unsolvable problems."⁸ This writer has experienced first hand what happens when faced day after day with such seemingly hopeless situations in the lives of clients.

Without intervention for the counselor, this sense of hopelessness certainly may lead to burnout.

A very real source of stress for one in the counseling profession is the control that managed care has over the duration and type of therapy a client is able to receive. As stated by Corey and Corey and Callanan, "This can produce both ethical dilemmas, such as situations in which clients are denied clinically necessary further treatment."⁹

A problem that people-helpers in the social services have, in their effort to help make the community a better place, is the discouragement of dealing with chronically ill people who show little change or improvement. The social service agencies are often inadequate for the many needs of the community. Many times the community is resistant to change, particularly if it has a culture orientation that is foreign to that of the social worker. After a time, the person in social service work may become discouraged and desire to find other work that is more satisfying.

Symptoms

As burnout progresses, "work habits deteriorate and productivity drops. The counselor or pastor feels increasingly isolated and begins to withdraw from co-

workers, family and friends, becoming angry, hostile and depressed."¹⁰ The authors of *Career Burnout* recognize three ways that counselor may withdraw. The first is physical withdrawal, which involves less contact and intimacy. The second is emotional withdrawal, the pulling back of one's emotional connectedness. The third is mental withdrawal, a set of attitudes that justifies detachment.¹¹

Symptoms take place, such as changes in sleeping and eating habits, irritability, chronic fatigue, headaches, nervous tics, deterioration of personal relationships, substance abuse, neglect of favorite activities, loss of self-esteem, resignation and apathy. When these signs appear, it is important for a counselor or pastor to face the fact that there is a problem. If he will not acknowledge it, he can slip into denial and be in danger of impairment as a helper. Corey and Corey and Callanan state that denial is a common characteristic of impairment, and that unless burnout is recognized and dealt with, it often results in impairment.¹² This condition is one of depletion, which hinders the effectiveness of a professional counselor or pastor.

Biblical Examples

One might think that it is a weakness to experience burnout. Pastors, in particular, might feel this way. But there are several examples given to us in Scripture of great men of God who experienced burnout. The prophet, Elijah, as told in 1 Kings 19, gave all, to the neglect of himself. Perceiving that his work was not making a difference, he became angry and wanted to quit. He felt sorry for himself and felt he was the only one listening to God. He wandered into the desert and became despondent. God fed him and allowed him to rest. He then caused him to have a time of solitude and reflection, speaking to him in the quietness. As with Elijah, "the exhaustion of burnout can be so complete that only the pilgrimage to Mount Sinai and the personality reorienting dialogue with God can cure him."¹³

Moses, in the book of Exodus, grew weary of being all things to the people and complained to God about it. God, through Moses' father-in-law, told him to share the workload with carefully selected leaders from the community.

Asaph, King David's associate, the man who led the nation in worship at the peak of its spiritual life, burned out. "He became an exhausted man who ministered in the realm of the Spirit. Busy every day in organizing the

worship of God, his foundations began to crumble."¹⁴ The Psalms he wrote illustrate his depressed and agonized condition.

Pastors in Burnout

A number of factors make the pastorate especially challenging. Many pastors have a small congregation and consequently need to have other employment in addition to their pastorate. Even if ministering is his only job, a pastor often works fifty to seventy-five hours a week. Traditionally, one of the pastor's main roles is that of a counselor, and many hurting people seek their pastor first for counseling.

In the past, a pastor dealt mainly with hospital visitation, shut-ins, grief, and spiritual guidance. But with the changes in society, pastors are called upon to deal with more complex issues such as marital problems, depression, financial concerns, sexual issues, and character disorders.

Massive changes in social mores in the last decade have left people confused concerning what behaviors are appropriate. Thus, they openly seek help and ministerial counsel in areas that once would have been considered private and not open to discussion.¹⁵

These are highly personal issues and many times a person will later regret sharing them with the pastor. They

sometimes will feel that subsequent sermons are directed at them and feel hostility toward the pastor. Thus "the pastor's effectiveness as a spiritual shepherd is weakened."¹⁶

Secular Counseling

Counselors who do not have faith in God to guide them, face a particular hazard in their profession. The authors of Career Burnout state:

The root cause of burnout lies in our existential need to believe that our lives are meaningful, that the things we do are useful, important and even heroic. Religion fills these needs for people, but those who have rejected religion have a void, which is often filled by work. In this case, the stakes are very high. If failure is perceived, then burnout follows.¹⁷

For these counselors, personal worth and value depend on their performance and success with clients. God's design is that people find their sense of value in Him. Without God's value system of unconditional acceptance, man is reduced to a measuring stick of his own making. Burnout is even more likely for a counselor without faith in God, than for one who has a deep faith.

Prevention Strategies

Along with the importance of recognizing signs and symptoms of burnout, it is of utmost importance to have knowledge of how to prevent its occurrence. One way to do

this would be to educate counselors and pastors so that they will go into their field with eyes open to the landmines that could await them. Concurrent with their education, they would benefit by personal counseling in order to examine their own deeply held beliefs.

Once they are practicing in their fields, there are several things they could do to keep balance in their lives and work. One is to arrange for accountability, either through peers or supervision. "Pastors and counselors need someone to confide in to confront the problem. They tend to bury it, thinking they should be strong enough to handle everything."¹⁸ If a peer or supervisor sees signs of burnout or impairment, they can help prevent it by confronting with love and concern.

Another strategy is self-evaluation, a good preventive measure. One could look at a list of signs and symptoms of burnout and ascertain whether they apply. A good look at the counselor's personal life and relationships could indicate if there is burnout.

Learning to care for the self in the work of the ministry is just as important as caring for others. How can a pastor or counselor care for others effectively if he is impaired? The need for a balanced lifestyle is essential in self-care. That balance would include times

of rest and recreation, times of fellowship with God, exercise, good nutrition, and time for family and friends.

A counselor needs to respect his limitations, knowing he cannot push himself beyond his strength, even if he feels people are expecting it. Jesus knew the importance of balance and demonstrated it to His disciples by His own example. The accounts in the Gospels tell us that "He went away by Himself to pray" Matt 14:23. He also made sure His disciples took time to replenish themselves. When they had ministered to the point of exhaustion and had not had time to eat, He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile" (Mark 6:31).

Recovery

Everyone who has experienced burnout has to travel the road back to recovery. Since burnout so often involves focus on a person's own ability to perform well, recovery can begin by refocusing attention away from the person's ability, to focusing instead on God's ability to work through him.

Many people experience hope when their attention has been refocused beyond their circumstances to the characteristics of the God they serve. For the person who has placed personal trust in Jesus Christ burnout is a problem that can be solved.¹⁹

Often, a good physical examination is a first step in recovery. There may be a need for medication in the case of depression or anxiety caused by the situation. In addition, the physician might prescribe rest, exercise, and a well-balanced diet, as well as some time away for rest and renewal.

After separating oneself from the source of burnout and having a time of rest, a burnout victim can begin again to find a new sense of purpose or a new vision. He can set new goals in order to be motivated to begin again and come out of the depression that burnout often causes. He can forgive himself and learn to love himself again. He can also use this experience of burnout to rise to a new level of spiritual maturity, allowing it to bring blessings into his life.

Counseling Persons in Burnout

In counseling a person who has experienced burnout, whether he is a pastor or therapist, there are several points that are helpful to remember, according to Myron Rush. One is to be a good listener and friend. Another is to be a facilitator for change and a motivator, helping him to establish a new purpose. Perhaps the most important

thing is to believe he will recover, never giving up on him even if he gives up on himself.²⁰

The Blessings of Burnout

A change in how one understands truth can be the biggest blessing found in burnout. Since people have a tendency, as discussed earlier, to build their self-image on their own accomplishments, they have a tendency to misunderstand the grace of God. God's grace causes Him to love us for who we are rather than for what we do. One learns that his value to God is not conditional on his performance or on how much he does for others. Therefore, he can know that he has worth regardless of his productivity.

Burnout gives one the opportunity to learn this truth, and can be an experience of brokenness. In brokenness one learns to lay down the self and its abilities, and heed the directive, found in Matthew 16:24, to take up one's cross and follow the way of Life in Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:28 is all about God's promise to take every situation and work it into His plan for good in a person's life. With faith and belief that He will do this, a person

can rise again from despair, expectantly waiting for God to turn burnout from failure to blessing.

Conclusion

It would behoove every counselor or pastor to be aware of how the stresses of their profession can lead them to the experience of burnout, if they do not take precautions to prevent it. If they do find themselves in that unfortunate situation, they can find comfort in knowing that there is a way of recovery, a possibility of finding new visions and goals to help them rediscover a fulfilling career or ministry.

¹ Myron Rush, *Burnout* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1987), P.13

² Ibid, p. 33

³ _____, *Burnout in the Workplace* (Louisville, KY: Baptist Hospital East, 1998), P.1

⁴ Don Hawkins, Frank Minirth, Paul Meier, and Christ Thurman, *Before Burnout* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1990), P.16

⁵ Rush, *Burnout*, p. 60

⁶ Gerald Corey, Marianne Schneider Corey, and Patrick Callanan, *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions*, Sixth Edition (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2003, p.61

⁷ Hawkins, Minirth, Meier, and Thurman, *Before Burnout*, p.70

⁸ Cory, Corey and Callanan, *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Profession*, p.60

⁹ Ibid, p.60

¹⁰ _____, *Burnout in the Workplace*, p.2

¹¹ Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson, *Career Burnout Causes and Cures*, (New York, NY: A Division of McMillan, Inc., 1988), p.91

¹² Cory, Corey and Callanan, *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Profession*, p.62

¹³ John A. Sanford, *Ministry Burnout* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), p.86

¹⁴ Malcolm Smith, *Spiritual Burnout* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, Inc., 1988). P. 107

¹⁵ _____, *Pastoral Counseling: Changing Expectations* (Springfield, MO: The General Council of the Assemblies of God, 2004), p.1

¹⁶ Ibid, p.1

¹⁷ Pines and Aronson, *Career Burnout Causes and Cures*, p.11

¹⁸ Brooks Faulkner, *Burnout in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), p.129

¹⁹ Rush, *Burnout*, p.108-111

²⁰ Frank Minirth, Don Hawkins, Paul Meier and Richard Flourney, *How to Beat Burnout* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), p.149

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Brief biography for Mary Stinson

Born in Florida and currently residing in Atlanta GA, I am employed as a telephone counselor at Charles Stanley's In Touch Ministries.

I received training as an Exchanged Life counselor at First Baptist Atlanta, and then earned a Master of Arts degree in Christian Counseling at Luther Rice University. I am licensed in special ministry, which enables me to pursue training as a chaplain. My area of interest as a chaplain is in ministering to persons in hospice.

Prior to returning to the faith of my childhood, I was married and divorced. My two children, Nathalie and Daniel are the delight of my life. My daughter is engaged to be married, and my son is enjoying a dual career in both music ministry and jazz performance.