



3 Questions for Those on the Brink of Burnout

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Prolonged Ministry Stress or Burnout?

All of us experience episodes in life when we have to push hard for a longer time than we would like. Some high-stakes situations demand our ongoing energy and attention. That said, most people cannot sustain this for months on end. Even branches of the U.S. military recognize that soldiers serving in hostile fire or imminent danger zones are entitled to paid-leave time that is comparable to their time in combat. When stress is prolonged, the human psyche reaches a saturation point. That saturation point is commonly described as "burn out."

If you are a ministry leader you carry the pain, tension, and messiness of the people you lead. But sometimes it gets to be too much. How would you answer these three questions?

- Do you find it hard to wind down, yet are often dogged by a "don't-care" attitude?
- Do you easily overreact, get agitated or angry, yet feel overwhelmed or helpless?
- Do you fear that you are inadequate for the job, and have become cynical about ministry, the people, and about life itself?

One Leader's Story

Carlton answered "yes" to these questions. He didn't like thinking and feeling this way. He was willing to make changes, but he had been here before—five years ago. However, with the most recent set of circumstances, he became discouraged about lasting change. Even though over the past five years he had made some attempts to eat better, get a bit more sleep, and exercise (all of which are important for recovery from burnout), he had drifted back. What would make the difference this time? Thankfully Carlton got the help he needed.

Start Here . . .

If it's true that, Jesus came to this world so that His disciples "may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), then burnout is NOT a place to remain. How can you get unstuck from burnout and avoid going there--again?

While physical self-care is certainly an important place to start, there's a foundational matter that is even more crucial. We shall return to this in a moment, but first consider the following.

With which of these do you most identify? Which one will you choose to start living life more abundantly?

Make sleep a priority. Sleep specialists are now telling us that we need at least eight hours of sleep. Some of us need more. Tom was amazed that after only two weeks of getting eight hours of sleep each night, he could think much clearly, more creatively, and felt more confident about hearing from the Lord.

Get appropriate exercise. You don't need to be in Olympic shape to be used by God in the lives of others. Mark found that a twenty-minute walk every day helped him to feel better physically and changed his prayer life.

Conscious eating. If you make just one simple change for healthier eating each month (e.g., drinking one more glass of water per day, reducing sugar intake, adding a vegetable a day), in a year you'll be amazed at how much this will help you.

Journaling. This time-honored practice is helpful for tracing patterns that have developed in our thinking and feeling.

Burnout: The Core Cause

Often burnout is brought on by factors outside us: too much work for too long, personal loss(es), an unhealthy work environment, a lack of organizational support, adversarial people/forces in our lives, a low salary, a lack of resources to perform our responsibilities, or a combination of several of these.

While all these can be causes for burnout, we have often seen something WITHIN leaders that is at the root of their ministry weariness.

Many spiritual directors and counselors have traced the root of burnout to A DIVIDED HEART. A divided heart? "Wait," you might be saying, "as best as I can discern, I seem to know my heart well enough to know that my fatigue is due more to external factors."

While this may be our feeling and belief, we often need others to help us know our hearts more fully and recalibrate our hearts to reality. Leaders regularly deal with conflict, betrayal, exhaustion, setbacks, and isolation. And when weary, we are limited in our ability to look at ourselves. A two-week vacation, for example, is certainly helpful, but usually not enough.

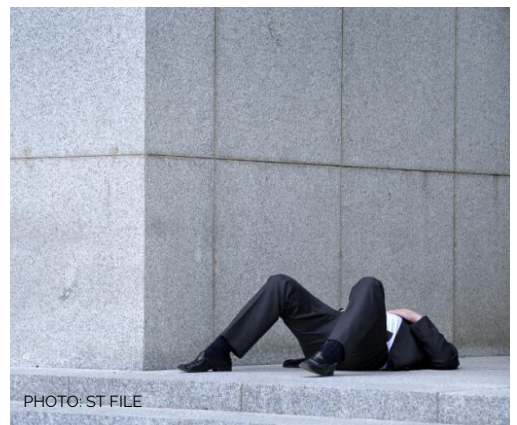


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Sometimes the features of our divided hearts are not always apparent or not taken seriously enough. They can include and are no limited to . . .

- Pride that leads to overconfidence and overcommitment
- Lack of boundaries
- People pleasing
- Willingly or unwillingly collaborating with ministry cultures that are unhealthy
- Our unrealistic expectations of ministry outcomes
- Our inability to control ministry outcomes
- Our attitudes of entitlement
- Functioning for too long in areas of secondary gifting or strength
- Forgetting or not knowing our truest identity

We need help from outside. We need someone who will graciously and kindly disrupt what we have come to believe is normal, someone who can do it the way Jesus speaks to us. We need relationships that are saturated with courage, kindness, and gracious discernment.

Rarely is one conversation all that is necessary. We have found that it can take a series of conversations before a heart can begin movement toward wholeness. Our desire is that you will find some journeying partners who will walk with you in the process of acquiring an undivided heart.

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"Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name" (Ps. 86:11) (ESV).



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