Psychologist Herbert Freundenberger popularized the term “burnout” in 1980 and called it “the high price of aiming to high.” Since then it has become a common term for describing the state of mental, physical, and spiritual exhaustion that is result of prolonged stress.

According to one psychologist, burnout is “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind.” Those suffering from burnout often show three symptoms. (1) Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted; victims frequently cannot face the future, and they detach themselves from interpersonal closeness. Sensing themselves to be drained emotionally, they also suffer spiritually. (2) The detachment leads to depersonalization – looking down on people, reacting negatively to them, and developing an attitude of “I wish people would go away and leave me alone.” (3) That attitude toward others, coupled with a feeling of emotional exhaustion, results in a reduction in personal accomplishment. A feeling of diminishing accomplishment leads to stronger feeling of personal inadequacy, which further reduces accomplishment. And thus the vicious cycle of burnout is established.

Two types of people have been found to be most susceptible to burnout. Those in the caring professions are driven by real, and often overwhelming needs. Frustrations and stress build when continual genuine care, and even successful ministry, leads not to less ministry and needs but more. For the average person, if they have 4 or 5 things to do, and get a few done, then they feel good and sleep well. But for the obsessive-compulsive, if they have 20 things to do and get 19 done, they go to bed feeling bad.

One example of “burnout” may be seen in 1 Kings 19:4 when Elijah sat down under a tree and prayed that he might die, saying “I have had enough, Lord!” Some people in ministry who “have had enough,” move toward “burnout.” When Elijah had his bout with burnout, God ministered to him. The Father let him get some rest, fed him, reassured him, let him know he was not alone, and gave him a special task to accomplish. The same is available for us from the Father – these same principles can work to pull good, caring people out of burnout!

Protecting against burnout

In order to protect against burnout or move out of possible burnout, the following general actions are helpful:

- Find your self-worth through God rather than through production.
- Learn to prioritize and set realistic limits on demands.
- Take time for personal spiritual renewal - look at your life from an eternal perspective.
- Establish good health habits of diet, exercise, and rest.
- Learn to relax with activities that are relaxing for you.
- Accept limitations and work in areas of strength.
- Improve ministry skills when necessary.
- Maintain an emotional support group including true friends and your spouse.
- Keep a sense of humor about life, and especially about yourself.
Taking care of yourself – emotionally

An important principle to improving the emotional part of your life is this: proper actions lead to proper emotions. It is a proven fact that ACTIONS LEAD TO EMOTIONS. Begin taking some of those needed steps to revitalize your life, to begin to reverse that burnout spiral, whether you feel like doing them or not. The actions of doing the right thing will be followed by the desire to do them.

Here are a number of steps you can take personally to help reverse the emotional part of your burnout:

1. **Have you laughed several times today?** Laughter is a sign of good mental health. Medical studies indicate that laughter releases chemical called endorphins in the brain, promoting feelings of well-being.

2. **What percentage of your self-talk was positive?** Each of us talks to ourselves. Make an effort of be more positive, kind, and forgiving in the things you say to yourself.

3. **What amount of time this past week did you spend living in the present?** Jesus says in Matthew 6:34, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Notice what is ‘right’ now. Learn to deal with your past,

4. **Did you do something three times this week for relaxation and recreation?** It is worthwhile to plan, at least three times a week, activities specifically dedicated to enjoyable recreation, something not connected your usual line of work. Try some recreational and relaxing activities other than your usual. That is particularly true of anyone who views a lot of television or DVDs. Watching make-believe, or even someone else’s real life, is never a substitute for experiencing life yourself. Instead, shoot some baskets with your kids, take a walk with your wife, or play some table games with friends, for fun.

5. **How often were you stuck on “Plan A” this month?** “Plan A” is your routine schedule. If it is leading to frequent bouts with burnout, it may be time to form a “Plan B.” When developing Plan B, set aside specific time to invest in time with the Father. Include one meaningful social contact each day, by phone if necessary. Develop a daily routine that includes some variety and is more personally satisfying, if only in the little things. People who are more emotionally oriented tend to become bored more quickly. Variety in daily life helps that. Plan B should also include refreshing days off. Scripture indicates that the Sabbath should include refreshment, no work, celebration of our relationship with God, assembling together with Christian friends and with relatives, and enjoying life.

6. **Is the sexual part of your life healthy?** Make sure the sexual part of your life is healthy. For singles, maintaining sexual purity and learning how to relate to others in close friendships alleviates stress and burnout. For married couples, maintaining marital romance, and cultivating the sparkle of an intimate relationship can add zest to life and help prevent burnout.
7. **Have you done something good – physically, psychologically, or spiritually – for one person this week?** The selfish spirit of this age can be mentally unhealthy. The apostle Paul expresses his concern for an “others orientation” in Philippians 2:4 with his words “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” We are emotionally enriched when we invest ourselves in others.

8. **Have you forgiven the last three people who offended you?** Forgiveness is important because, if we don’t forgive others, we tend to turn our anger inward, which results in bitterness and then in depression.

9. **Did you talk with a close friend or your spouse two times this week about your feelings?** It is important to stop all your “doing” and share both the good and bad events of the day. Men generally tend to hide their feelings more than women and may need to work specifically at that.

10. **Did you share your burdens with a friend this week?** Most people who experience burnout do not have even one friend to whom they are close enough to share their personal feelings and still feel accepted and loved. Of course, it you are already in burnout, building a friendship may be hard to do, although if someone offers friendship and unconditional understanding at this time, don’t rebuff it. It’s what you need, even if you have little emotional energy to offer them anything in return. Allow others to give friendship to you. If you still have the emotional energy, start looking for friends, ones who will be good listeners, who will be loyal, and who will care, but also who will be willing to give a viewpoint different from yours if they feel it is needed.

11. **Did you do at least one specific thing this week to become closer to a relative?** Each of us has a family heritage, one that has tremendous bearing on our mental health. Doing at least one thing per week – with extended family members can build closer relationships and foster emotional health.

If you believe you might be in “burnout,” you can benefit from memorizing or carrying with you this simple outline as a check on how you are doing.

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<th>A Method to Escape Burnout</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Use time wisely.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Keep priorities straight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Relax more.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Realize I am someone in Christ.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Watch perfectionist tendencies.</td>
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<td>• Focus on the true meaning of life.</td>
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