



A Quick Reference and Lesson Guide

Dealing with Burnout

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1 Scenarios and Assessment

The Japanese have created a term to describe a death-by-overwork syndrome: *karoshi*. This is where seemingly healthy workers drop dead at their desks. However, the Japanese do not lead the world in work hours; the United States does. Harvard economist Juliet Schor writes in *The Overworked American* that the average US worker has added the equivalent of one month to the work year (Swenson, 1998). The Japanese call it *karoshi*, but in the United States, it is called *burnout*. Stress that becomes distress, depression, a desire to isolate oneself, a strong feeling of ineffectiveness, and “wanting out,” are strong undercurrents that constantly swirl inside an individual facing burnout. Christians are not exempt.

Scenarios/Case Studies

A. Scenario #1

1. He exercises four times a week, tries to eat healthy, does daily devotions, manages time fairly well, spends time with his family consistently, and lives an overall disciplined life. While playing in a softball tournament with his sons, he experienced what he thought at the time was a heart attack. Extreme dizziness, rapid heart rate, throat constriction, and shortness of breath brought him almost to his knees. His dad died at forty-seven. He was forty-nine, so he thought at least he outlived the curse by two years. After an angiography test to check for internal heart blockage, a stress test, and an echocardiogram, the doctor said, “I am shocked. Your heart looks fabulous. I was sure with your family history and your symptoms it was going to be much worse. Are you under stress?” It was all too surreal for the forty-nine-year-old, fit, disciplined, type A minister and leader. He had thought this only happened to other people.

B. Scenario #2

1. The fire fell as Elijah prayed and preached; however, the mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion took a toll on him after the fire. Jezebel did not like her kingdom being destroyed and sought to destroy the man of God. Yes, spiritual warfare significantly contributes to burnout. Elijah was in a place of distress and burnout: “But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers” (I Kings 19:4). The fire fell on Sunday, and he felt like a failure and wanted to die on Monday. All the problems are never solved.

C. Scenario #3

1. Her husband is passive and will not discipline the kids. The roles are reversed in the marriage, and she assumes the role of primary disciplinarian. The dad skips church often, and the mom is the super responsible one who is juggling work, parenting, and spiritual leadership. She starts feeling trapped and deeply resentful. She grows weary

and loses the energy to hold everything together. Her stress turns to distress which leads to depression. With the depletion of energy, with the thoughts of nothing ever changing, and with her husband's neglect of leadership in the family, she withdraws and isolates herself.

Definitions and Key Thoughts

- A. In the language of physics, *stress* is a term used by engineers to describe both the external force applied to a material and the internal strength required to resist the pressure. These combined stresses will cause the material to change size and shape (Hunt, 2006).
 1. Stressors are the external forces in life that apply pressure. The reaction to the external force can be positive or negative depending on one's mental response.
 - a) How is the event interpreted?
 - b) How is the pressure shaping and changing you?
 - c) What is your yield point?
 - d) What is your failure point?
 2. Failure to recognize personal yield points and failure points will lead to distress.
- B. Distress is a word used more than one hundred times in the Bible to describe negative stress. It most often pictures the negative results that pressure and pain can have on the heart.
 1. "Then they said to one another, 'In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.'" (Genesis 42:21, ESV)
- C. The four stages of stress offered by June Hunt in *Hope For the Heart Biblical Counseling Library* (2006) provide insight into warning signs which, if not detected and corrected, can lead to burnout.
 1. **Stage 1: Green Light-Positive Stress**
 - a) Motivation to move responsibly
 2. **Stage 2: No Light-Insufficient Stress**
 - a) No motivation to move responsibly
 3. **Stage 3: Yellow Light-Negative Stress**
 - a) Motivational warning signs to slow down movement
 4. **Stage 4: Red Light-Burnout**
 - a) Movement is stopped and repair is necessary.
- D. In *It's All In Your Head*, Jean Stine and Camden Benares wrote:

"Stress-related conditions cost the United States \$10 billion to \$20 billion annually in cost productivity. And they have been indicted as a leading killer of men and women. Even a brief list of the psychological and physical problems stress causes reads like a who's who of modern illness: hypertension, heart disease, strokes, aneurysms, ulcers, cancer, impotence, frigidity, migraines, backaches, asthma, bronchitis, digestive disorders, skin problems, sleep disorders, depression, bulimia, anorexia, anxiety, crying spells, paranoia, addiction, chronic anger, suicide, domestic violence, panic."

Assessment (Interview)

- A. An individual may be facing burnout if he:
 1. Is constantly angry or irritable with spouse, kids, co-workers, supervisors, and church leadership.

- a) Resents the happiness others are experiencing.
 - b) Complains and finds fault with everything and everyone.
 - c) Has little energy to do things previously enjoyed.
 - d) Believes he cannot forgive or does not desire to forgive.
 2. Dreads going to work or dealing with people; experiences a loss of joy.
 - a) Feels ministry or work is a burden.
 - b) Is upset by the little problems and or annoyed by small things.
 - c) Feels helpless and fears constantly being under a microscope.
 - d) Avoids even small decisions and has difficulty thinking rationally.
 3. Wants to throw in the towel and quit.
 - a) Makes excuses for not doing his job, not showing up, and so on.
 - b) Does not see problems being solved anytime soon.
 - c) Cannot live up to all the expectations.
 - d) Keeps saying things like, "I am just tired."
 - e) Cannot sleep but feels as though he does not want to get out of bed.
 4. Doubts God.
 - a) Neglects personal prayer life and time in the Word.
 - b) Feels alone.
 - c) Thinks of isolation as an escape.
 - d) Is more vulnerable to temptation to engage in immoral actions.
- B. Based on knowledge of these symptoms, the following questions are recommended:
1. When did the feeling of burnout begin?
 2. Describe what you believe were trigger events that you ignored or are ignoring now.
 3. Have you committed sin in order to seek relief from the feeling of burnout?
 4. What unresolved problems need to be addressed right away?
 5. What do you need to stop doing now in order to create boundaries and margins that will offer rest?
 6. Is there anyone you need to forgive?
 7. Are there losses, changes, or transitions that you have not grieved over?
 8. How are these external pressures shaping or changing you into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28–29)?
 9. What boundaries and margins have you established?
 10. What does your daily devotion look like?
 11. Can you hear the voice of God clearly? Are you facing stress distortions that blur God's voice? If so, list all of them now.
 12. Are you taking care of your body with proper exercise, diet, and rest?
 13. Are you numbing yourself with superficial substitutes such as excessive media, out of balance hobbies, and too much social media?

2 Critique and Counsel

Biblical Insight

A. Elijah allowed a fatal confidence to build a spiritual stronghold in his mind (I Kings 19:1–3).

1. Fatal confidence is believing the voice of the enemy instead of the voice of God. By listening to the lie, a false confidence is built in the mind. A belief develops that nothing is going to get better and there is no use in continuing. Elijah lost confidence in the power of God to see him through.

B. Elijah had reached the end of his own resources and felt like a failure (I Kings 19:4).

1. When there is a lack of spiritual clarity and realistic assessment, the “I” syndrome takes over. Elijah used *I* in a negative context on a consistent basis: “I have had enough, I am no better than my fathers, and I alone am left.” Exhaustion, fatigue, and hopelessness led to a low self-image of being no better than others.

C. Elijah was tired, exhausted, and alone (I Kings 19:5).

1. Elijah was not by himself, but he was experiencing loneliness. This often occurs when we feel misunderstood. Moses experienced the same feelings, “I alone am not able to carry all these people, because it is too burdensome for me. So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once” (Numbers 11:14–15, NASB). Loneliness is a feeling and it will pass if processed biblically. Sinful decisions must be avoided during this time of burnout.
2. Loneliness has physiological components that must be identified and addressed. “Serotonin is a chemical like an endorphin. It’s a natural, feel-good hormone. It replenishes during times of rest and then fuels you while you’re working. If, however, you continue to drive yourself without replenishing, your store of serotonin will be depleted. As a substitute, your body will be forced to replace the serotonin with adrenaline. The problem is that adrenaline is designed for emergency use only. It’s like those doors in a restaurant that when opened cause an alarm to sound. Should you continue to run on adrenaline, it will destroy your system. You will burn out sooner on the inside than you’re able to see on the outside” (Cordeiro, 2009).

D. Elijah left his servant and got alone with God (I Kings 19:3–4).

1. Prayer and personal devotion are just that, devotion, not emotion. Never allow negative emotions to control your devotion time with God. Even when you feel numb and you tell yourself it’s not doing any good, spend time with Him daily.
2. Spiritual transformation was prescribed by the divine visitation. We must be careful not to compartmentalize spiritual transformation, by limiting it to our initial salvation experience. The Bible and personal devotion are not about receiving information as much as about being spiritually transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1–2).

3. Diet and proper sleep were prescribed as Elijah lay under the juniper tree. The first thing the angel said was “Eat something.” That’s profound, isn’t it? Remember Elijah was a prophet. I’m sure he wanted a deep, earth-shattering, prophetic word to fix everything, yet the angel simply instructed him to eat right.
 - a) Feeding and hydrating the body was so important that the angel provided the needed food and water. Because the work this prophet had to do for the Kingdom was not finished and because he was facing burnout, the angel had a life strategy.
 4. Boundaries and margins were prescribed by the angel, and he made sure Elijah slept again. This resting period, along with a proper diet, gave him the strength to go on for forty days. Please notice the balance between the natural disciplines of life and the supernatural strength that came from a divine visitation.
 5. Elijah then went into a cave and had a talk with God. Prior to this time of rest, he may not have been in any shape to hear from God because of stress distortions. In this time of rest and refocus, he heard a still small voice from God. Interestingly enough, a needed rest and a needed word from God revived the prophet, and he finished his course.
- E. Elijah and Moses are recognized as heroes in the Old Testament, and they are seen with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:1–5). Out of all the biblical giants such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, Jesus selected Elijah and Moses to be on the mountain with Him. What do these two men have in common? Both faced burnout and made it through.

Wise Counsel

- A. When we allow our lives to get out of balance, we experience mistrust, anger, frustration, hurt, doubt, and fear, all of which lead to disillusionment and “wanting out.”
- B. In Genesis, God rested from all His work. In Exodus, the Sabbath rest was implemented as a law so man could have time to rest and space to heal. In Leviticus, the land rested every seventh year. This protected it from being overworked which resulted in under-production. Ironically enough, even the land is not at its best when pushed beyond its limits. In the church age, the Holy Spirit has been poured out as our spiritual rest (Isaiah 28:10–12; Romans 14:17). After the Second Coming, we will enter the Millennium, a one-thousand-year period of rest. Rest is important to God and His creative purposes.

Proper rest brings a needed rhythm. “Rhythm is a dynamic pattern. When functioning properly our heart beats to a certain cadence. When that cadence is disrupted, our heart is at risk. A cardiologist will prescribe medication or maybe even a surgical implant to establish this rhythm” (Wilson & Hoffman, 2007). It becomes a matter of life and death. When we fight God’s rhythmic pattern, burnout is ahead.

3

Application and Prayer

Application

- A. Allow the voice of wise counsel to speak candidly.
 - 1. “And Moses' father in law said unto him, The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone (Exodus 18:17–18; emphasis added).
- B. Have enough Humility to listen now.
 - 1. “Hearken now unto my voice, I will give thee counsel, and God shall be with thee: Be thou for the people to God-ward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God” (Exodus 18:19; emphasis added).
- C. Have the faith to obey and know God will validate.
 - 1. “God shall be with thee” (Exodus 18:19).
- D. Lead by modeling godliness and let others walk on their own. Release perfectionism.
 - 1. “Thou shall teach...and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do” (Exodus 18:20; emphasis added).
- E. Don't solve all the problems. Lead them to God and let them do the work.
 - 1. “Teach them...and... shew them...the work that they must do” (Exodus 18:20).
- F. Empower those you can trust. Moreover, thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens” (Exodus 18:21).
- G. Discern, relinquish, and rest.
 - 1. “And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee” (Exodus 18:22).
 - 2. Discern what leaders who answer to you are capable of doing. Don't assign them responsibilities that should be yours; this could overwhelm them and lead to problems for the people and the leader.
 - 3. Relinquish power to them and let them make decisions within the sphere of their ability.
 - 4. Communicate to them that they must bring anything to you that is outside their area of responsibility. By doing this your load will be made lighter, and you will have rest.
- H. Rejoice Together
 - 1. “They shall bear the burden with thee” (Exodus 18:22).
 - 2. When God brings victory through shared burdens, the song of rejoicing is always sweeter. Be sure to worship together.
- I. Obey God, finish strong, and live in peace.
 - 1. “If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace” (Exodus 18:23).

2. When Moses obeyed God, (the voice of God came through Jethro), he had strength to finish strong in the ministry, and the people he led found their place in the Kingdom and functioned in the peace of God.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for _____ having the wisdom and courage to seek help and support concerning the symptoms of burnout (he/she/they) are facing. Father, You have not only been present with us in this meeting today, but You have walked beside _____ every step of the way through this process and You know the struggles (he/she/they) are facing. We pray for peace over minds and hearts right now and ask You to do what no other can do for _____ right now. We plead Your blood over hearts and minds. Guide them through this season of life and let them feel Your peace once again. In the name of Jesus we pray all of this. Amen.

4 Recommended Resources

- Cordeiro, W. (2009). *Leading on empty: Refilling your tank and renewing your passion*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers.
- Hunt, J. (2006). *Hope for the heart biblical counseling library*. Peabody, MA: Aspire Press.
- Swenson, R. A. (1998). *The overload syndrome: Learning to live within your limits*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group.
- Turner, J.J. (2011). *Preventing ministry burnout*. McDonough, GA: Jeremiah Institute.
- Warwick, D. (1989). *How to handle stress*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group.
- Wilson, M. T. & Hoffman, B. (2007). *Preventing ministry failure: A ShepherdCare guide for pastors, ministers, and other caregivers*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

5 Taking it to the Church

“Going from Burnout to Breakthrough”

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“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1–2).

Burnout is dark and blinding, and this demands a breakthrough of incomprehensible light. Burnout is deceptive and destructive, and this demands a breakthrough of penetrating truth. Burnout is defeating and disheartening, and this demands undeniable victory. If we handle burnout incorrectly, it can become a tool in the hands of Satan. He wants burnout to be the final chapter in your life. He wants you to believe you will never escape the chapter of no hope, no escape, no peace, no joy, no victory, and no future. Recognize you may feel lonely, but you are not alone—a great cloud of witnesses had run this race, with its twists and turns, long before we came along. Just as Moses and Elijah found themselves on a mountain with Jesus talking to the disciples and offering encouragement beyond burnout, there is a mountain called breakthrough to which you are going! Why can this be said with undeniable confidence? Jesus is the finisher of the book of your life.

Jesus is the author and the finisher of our faith. When a story is written, and another author reads the story but wants to edit it to fit his vision for the ending, the author can purchase the story and assume buying rights. As the new owner, he has the authority to rewrite the story. Jesus purchased the buying rights to edit and finish the story. You who are facing burnout and think that is the last chapter of your book, the author is also the finisher, and the last chapter is called “Breakthrough.” Blood purchased the rights to edit and finish your story. When Jesus hung on the cross, He cried, “It is finished” (John 19:30). What was finished? The final payment of the act of redemption. Through His blood Jesus secured the authority to finish your story! Satan will not write the last chapter and cause things to end in burnout. He is not your owner and he does not have buying rights over you, your family, your ministry, or your calling.

Calvary provided a mental and emotional breakthrough. “And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center” (John 19:17–18, NKJV).

In his commentary, David Guzik (2018) states:

“In 1968 archeologists discovered the remains of a man crucified in Jesus’ era. The victim was nailed to the cross in a sitting position, both legs over sideways, with nails penetrating the sides of both feet just below the heel. The arms were stretched out, each stabbed by a nail in the forearm. Dr. Nico Hass, Hebrew University anatomy professor, described it as a ‘compulsive position, a difficult and unnatural posture,’ meant to increase the agony of the sufferer.”

Jesus said, “It is finished! The chapter of suffering, depression, burnout, the unnatural posture, the compulsive position is finished. The new author is rewriting the story!”

Determine to live in your breakthrough. As the author and finisher, Jesus will write new things in your life and ministry. There will be times you think the devil is going to have the final say and you will not see beyond the stress distortions. It’s a lie! The author of confusion must submit to the author of life.

To the pastor, the pastor’s wife, the leader, the saint of God, and the child of God, it is not the will of God for the last chapter to be “Burnout.” Jesus Christ is the finisher, and He will not quit on you until the final exclamation mark is placed behind the final statement in the “Breakthrough” chapter. Please remember the words of Paul written from a prisoner’s pen: “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6, NKJV). Sounds like a breakthrough! This verse was written by the same man that had experienced burnout:

“Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me” (II Corinthians 11:23–32, NKJV).

Those experiences would likely cause anyone to burn out! But, that was not the final chapter. Listen to the next verse authored by the finisher: “But I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands” (II Corinthians 11:33, NKJV). Never argue with how God provides the breakthrough. You may have to get in a basket and go through a window to leave burnout behind.