

# DEALING WITH BURNOUT

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## Some Observations

Burnout is very common, especially among executive directors working solo or nearly so. It takes a huge toll on those individuals (stress, depression, fatigue, panic, disrupted relationships, failure to grow in one's job) and on organizations, particularly when they lose capable employees and have to hire new ones.

I've observed two types of transformational leaders in small nonprofit organizations:

- a) The "hyperactive," a dynamic, charismatic individual who makes a whole lot happen very quickly. Works ungodly number of hours, is thinking of the job 24/7, brings a lot of energy into the organization. This kind of leader can be good for startups, turnarounds, rescues, and big projects. Change is dramatic; organization gets a lot done very quickly. Wants to be appreciated—and is!
- b) The "steady," leader with a more relaxed style, works reasonable hours, doesn't appear to be doing much because changes are slower and sometimes more subtle. Is good at delegating or just not taking on too much. Respects work-life boundaries. Not dependent on external validation—has confidence in own abilities and understands that progress is incremental. At the end of the day, has achieved as much or more as the hyperactive leader.

Our temperaments, emotional needs, and functional/dysfunctional patterns of behavior all contribute to our predisposition to burnout. Burnout is NOT our fault—but how we react to pressure stressful situations and pressure may make us more susceptible.

Is burnout more common among women? Maybe. In my day (born in 1950s), women were socialized to make everyone happy, rescue people, fix problems, and not complain. These tendencies may contribute to burnout susceptibility.

## What to Do About It?

- 1) Recognize your burnout as a crisis and take responsibility for dealing with it.
  - You are the most important person in your organization—if you become dysfunctional, the whole organization becomes dysfunctional (or else they fire you)
  - You much an asset as any CE or preserve—and just as deserving of conservation (maybe more so)
- 2) Ask for help: "I think I'm in imminent danger of burning out and I need your help."
  - Supervisor, board member: may need to develop more realistic job description, a reasonable workplan, better ordering of priorities.
  - Peers/colleagues: may help you understand that you're taking on too much and can help you put things into perspective.

- Spouses? Maybe. But recognize that your spouse or partner is living with your burnout issues too and may not be the greatest person to help. Your burnout affects everyone you live with.
- Therapist (can help you deal with catching-people-jumping-from-burning-buildings syndrome, issues with perfectionism, low self-esteem, depression, dysfunctional relationship patterns, all of which can all contribute to burnout)

### 3) Adjust your expectations

- Prioritize. If you can only do 5 out of 10 things, figure out which 5 to drop or defer and let them go. Better to do 5 things well than 10 things poorly.
- Do what's important—not just what is urgent. If you focus your energies only on urgent matters, you'll never get to the important ones.
- Remember that perfection is not attainable.
- Keep perspective. A land trust is not a hospital emergency room. Nobody dies if the CE doesn't close by December 31, if the newsletter is late or filled with typos, if the workplan needs adjusting.

4) Ask for feedback. You may actually be doing much better than you think you are. And even negative feedback is a gift—because now you have a great basis for asking for help.

5) Make time for exercise (especially outside), no matter what.

6) Schedule time to do something you really enjoy each week at work—even if it's not high priority. Spending an hour or two doing something that makes you feel good will help you be more productive during the other hours.

7) Find something new to get excited about

- Learn a new skill on the job
- Take a course/lessons
- Volunteer for something that makes you forget yourself for awhile

8) Spend time with people who are not connected with your job. And try not to talk about it with them.

9) If all else fails, update your resume and start looking for something else—it truly may BE an impossible job. No job is worth wrecking your life for.

Online quiz: <http://www.mindtools.com/stress/Brn/BurnoutSelfTest.htm>

Accompanying article: <http://www.mindtools.com/stress/Brn/AvoidBurnout.htm>

Heidi likes these tips: <http://fearlessstories.com/magazine/how-to-tackle-overwhelm/>

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