The author examines professional burn-out, a condition of emotional exhaustion resulting from stress; the condition is most prevalent in individuals in the "helping professions." The author discusses both external and internal causes of burn-out, and offers suggestions for managing stress.

- Do you feel there are far too many demands placed upon you? Far too many interruptions? Far too many details that are taking all your energy?
- When you awaken each morning, does it feel like Monday? Are there times when you honestly wish you could just "call in sick" and not report for work that day?
- Does your relationship with your friends leave much to be desired?
- Can you not wait until Friday, and when it arrives, do you ask yourself "Is that all there is?"

A "yes" to all of these questions does not mean you have a problem, but perhaps in the extreme, they may be indices of burn-out.

History of burn-out

It has been only within the past five years that the subject of burn-out began to appear in the literature, and now the topic has surfaced within most professional journals. In fact, one of the earlier references on the subject appeared in the professional periodical, Nursing 78 in an article entitled, "Burn-out: The Professional Hazard You Face in Nursing." However, it was not until the writings of Dr. Herbert Freudenberger appeared that professions were alerted to this phenomenon, which now appears to be "spreading" throughout institutions "like a match burning to an ember."

Freudenberger was a practicing psychoanalyst who operated a free clinic in the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco during the 1960s. He gave much of himself without seeing positive results; his idealism met with frustration and defeat, and there was never an end to the numerous problems he dealt with daily. Eventually, this led to physical and emotional exhaustion which he later diagnosed as burn-out.

What is burn-out? A burned-out person is an individual in a state of fatigue and frustration when a job, a cause, a way of life, or a relationship fails to produce the expected reward.

Several other writers, including Kahn, Maslach, Truch, and Edelwich and Brodsky tend to agree in principle with the stated definition that emotional exhaustion is burn-out, and stress resulting from interpersonal contact is central to its cause.

Symptoms of burn-out

Burn-out is a progressive condition whereby there is a loss of idealism, energy, and purpose.

It is generally the rule that the person most likely to burn-out is an idealistic individual who...
wants to see changes in the system. These individuals have dedicated themselves to a career of helping others only to find that their efforts and dedication do not produce the expected results. These are individuals who have a high need to achieve—persons whom their supervisors can always count on to fulfill the impossible. A person such as this always seems to find time to do just a little more. Examples with recorded case histories include the professional careers of doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, and mental health workers, all of whom are prime candidates for burn-out.

It might be stated that anyone who has direct and intensive interpersonal contact with people and assumes a helping role can be expected to be a candidate for burn-out. That is, of course, if the person is not willing to recognize burn-out's course of action and do something about it. There are exceptions however, such as happy-go-lucky persons who never let events bother them, and those who are flexible and able to tolerate ambiguity.

When trouble does set in, it is usually the result of over-commitment, over-dedication, or of being an overly zealous person. Such individuals with a high need to achieve are the very people that the system can ill afford to lose. For example, burn-out in the educational field alone is estimated to cost the public $3.5 billion annually. It is recognized that the longevity of a teacher before burn-out occurs is about 10 years; a lawyer working in poverty areas burns out after two years, and a psychiatric nurse working in a drug rehabilitation center over a five year period, would see a three-fold turnover of personnel.

For an example involving the anesthesia profession, one need only refer to a recent issue of Time magazine. A 40-year-old anesthesiologist began to experience one serious stressful event after another including marital problems which eventually led to divorce, an auto accident, drug addiction, and a faltering career. He attempted suicide. Fortunately, he was rescued and is now actively involved in a suicide prevention program in Los Angeles. His case serves to illustrate that the strain of medicine is felt most acutely after 10-15 years. Early signs of distress which he experienced included extra-marital affairs and physical upsets, including insomnia and diarrhea.

Not only, then, is professional burn-out psychologically and physically harmful to the person experiencing it but, according to Spaniol, it is also potentially harmful to others in one's personal work environment. Furthermore, it reduces the amount of energy one has available for creativity, excitement and caring.

It appears that the person most likely to experience burn-out is positively correlated to the type of individual one happens to be. That person is high-achieving, idealistic, charismatic, energetic, and impatient. Moderation does not describe this personality; burn-out candidates thrive on intensity.

The symptoms of burn-out include:

**Exhaustion:** A loss of energy, fatigue, and a feeling of weariness is perceived by Freudenberger to be the first distress signal. The true burn-out candidate has difficulty accepting this because he/she has a high energy level. A reaction to this stage of fatigue is to push even harder, thus placing greater demands on the self. The rationalization for this behavior is to say "I have been able to meet previous demands; therefore, all I have to do now is to exert more effort."

**Detachment** is a dynamic aspect the burn-out candidate employs to protect the ego. When he realizes that a standard is not met or is rejected, it hurts. Thus, to avoid psychological pain, the individual tends to separate himself from people and situations that cause the hurt. Again, the rationalization is to say, "It really did not matter and it was not important."

**Boredom and cynicism:** When you find that you are no longer the center of your relationships but on the peripheral instead, it is hard to remain interested. By not being recognized and receiving little or no positive feedback, the individual can become quite cynical and skeptical of those around him.

**Impatience and heightened irritability:** The burn-out candidate possesses a considerable reservoir of energy. However, tolerance of others is not one of his virtues. As the individual begins to falter, he becomes more impatient with the shortcomings of others.

**A sense of omnipotence:** Unlimited power, unlimited ability, and "believing that only I can do the task" are examples of a sense of omnipotence. This is not a healthy mental trait to exhibit, but the burn-out candidate really feels that he is the most capable to perform the work assignment.

**A suspicion of being unappreciated:** Here is an individual who has increased his effort to meet the task by arriving at work early and staying late. He now begins to resent his colleagues who leave early, and feelings of unappreciation surface. This dynamic symptom is consistent; unfortunately, it is also unhealthy.

**Paranoia:** If you are not accepted or appreciated, paranoia becomes a real threat to the ego. Feelings of mistreatment and of being unaccepted
only heighten the individual's sensitivity to his perception of the world around him.

**Disorientation:** Perhaps this is like suddenly awakening from a deep sleep and not being quite certain just where you are. You may be physically present, but mentally, your thoughts are far from the here and now. You are aware of the inattentiveness you exercise, and you begin to wonder if your superior detects the mental absenteeism. This tends to further heighten the individual's paranoia.

**Psychosomatic complaints** are real, whether they are of a lingering cold, excessive headaches, lower back pain or diarrhea.

**Depression:** The true burn-out victim will experience feelings of depression; however, these feelings are situationally oriented. At work, he may feel sad and despondent. Once removed from that stressful situation or structure, however, the depression dissipates. This expression of behavior is quite different from that of the truly depressed person whose depressed state pervades globally.

**Denial of feelings**

The true burn-out victim denies feeling hurt psychologically. This denial is accompanied by feelings of unacceptance, of not being appreciated and possibly, experiencing discomfort. The burn-out victim's reaction to these unpleasantries is to place himself at a distance. We block out others by not caring. Yet, caring was one of the original traits expressed for selecting a career in the helping professions. The burn-out victim, however, will deny these painful feelings, thus becoming further incongruent with the self.

If being tired signals the early symptoms of burn-out, it follows then that denial of the awareness of the feeling signals a more progressive state of the syndrome.

Thus, we see a charismatic, energetic person experiencing symptoms of burn-out, but denying the feeling that something is wrong. The behavior these individuals generally engage in is not dealing with the *causality factors*, but rather, focusing on behaviors that *hasten the syndrome*. This is because the burn-out candidate fails to accept personal ownership and responsibility for the problem. To counter the existing behavior, many cures are often attempted. To better understand the problem, it behooves us to observe such behavior.

An appropriate hypothesis is that the behavior a burn-out candidate experiences is most likely inappropriate, and if continued, will progressively hasten the exhaustive state. This person believes and is compelled to try newer experiences to restore the good feelings. There is a need to stimulate the senses and overcome this constant tiredness. The behavior "tryouts" are not experienced in moderation; because burn-out candidates thrive on intensity, they will push the limits.

Prior to developing the syndrome, the candidate probably could not have imagined the behavior that has become a part of his repertoire. In fact, this behavior is incongruent with his previous value system. For example, through extra-marital sexual relations, excessive drug use, excessive gambling, excessive drinking, and excessive physical activity, the candidate is doing everything in the extreme to find that "high," continually searching until it is found. The burn-out candidate becomes dedicated to a search for meaning through sensory experiences.

However, as Freudenberger stresses, disengaging, distancing, dulling, and deadening the senses will not solve the problem.

Edelwich and Brodsky, perceive the burn-out syndrome as progressing through four stages. First, there is *enthusiasm*. This highly motivated and enthusiastic person, who cannot possibly perceive that a problem associated with his chosen occupation exists (because of the desire to implement his training and make an important impression), now begins to have that zeal subside. This occurs because the energy expended is not returning sufficient personal satisfaction.

From *enthusiasm* to *stagnation*; he is slowing down and the long hours that once were accepted are now becoming an issue. The rewards are miniscule and the job turned out to be far from what was expected. To be stagnated is to be virtually at a dead end vocationally. This is followed by *frustration*.

The core of the burn-out is frustration. In the helping professions, we give of ourselves. We satisfy others' needs but find that perhaps our own personal needs are not being satisfied. The system is not meeting our expectations. Frustration, if not rationally handled, leads to *apathy*. A job is a job and that is all; it provides nothing else. You find yourself locked in, idealism has disappeared, and the dreams have faded. You go through the motions of the routine. Of course, as bleak as it all appears, it need not be that dismal. There is hope, but the work is primarily up to you.

**Recognizing burn-out**

Spaniol and Caputo have identified organizational signs and symptoms to which administrators may be alerted. As anesthetists, you may have observed these symptoms in your employment setting.
or know of a colleague who may be experiencing the process.

- **Increased absenteeism:** This is demonstrated through sick leave, personal days, personal holidays, lateness, less demonstrated commitment to work and a reluctance to participate.
- **Low level of enthusiasm:** There is a lack of excitement in the job; people feel sluggish. ("Oh God, not another stitch block.")
- **Quality of service declines:** Staff performance declines, there is less energy to perform, and you hear more complaints from staff members about everything in general.
- **Lacking focus:** Staff members complain about a lack of clear directions. They feel as though they are caught up in a constant crisis situation and cannot plan their work. They take frustration out on the supervisor by constantly complaining and criticizing the organization.
- **Lack of communication:** Communication is fragile at its best, but when burn-out occurs, the communication that has existed is now seriously sabotaged. Staff members may appear less open, may be less receptive to new ideas and may be less willing to acknowledge the accomplishments of or a job well done by fellow colleagues.

**More about stress**

Stress is a symptom of burn-out. Since detachment is not effective, Freudensonberger believes that the opposite, closeness, is the best cure. Before we can be close to someone else, however, we must not be afraid to be "close or be in touch with ourselves."2

As Maslow has written, one cannot engage in a mature, satisfying relationship until one knows who he or she is. Not knowing one's own needs, or failing to accurately communicate them, is a hindrance to securing the warmth and gratification that are the rewards of interpersonal relationships.

Society has placed so many shoulds and oughts upon us that by the time we play the many different roles demanded of us, (appealing to the expectations of others), we begin to lose a grip upon ourselves and what we believe. Therefore, one way of confronting this issue is to be realistic and rational. In essence, the greatest cause of your stress is you. We make ourselves unhappy, we upset ourselves, we teach ourselves to become neurotic. Therefore, that which is learned must be unlearned.

What then are the bases for this stress? Perhaps its etiology lies within the irrational beliefs we hold. For example, the burn-out candidate has accepted the belief that one must excel in every-

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**Characteristics of the stress-prone individual**

The following are basic characteristics of the stress-prone individual (Forbes)10:

- **A tendency to overplan each day:** an attempt to crowd too many tasks into the allotted time. As a result, the individual is always playing "catch-up" because he cannot meet the self-imposed, unrealistic goals. He will drive himself by taking on numerous tasks and will seek perfection.

- **Polyphasic thinking:** attempting to process more than one idea at a time. It is not unrealistic for the stress-prone individual to be eating, reading the paper, listening to music, and planning a morning work schedule. It is characteristic of this person to interrupt others by providing closure for their sentences. In doing so, he believes he is more efficient. In reality, it is counter-productive because the mind cannot process more than one piece of information or solve more than one problem at a time.

- **A need to win:** These individuals must win any and every activity in which they participate. It is the challenge, not the activity, that is the motivator. Whether it is golf, tennis, jogging, or a harmless game with their own children, they must win. They are workaholics. This desire to achieve at work could be a screen for other problems affecting their lives.
• A persistent desire for advancement or recognition: This person excels for the purpose of gaining recognition, and if not duly received, he becomes hostile. Desire for recognition pervades everything. Money often becomes symbolic of his achievement, although he does not enjoy the money because of his “hooked” manner of behaving.

• An inability to relax without feeling guilty: Stress-prone individuals are programmed to work, and work is all they do. They have not developed hobbies nor do they enjoy vacations or leisure time. Instead of enjoying relaxation, it becomes a source of stress.

• Impatience with delays and interruptions: They have little patience with people who are slow in completing their work assignments. They will more often than not interrupt or demonstrate how to do the assignment more efficiently. They find it difficult to observe, and will be exceptionally critical of the process.

• Involvement with multiple projects with many deadlines: Since stress-prone individuals have a high need to achieve, they will commit themselves to numerous projects at the same time. Quite often, this is self-defeating because they do not have adequate time to devote to their tasks, and the quality of work is thus inferior.

• A chronic sense of time urgency: Constantly in a struggle to meet deadlines, these individuals feel frustrated by all that has to be done in a short period of time if goals are to be met. Time itself is their nemesis. Time is their source of stress.

• An excessive competitive drive: This compulsion to overwork borders on neurotic behavior. Their drive goes beyond the normal healthy competitive role. They constantly compare themselves with a standard and strive to improve.

• A compulsion to work: They neglect all aspects of life except work. The drive to achieve is so strong that work becomes a cover-up for other problems affecting their lives.

Intervention strategies

What can be done to re-channel individuals who are potential burn-out candidates? One strategy might be a suggestion to return to school. By participating in continuing education programs, one can upgrade skills as well as seek new options.

Frustration is anger that the individual can channel to do something positive for both his own welfare and for his profession. This energy of discontent can become a motivator. We have to realize at times that the goal we eagerly seek is not always what we really expected. If need be, a career change might be beneficial.

When apathy arrives, the individual must accept reality and take the responsibility for his decisions. In practical terms, we have to accept the “givens” of the job, make a value judgment, and act upon it. The question needs to be asked, “Am I doing what I really want to do?” We need to understand the givens and learn to live with them. Once we have realistically accepted the givens, decision-making becomes more rational. Therefore, a significant personal strategy is dealing with the realities of the profession, accepting the givens, and then proceeding to go about doing something about your life.

This involves an awareness of self. We need to recognize what we do to our bodies and accept how we contribute to our own frustrations. Make contact with another person in the profession. Let that person know your wants, needs, feelings, and thoughts. Each individual is a unique person—so be in tune with yourself. Spaniol suggests that if you are going to have a stressful day, plan for it! Do something positive for yourself. Have a good breakfast even if your day starts at 6:00 a.m. Ask people for strokes. Shake hands with a friendly colleague and feel the nurture. Accept the compliments offered and reciprocate when the occasion arises.

Make a list of a few people you can contact by phone or in person everyday to whom you can share a thought or a feeling, and invite them to do the same. Think about the ways you get your support needs met.

Research reports that people who are happy and contented with their jobs outlive those who are discontented. For what it is worth, are you happy with your job? The burn-out candidate needs to learn to relax.

Today, there are voluminous books written on the topic. The classic, in my opinion, is Benson’s Relaxation Response. His thesis consists of four basic elements:

1. A quiet environment.
2. An object to dwell upon.
3. A passive attitude.
4. A comfortable position.

There is a need to decompress, to separate your work from your home life. As an example, this could involve stopping off at the local pub, which so many individuals do daily; however, this procedure generally creates additional problems. Instead, work off your stress by engaging in physical activity such as walking, jogging, playing handball, racquetball, bicycling, or cross-country
### Appendix I

**How high is your stress level?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Have you been drinking, smoking or eating more than usual?</td>
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<td>2. Do you have difficulty sleeping at night?</td>
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<td>3. Are you more grouchy and argumentative than normal?</td>
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<td>4. Do you have trouble with your boss?</td>
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<td>5. Did you or a loved one experience a serious illness?</td>
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<td>6. Have you recently divorced?</td>
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<td>7. Has there been an increase in the number of marital or family arguments?</td>
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<td>8. Have you been experiencing sexual difficulties?</td>
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<td>9. Did a close relative or friend die?</td>
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<td>10. Did you marry or recently start living with someone?</td>
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<td>11. Has there been a pregnancy or birth in your family?</td>
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<td>12. Do you have financial problems?</td>
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<td>13. Did you get fired or change jobs?</td>
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<td>14. Do you feel jumpy and on edge, flying off the handle at little things?</td>
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<td>15. Do you watch television more than three hours a day?</td>
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<td>16. Have you had trouble with the IRS or the law?</td>
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<td>17. Has there been an increase in the number of deadlines or work hours?</td>
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<td>18. Have you moved or changed residence?</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Do you have trouble with your in-laws?</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Are you exposed to constant noise at home or work?</td>
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**Answer Key**

If you have answered "yes" this many times:

- 1-5: Stress is not likely to cause any problems.
- 6-10: Stress is moderate and will not harm you if you watch your diet and get rest.
- 11-15: Try to eliminate some of the stress in your life or you risk suffering poor health.
- 16-20: Stress is excessive and may make you susceptible to a major illness.

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Appendix II
How to tell if you are a stress-prone personality

Rating scale: 4-Always 3-Frequently 2-Sometimes 1-Never

____ 1. Do you try to do as much as possible in the least amount of time?
____ 2. Do you become impatient with delays or interruptions?
____ 3. Do you always have to win at games to enjoy yourself?
____ 4. Do you find yourself speeding up the car to beat the red light?
____ 5. Are you unlikely to ask for or indicate you need help with a problem?
____ 6. Do you constantly seek the respect and admiration of others?
____ 7. Are you overly critical of the way others do their work?
____ 8. Do you have the habit of looking at your watch or clock often?
____ 9. Do you constantly strive to better your position and achievements?
____ 10. Do you spread yourself "too thin" in terms of your time?
____ 11. Do you have the habit of doing more than one thing at a time?
____ 12. Do you frequently get angry or irritable?
____ 13. Do you have little time for hobbies or time by yourself?
____ 14. Do you have a tendency to talk quickly or hasten conversation?
____ 15. Do you consider yourself hard-driving?
____ 16. Do your friends or relatives consider you hard-driving?
____ 17. Do you have a tendency to get involved in multiple projects?
____ 18. Do you have a lot of deadlines in your work?
____ 19. Do you feel vaguely guilty if you relax and do nothing during leisure?
____ 20. Do you take on too many responsibilities?

_______ Total

Answer key:
If your score is between 20 and 30, chances are you are non-productive or your life lacks stimulation.
A score between 30 and 60 designates a good balance in your ability to handle and control stress.
If you tallied up a score ranging between 61 and 60, your stress level is marginal and you are bordering on being excessively tense.
If your total number of points exceeds 60, you may be a candidate for heart disease.

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skiing. This physical activity is your fight outlet. The point is to do it regularly and enjoy it. In addition, engage in mental relaxation: read a good book, listen to music, or participate in a mental fantasy technique.

Take care of unfinished business. Without the psychological closure in personal problems, it can cause you a great deal of anxiety. It is difficult to concentrate on daily activities when your energies are directed to warding off the anxieties involving a personal concern. Finally, you might consider planning "time out" periods within your day.

Conclusion

Burn-out is real. You alone have the ability to interrupt the process. Being a nurse anesthetist has to be one of the more stressful occupations in our entire world of work. You have made your career selection; you are aware of the givens; so now it is up to you to accept them.

Whether it is the demanding time schedule, lack of time to console your patients, the question of salary, or even more central, the threat of malpractice, these are indeed stress producing variables you encounter each day. How you perceive these stressors will affect your emotional well-being which, in turn, may initiate or interrupt the burn-out syndrome. You owe it to yourself to take care of "number one." You will be a better person for it and your future patients will be grateful.

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ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


AUTHOR

Edgar M. Ansell, EdD, received his BS in Social Studies from California State College, California, Pennsylvania, and his MA in Counselor Education from West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia. He received his EdD in Counselor Education in 1970 from the State University of New York, Buffalo, New York.

Dr. Ansell has published and presented numerous papers, and has served as consultant to a wide variety of schools, educational programs, state workshops and projects, and industrial training programs. He is a member of many professional societies, including the American Personnel and Guidance Association, the Association of Counselor Educators and Supervisors, the Association for Group Workers, and the National Education Association. Currently, Dr. Ansell is Chairman of the Department of Counselor Education at Edinboro State College, Edinboro, Pennsylvania.

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