

Prophylactic Measures Against Burnout: Helping Supporters of Trauma Victims Relax and Stay Healthy

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PART 1

Supporters of persons with severe mental health issues, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) risk getting severe Burnout Syndrome. This may be especially true for NGO workers in Cambodia working within psychosocial services. These people often make, more or less, conscientious commitments towards self-improvement and recognize it as a chance to develop their own personality pattern. However, few realize that dealing with traumatic issues or traumatized people on a regular basis puts them at risk of themselves being traumatized, or at the very least, suffering from mental or physical exhaustion. It is a fact that healthcare workers are prone to burnout.

Burnout is a chronic condition where the mind or body can no longer cope with the high demands of external stimuli. The symptoms associated with burnout come in a wide array. Some typical symptoms found in the research literature are: (1) low job performance (low job satisfaction), (2) physical exhaustion (fatigue), (3) rigidity to change (loss of flexibility), (4) decreased communication (withdrawal), (5) physical symptoms, (6) apathy (loss of concern), (7) cynicism, and (8) emotional exhaustion.¹

Many NGO staff doing outreach work or other reconciliation projects may find that they experience the memories of the Cambodian people with whom they work, horrible memories from Khmer Rouge years. Faced with these vicarious memories, they experience tension or react with destructive behaviors, such as aggression towards others and themselves. NGO staff and health workers in Cambodia seldom receive capacity-building, training on mental health issues, or coping strategies to deal with the impact of severe stress and trauma.

Coping successfully with any kind of stress is key to avoiding burnout. The following strategies, social and individual, are common methods for avoiding burnout:

1. Develop a realistic picture of yourself - know what you're feeling and why.
2. Set realistic goals for yourself.
3. Recognize the symptoms of stress and burnout.
4. Ask for help when needed.
5. Develop a structural and personal support system.
6. Retain hope.
7. Develop a detached concern for recipients of your efforts.
8. Maintain an active personal social life outside of work.
9. Take a “time-out” when necessary.
10. Maintain a regimen of proper nutrition and physical exercise.
11. Develop a sense of organizational involvement.
12. Be willing to accept counseling when needed.
13. Develop self-therapies such as meditation, biofeedback, or relaxation response.
14. Accentuate the positive.²
15. To be able to support people who struggle with high tension and inner stress, professional social workers should educate themselves in anger management, conflict resolution, and relaxation techniques. Authentic and empathetic support requires social workers be equipped with adequate knowledge through capacity building and regular home training. Therefore, organizations serving high stress communities could help its staff and beneficiaries by providing specific training on these techniques. Even without extensive training, NGO workers with sensitivity and awareness are capable of learning and incorporating these skill sets.

The main purpose of this “basic psychological and spiritual aid” is to help people relax and reduce tension caused by the high demands of their social or therapeutic work. The scope of this article is primarily preemptive. In other words, it is to prevent severe stress leading to burnout and not to heal people from burnout, which is best left to professionals.

1. General Relaxation Activities:

Whether aware of it or not, we all possess within ourselves the necessary resources to manage stress, relax our bodies, and find peace of mind. However, sometimes we forget about some of these inner resources because we get blocked due to sudden or prolonged stress. In such situations, it is difficult to tap into and employ these strategies used to release tension and regain inner peace. Some general relaxation strategies are:

- ◆ Walking around in a peaceful environment- alone, with friends, or with family
- ◆ Dancing or other activities requiring bodily movement
- ◆ Music – whether it be singing, listening to soothing music, or playing an instrument
- ◆ Spending time with friends and family – playin games, going to Pagoda, or other activities
- ◆ Activities requiring mental and/or physical exertion- like playing sports (exercise), playing with children, playing games with close friends and loved ones (Note: Gambling increases stress and thus should be avoided);
- ◆ Sharing activities with a peaceful aim.

2. Relaxation of the Mind:

To regain a state of inner peace a person needs sufficient time, good concentration, and a relaxed position of the body. It is best to practice these relaxation techniques accompanied by an experienced practitioner. Moreover, find a safe and quiet place, free of disturbances where one can concentrate. Concentrating the mind helps to decrease tension and stress.

Make a conscious decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day. Allow your needs to take precedence over any of your worries. Success with relaxation depends on giving priority to your peace of mind in your overall scheme of values.

2.1. Mindfulness Each Day

Many Buddhist meditation masters talk about using everyday activities to awaken the mindfulness within. An impact of mindful meditation, apart from the spiritual, is the feeling of psychological balance and relaxation.

Examples of Mindfulness:

- ◆ **Walking meditation:** While walking, synchronize your breaths to your step - perhaps inhale after every three steps and exhale every alternate three steps. Maybe make a conscious effort to walk slower than usual, and as you are walking at this slower pace, take notice of everything around you.
- ◆ **Eat mindfully:** Eat in silence once in awhile. Pay attention to the smells, tastes, arm movements, use of fork, chewing, swallowing, etc. Observe the presentation, the colors and textures of the food. Take in the aromas as you inhale its delightful scent. Feel the coolness or warmth of the food as it enters your mouth. Take notice of all the sensory delights eating has to offer.
- ◆ **Wash dishes mindfully:** While washing dishes, pay attention to every movement, the way it feels in your hands. Feel the warmth of the water and the softness of soap suds on your hands as you wash these dishes. Watch yourself place them in the dish drainer.

2.2. Peaceful Imaginations and Visualizations:

- ◆ **Close your eyes.** In your mind's eye recall a time when you felt calm and peaceful. If an event doesn't come to mind, imagine an environment that would put you in this peaceful state (i.e., sitting under a tree with a gentle breeze, observing the glass-like reflection of a placid lake, or enjoying the warmth of the sun on a beach near a tranquil sea).

- ◆ Focus the mind on peaceful symbols (i.e., Buddha statues or pictures, Lotus flowers, Candles).

- ◆ Focus the mind on beloved persons (partner, children, parents).

Example of relaxation with a peaceful visualization:

Find a safe place where you will not be disturbed for 10 - 20 minutes. Lay down or sit comfortably on your bed, mat, or sit chair with your spine reasonably straight. Now just sit or lie still for a few seconds. Without falling asleep, let your thoughts gradually quiet down. Without any force, begin to feel yourself taking longer, deeper, more regular breaths.

Now: Breathe deeply through the abdomen 3-4 times. Imagine yourself on a walk in the countryside. It is a warm sunny day and you can feel the warmth of the sun touching you. As you walk you can see and visualize a beautiful garden with a pond in front of you. It is calm and peaceful. Look around you. Observe the natural beauty of the garden and the pond. Flowers and trees you like are growing in this garden. The birds are chirping. Take time to listen to their songs. Visualize every aspect of the garden and the pond, the flowers, the butterflies, the clear blue water. Feel the beauty of the place and the peaceful atmosphere. This is your garden. If you want, you can change how it looks and feels. This is your garden. If you want you can sit or lay down in the shade of a tree. You can stay as long as you want within your garden. Your breathing is so much easier here. Relax. Let your garden rejuvenate you. After a while you find yourself calm, at peace, and yet invigorated. You decide to leave the garden. This is your garden. You know you can come back at any time if you need a peaceful place to relax, to regain balance, or merely to enjoy its beauty.

2.3. Prayer:

Focusing the mind while reciting prayers, mantras, or religious texts helps to gain a state of inner peace. This is an old and well-known technique of Buddhism and other spiritual approaches.

2.4. Meditation:

Meditation, although difficult, may be the most efficient relaxation strategy. A beginner should always seek guidance through a monk or another meditation advisor. There are different meditation approaches, but normally people start to meditate while observing their breath and focus their mind on abdominal movements or airflow in and out of the nostrils. Concentrating on peaceful symbols or objects may also be a part of the meditation. After extensive practice with these meditation skills, a person is able to focus on peace and inner enlightenment. In turn, the person is able to let go of thoughts and feelings which create tension and stress.

One example of Relaxation Meditation:

Sit comfortably with your spine reasonably straight. Allow your eyes to rest comfortably downward, gazing softly and not focused on anything. Without closing your eyes completely, let your eyelids drop to a level that feels most comfortable. Continue gazing downward. You may notice your breathing becoming more rhythmic. It's OK to let your attention drift a bit. If your eyes become very heavy, it's ok to let them close. If you notice you stop feeling relaxed, simply bring your attention back to your relaxed downward gaze.

In the next issue this article will be continued with different approaches related to burnout prophylaxes: Relaxation techniques related to the body and the breathing.

¹ Don E. Unger, "Superintendent Burnout: Myth or Reality"(Ph.D dissertation, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 1980).

² L. C. Nusbaum, "Perceived Stress and Self-Concept as Related to Burnout in School Counselors" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 1983).