

# The Signs and Dangers of Job Burnout

If, in the beginning, your job seems perfect, the solution to all your problems, you have high hopes and expectations, and would rather work than do anything else, be wary. You're a candidate for the most insidious and tragic kind of job stress -- burnout, a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by unrealistically high aspirations and illusory or impossible goals.

The potential for burnout increases dramatically depending upon who you are, where you work, and what your job is. If you're a hard worker who gives one hundred and ten percent, an idealistic, self-motivated achiever who thinks anything is possible if you just work hard enough, you're a possible candidate. The same is true if you're also a rigid perfectionist with unrealistically high standards and expectations. In a job with little recognition and few rewards for work well done, particularly with frequent people contact or deadlines, you advance from a possible to a probable candidate for burnout. The road to burnout is paved with good intentions. There's certainly nothing wrong with being an idealistic, hard working perfectionistic, or a self-motivating achiever and there's nothing wrong with having high aspirations and expectations. Indeed, these are seen as admirable traits and attributes in our culture. Unreality is the villain. Unrealistic job aspirations and expectations are doomed to frustration and failure. The burnout candidate's personality keeps him or her striving with single-minded intensity until he or she crashes.

Burnout proceeds by stages that blend and merge into each other so smoothly and imperceptibly, that the victim seldom realizes what's happening even after it's over.

Burnout stages include:

## **The Honeymoon**

During the honeymoon phase everything is wonderful. You have boundless energy and enthusiasm and all things seem possible. You love the job and the job loves you. You believe the job will satisfy all your needs and desires and solve all your problems. You're delighted with your job, your coworkers, and the organization.

## **The Awakening**

The honeymoon wanes and the awakening stage starts with the realization that your initial expectations were unrealistic. The job isn't working out the way you thought it would. It doesn't satisfy all your needs; your coworkers and the organization are less than perfect; and rewards and recognition are scarce.

As disillusionment and disappointment grow, you become confused. Something is wrong, but you can't quite put your finger on it. Typically you work even harder, to make your dreams come true. But working harder doesn't change anything and you become increasingly tired, bored, and frustrated. You question your competence and ability and start losing your self-confidence.

## **Brownout**

As brownout begins, your early enthusiasm and energy give way to chronic fatigue and irritability. Your eating and sleeping patterns change and you indulge in escapist behaviors like sex, drinking, drugs, partying, or shopping binges. You become indecisive, your productivity drops. Your work deteriorates. Coworkers and superiors may comment on it. Unless interrupted, brownout slides remorselessly into its later stages. You become increasingly frustrated and angry and project the blame for your difficulties onto others. You are cynical, detached and openly critical of the organization, superiors, and co-workers. You are beset with depression, anxiety, and physical illness. Drugs or alcohol are often a problem.

## **Full Scale Burnout**

Unless you wake up and interrupt the process or someone intervenes, brownout drifts remorselessly into full-scale burnout. Despair is the dominant feature of this final stage. This may take several months, but in most cases, involves three to four years. You experience an overwhelming sense of failure and a devastating loss of self-esteem and self-confidence. You become depressed, feel lonely, and empty.

Life seems pointless and there is a paralyzing, "what's the use" pessimism about the future. You talk about "just quitting and getting away." You are exhausted physically and mentally. Physical and mental breakdowns are likely. Suicide, stroke, or heart attack are not unusual as you complete this final stage of what all started with such high hopes, energy, optimism, and enthusiasm.

## **The Phoenix Phenomenon**

You can arise Phoenix-like from the ashes of burnout, but it takes time. First of all, you need to rest and relax. Don't take work home. If you're like most of our clients, the work won't get done and you will only feel guilty for being "lazy."

For example, Harry, a thirty-six year old attorney, would regularly load up his briefcase with work, lug it home, and set it down in a corner of the living room, with every intention of doing it after dinner. Too tired to work after dinner, he would try to rest, but the briefcase would "sit there in the corner and glare" at him. The next morning Harry would lug the undone work back to the office.

In therapy, Harry finally realized the futility of what he was doing and stopped taking work home. Now, he could rest and relax in the evening, giving him more energy for work at the office.

Accept your attitude, the anger, confusion, frustration, disappointment, depression, anxiety, and your sense of inadequacy and failure as a normal part of the burnout process and as a necessary step toward your recovery. Find someone to talk to about your distress—your mate, a good friend, your priest, minister, or rabbi, or perhaps, a professional counselor. But, it's important for both you and whomever you're talking with to understand that you only need someone to talk to and that you're not asking them to correct the situation for you.

In coming back from burnout, be realistic in your job expectations, aspirations, and goals. Readjust your aspirations and as you change. Trying to be and do what someone else wants you to be or do is a sure-fire recipe for continued frustration and burnout.

A final tip—create balance in your life. Invest more of yourself in family and personal relationships, social activities, or hobbies. Spread yourself out so that your job doesn't have such an overpowering influence on your self-esteem and self-confidence.