



Healing Leader Burnout: A Few Quick Tips

Description

Burnout—whose issue is it? Some years back, I wrote a book with the help of George Ford, MD. The title is *Healing Physician Burnout: Diagnosing, Preventing, and Treating*. Dr. Ford was seeing a lot of burnout in doctors and healthcare in general and brought it to my attention. Keep in mind, this was before it became a widely known issue.

These past several months—due to all sorts of reasons—stress, lack of resiliency, and, sadly, suicide have also become part of the burnout discussion. It seems people feel they have way too much on their plate. Also, many are struggling to adjust to different work situations. All of this is true.

While I wish this column could be written in a simpler time, I do feel it fits today's environment. My question is this: Can a person reduce that feeling of being overwhelmed and at times burned out? When I hear people saying they are burned out, it is almost like they have no control over the situation. Yet we all need to remember there are plenty of factors we can control.

A common acronym in the recovery community is HALT. It means don't get too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. When these conditions pop up in our lives, we need to HALT and address them before things escalate.

A recent column I read in the *Harvard Business Review* on burnout provided a number of tips. What I liked about them is that they put much of the solution back on the individual. My own experience in working with thousands of people is that those who don't fall into the victim trap do much better in life than others. (It reminds me of the Serenity Prayer. We all need to accept what we can't control, change what we can, and know the difference between the two.)

There is no doubt the work environment can and often does play a role in burnout. For example, burnout might be more likely when systems are not working well, when tools needed for the job are not available, when the boss is not a good one, when there is a lack of reward, or when toxic coworkers or leaders are not dealt with.

This column's focus is on what you can do, especially if you're in a leadership role, to create a healthier you. When leaders are healthy, workplaces are likely to be healthy.

The obvious starting point is self-care. This means eating better, exercising, getting plenty of sleep, meditating, and seeking brain health. Wellness practices go a long way toward preventing the need to HALT.

Here are some suggestions that apply to everyone; however, my focus here is on those in a management role:

1. Pick a vocation you are passionate about. Years ago, I listened as pro golfer Bubba Watson was interviewed. Bubba is very committed to being a great dad. Even when his son, Caleb, and daughter,

Dakota, were very young, Bubba was projecting that when they got older, they could no longer travel with him, nor could his wife, Angie. From the beginning, Bubba has been very involved in his children's lives. He helps coach his children's teams. He also knows his job calls for him to be away from home. Many pro golfers play lots of tournaments, knowing that if they do well and invest wisely, as their children age, they will have more options to stay home. A reporter asked Bubba what he would do when he retired or played fewer tournaments. Without skipping a beat, Bubba said he would golf. Point one: have a job and a place of work you enjoy. If you're passionate about what you do, you're less likely to burn out.

2. Develop others so you can delegate. I feel the inability to maximize delegation is a prime reason people can become burned out. In order to delegate, one needs to also be able to develop others. So, why do people struggle to delegate? I get that one must have someone to delegate to. If that is your issue, drop me an email; I have some suggestions.

Sometimes a leader does not have standard operating procedures in place and thus feels they must always be there. The leader feels only they can do the job. Or they have the "if you want it done right, do it yourself" attitude. Or they think, *It's easier to just do it myself*. Sadly, this attitude leads to a hamster wheel, in which the hamster does not get off. Due to lack of standard operating procedures and not developing others, the leader works too many hours. When this happens, two parts of HALT come into play: angry and tired.

3. Hold up the mirror. (You knew I would bring up the mirror!) I find when people are tired, frustrated, and headed toward burnout (or already there), they point a finger at someone or something. A wise person shared with me years ago that when you point a finger at someone, there are three pointing back. Take inventory. Are you taking care of yourself? Do you have standard operating procedures in place? Are you developing others? Are you delegating? Have you developed your own skill set on knowing how to ask for help? Do you have the resources you need?

In 1993, I was sharing the problems I faced at the place I worked with a guy named Frank Milos. About a week later, he gave me three decals and told me to put them on my mirror at home, my mirror at work, and my rearview mirror in the car. The decals all read the same: "You're looking at the problem."

Once you start taking better care of yourself and making changes to prevent your own burnout, you will be in a better position to create workplace conditions that help others avoid it too. A big part of it is awareness. (This is why HALT is such a helpful tool, as it gives you a way to check yourself when things are not right.)

I know in the current COVID-19 environment, we feel a loss of control around the changes taking place and the uncertainty about the future. All of this puts extra pressure on everyone. I feel the points I laid out above will be helpful. There are plenty of things we *can* control and changes we can make to improve our lives. Just realizing that truth may be our number-one defense against burnout.

Date Created

January 18, 2021

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