

Winning the Battle against Burnout

By Kenya McCullum

You are lying in bed on Sunday night, gazing at your clock—which you feel is mocking you about the upcoming work week—with an absolute sense of dread. Maybe you have been depressed lately. Maybe you are having stomach pains. Or maybe you are just grumpy and complaining all the time. If you are feeling this way, you are probably having a bout of burnout—and if you do not handle it now, it will only get worse.

Paul Gibson, human resources veteran and a member of the Society for Human Resource Management's Employee Relations Special Expertise Panel, explained burnout this way:

"Burnout involves a sense of hopelessness. People can do amazing things when they can see a light at the end of the tunnel and when they can see change ahead of them. Anybody who is involved in sports knows that you can break down a marathon into stages, so you can see the end of a stage. But if you are standing there with a sore leg at mile one of 26, it is impossible to see mile 26. It is hopeless. People have tremendous wells of energy if they can see something ahead that they like."

But if you are burned out on your job, what can you do to restore the enthusiasm that you once had?

Joanne Webster, Director of Human Resources at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula, said that when she experienced burnout in her industry, the first thing she did was self-evaluation to determine exactly what it was about her job that was causing the problem. She had been working in the high-tech industry for twenty years and found that the ups and downs—from the Internet boom to the dot com bust—were beginning to take their toll on her. Once she identified the problem, she decided it was time to take her talents to another industry, where she could feel fulfilled about her work again.

"If there's no joy in coming to work for whatever reason, then maybe it is time to look for something else that will really make you happy and make you feel good about what you do day to day," she said. "It comes down to trying to figure out what makes you happy, what drives you to go to work, and where you get the most job satisfaction. Once you analyze that, figure out what you need to do to change those circumstances so you do not feel burned out."

Sometimes changing your circumstances can be as drastic as changing your job, but it does not have to be. There are several ways that you can get over burnout and still stay at your current job.

Take a few days off. Sometimes a long weekend—whether you go out of town or not—can help you feel rejuvenated. Just be sure to leave the stresses of the office in the office. This means no laptop, no phone calls, and no Blackberry during your days off.

Discuss your concerns. When you've determined the part of your job that you find overwhelming, try to work with your boss to alleviate those stressors. Whether this means new job responsibilities or getting extra help with your current ones, most bosses are receptive to helping their burned out employees.

Take on new responsibilities. Although it may sound counterintuitive when dealing with burnout, sometimes taking on work that you do not normally do can break up the monotony of your day and give you a new outlook. Asking your boss for a special project that interests you or volunteering to mentor new employees can help you develop new skills and give you more exposure, which can make you see yourself and your job in a new light. This variety can be enough to spice up your work day and keep you motivated.

Get a life. If your life is starting to revolve around your job, you are likely to experience burnout at some point—even if you love your job. You need to step back and develop a sense of balance in order to recover from, or prevent, burnout. Things like spending more time with friends and family instead of bringing work home, starting an exercise routine (which also reduces stress), or making time for a hobby can be enough to tip the scales toward a more balanced lifestyle.

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