

“Best of” Firelight Newsflashes! 31 August 2009 – Caring for the Caregivers

Dear partners and colleagues,

A quick message to let you know that the Firelight Newsflash will take a break during our team's busy time of grant docket preparation. During this time, we will be re-sending prior Newsflashes that received good feedback from our grantee-partners. Today, see the Newsflash from July 2007 on caring for the caregivers and preventing burnout.

We'll return on Monday, 14 September with brand new Newsflashes.

Best,
The Firelight Team

From: Firelight Newsletter <newsletter@firelightfoundation.org>
Date: July 30, 2007 12:19:00 PM PDT
To: newsletter@firelightfoundation.org
Subject: Firelight Newsflash! 30 July 2007 - Caring for the Caregivers

Dear partners,

When was the last time you took a moment to care for yourself? To stop and make sure that for once, you came first? It's so difficult to prioritize this with all the people coming by your home or office to ask for help, or the volunteers who need support, or the board who has questions, or the donor who needs a report. But sometimes the most important thing is to do is to care for the caregiver emotionally and physically to prevent burnout.

We admire, honor and support the amazing work that you do every day! So breathe deeply and renew your commitment to children by taking a moment for yourself.

All our best from the Firelight team!

Burnout: Signs, Symptoms, and Prevention

What is burnout?

Burnout is a state of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It can occur when you feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place. Burnout reduces your productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly hopeless, powerless, cynical, and resentful. The unhappiness burnout causes can eventually threaten your job, your relationships, and your health.

How can you tell if you're burning out?

Because burnout doesn't happen overnight — and it's difficult to fight once you're in the middle of it — it's important to recognize the early signs of burnout and head it off. Burnout usually has its roots in stress, so the earlier you recognize the symptoms of stress and address them, the better chance you have of avoiding burnout.

The signs of burnout tend to be more mental than physical. They can include feelings of:

- Frustration and powerlessness
- Hopelessness
- Being drained of emotional energy
- Detachment, withdrawal, isolation
- Being trapped
- Having failed at what you're doing
- Irritability
- Sadness
- Feeling that people act out of selfishness and nothing can be done about it

If you're burning out and the burnout expresses itself as irritability, you might find yourself always snapping at people or making unkind side remarks about them. If the burnout manifests itself as depression, you might want to sleep all the time or always be "too tired" to socialize. You might turn to risky behaviors such as sex, drinking, drugs, or partying to try to escape from your negative feelings. Your relationships at work and in your personal life may begin to fall apart.

What is the difference between stress and burnout?

Burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as too much stress. Stress, by and large, involves too much: too many pressures that demand too much of you physically and psychologically. Stressed people can still imagine, though, that if they can just get everything under control, they'll feel better. Burnout, on the other hand, is about not enough. Being burned out means feeling empty, unmotivated, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout

often don't see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress is like drowning in responsibilities, burnout is having nothing more to give.

Stress vs. Burnout	
STRESS	BURNOUT
Characterized by overengagement	Characterized by disengagement
Emotions are overreactive	Emotions are blunted
Produces urgency and hyperactivity	Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Exhausts physical energy	Exhausts motivation and drive, ideals and hope
Leads to anxiety	Leads to paranoia, detachment, and depression
Causes disintegration	Causes demoralization
Primary damage is physical	Primary damage is emotional
Stress may kill you prematurely, and you won't have enough time to finish what you started.	Burnout may never kill you, but your life may not seem worth living.

One other difference between stress and burnout: While you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don't always notice burnout when it happens. The symptoms of burnout — the hopelessness, the cynicism, the detachment from others — can take months to surface. If someone close to you points out changes in your attitude or behavior that are typical of burnout, listen to that person.

What causes caregiver burnout?

Outside the world of paid work, the people more prone to burnout than any other group are caregivers: people who devote themselves to the unpaid care of chronically ill or disabled family members. While caregiving always represents stress for the caregiver, what may be a burden to one person may be more manageable to another. When caregiving goes on indefinitely, however, burnout is always a possibility.

The stressors of caregiving — changes in the family dynamic, household disruption, financial concerns, and the sheer amount of work involved — can be overwhelming. People feel tremendous pressure to ‘do it all,’ taking care of children while maintaining the home. Instead of having a sense of accomplishment, many people feel guilt when they run out of energy to handle all of the tasks.

Another source of caregiver burnout is the lack of hope for a happy outcome. Often the rewards of caregiving, if they come at all, are intangible and far off, and the lack of control the caregiver feels over the situation is often compounded by other factors such as lack of finances, little or no family support, or poor management and planning skills. Without support, the caregiver becomes more and more isolated and sinks further and further into frustration and despair.

A person once said, “The capacity to care is the thing that gives life its deepest significance and meaning.” It’s essential that caregivers receive enough support that they don’t lose that capacity.

What causes burnout on the job?

Most of us have days when the dozen balls we juggle aren’t noticed, let alone rewarded; when our co-workers and bosses seem wrong-headed; when we have to drag ourselves into work; when caring about the work seems like a waste of energy; when nothing we do appears to make a difference in the world.

We all have bad days. But when every day is a bad day, you’re playing with burnout.

Those most at risk may be social service providers or volunteers, who spend their work lives attending to the needs of others, especially if their work puts them in frequent contact with the dark or tragic side of human experience, or if they’re underpaid, unappreciated, or criticized for matters beyond their control.

The following scenarios can lead to workplace burnout:

- Setting unrealistic goals for yourself or having them imposed upon you.
- Being expected to be too many things to too many people.
- Working under rules that seem unreasonably coercive or punitive.
- Doing work that frequently causes you to violate your personal values.
- Feeling trapped for economic reasons by a job that fits any of the scenarios above.

Remember, workplace burnout isn’t the same as workplace stress. When you’re stressed, you care too much, but when you’re burned out, you don’t see any hope of improvement. You don’t want to get to that point.

Can burnout be prevented or treated?

Because burnout is related to stress, many of the methods effective in countering stress can help prevent burnout as well. For one thing, it's important to build or maintain a foundation of good physical health, so be sure to eat right, get enough sleep, and exercise.

Best defense against all burnout: Being with other people

When it comes to burnout, the stakes are high, as we are trying to help others. So the first and most important strategy for preventing burnout is, don't try to do it all alone.

Although taking time to yourself to relax is important in reducing stress, if you are approaching burnout, it's also crucial that you cultivate relationships with other people and spend time socializing. Poor relationships and isolation can lead to burnout, but positive relationships can help prevent or reduce its onset.

Here are some steps you can take to improve your relationships with others:

- Nurture your closest relationships, such as those with your husband/wife, children, family or friends. These relationships can help restore energy and alleviate some of the psychological effects of burnout, such as feelings of being underappreciated. Try to put aside what's burning you out and make the time you spend with loved ones positive and enjoyable.
- Nurture friendships. "We do things together outside of work duties. It gives everyone an opportunity to relax, laugh and release the stress." Just remember to avoid hanging out with negative-minded people who do nothing but complain.
- Confide in others. Talk to people about what you feel; don't keep your emotions bottled up. This is where the support group comes in, but trusted friends and family members can help too. Joining a religious, social, or support group can give you a place to talk to like-minded people about how to deal with daily stress — and to make new friends.
- Accept your feelings and practice healthy communication. Express your feelings to others who will listen, understand, and not judge. Burnout involves feelings that fester and grow, so be sure to let your emotions out in healthy, productive ways.

In summary, to prevent or recover from burnout, learn to cultivate methods of personal renewal, self-awareness, and connection with others, and don't be afraid to acknowledge your own needs and find ways to get your needs met.

BLESSED ARE THE CAREGIVERS

Blessed are the caregivers who refuse to compare their responsibilities with others.

Blessed are the caregivers who have learned to laugh, for it is their only chance for sanity.

Blessed are the caregivers who can redirect negative behavior, without anger.

Blessed are the caregivers who are teachable, for understanding brings love.

Blessed are the caregivers who love their task, for love is the greatest gift they give.

Blessed are the caregivers, for all the blessings they bestow upon the world.

As part of the Firelight Foundation's Monitoring, Evaluation and Technical Assistance (META) Program, Firelight provides "Newsflashes" to share relevant resources and information with our active grantee-partners via weekly emails and via post on a monthly basis. We hope that by facilitating access to information for grassroots, community-focused organizations, programming for children and families, as well as organizational development, is enhanced. Past editions of the Firelight Newsflash can be found on our website: <http://www.firelightfoundation.org/newsflash.htm>.

We welcome your comments, feedback and ideas for upcoming Newsflashes at newsletter@firelightfoundation.org.