Four Stages of Burnout
and Key Strategies for Rejuvenation, Prevention and SPEED

By Mark Gorkin
"The Stress Doc" ™

In our 24/7, wired and always on world, that constantly cycles between upgrading and downsizing it’s no surprise that employees are increasingly feeling exhausted. Some, alas, are showing signs of burnout. Let’s get a handle on this “b”-word:

Burnout is the gradual process by which a person, in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental and emotional strain, detaches from work and other meaningful relationships. The result is lowered productivity, cynicism, confusion... a feeling of being drained, having nothing more to give.

To provide a framework both for understanding and, hopefully, inoculating against future burnout, let's begin with "The Stress Doc's Vital Lesson of the Four 'R's":

If no matter what you say or what you do, Results, Rewards, Recognition and Relief are not forthcoming, and you can't mean "no" or won't let go... trouble awaits. The groundwork is being laid for apathy, callousness and despair.

Have I captured your attention? Let's examine some of the progressive signs of being caught up in this erosive spiral. Here are the "Four Stages of Burnout":

(1) Physical, Mental and Emotional Exhaustion. Maybe you are still holding it together at work.). Still, can you relate to this sequence? As soon as you get home, you head for the fridge, get out the Haagen-Dazs or Ben and Jerry's or lite-beer, turn on the tube, collapse on the sofa and you're comatose for the rest of the evening? Doing more with less is starting to produce a case of the "brain strain" and frustration or guilt for cutting corners.

(2) Shame and Doubt. Someone asks you to take on a new project; you want to but a voice inside says, "Who are you kidding!" And then you catch yourself emitting heavy, labored sighs. (When do people often engage in deep, labored breathing or sighing? Other than when calling those 1-900 numbers. When experiencing a deep sense of loss and change perceived as uncontrollable.) Is chronically grappling with a profound sense of vulnerability or uncertainty anyone's favorite state? Certainly not mine. No surprise then that some folks will "progress" to the third phase: "Cynicism and Callousness."

(3) Cynicism and Callousness. Having had enough of this chronic uncertainty and vulnerability you are putting on the heavy armor: "look out for #1," "cover your derriere" and "get out of my way." Ironically, sometimes it's the "too nice" folks who reach this cynical stage by staying later and later or by taking on more and more work despite a full plate. There's an option: "Sure I'll help you with this new demand and deadline. But for me to give the assignment the attention it deserves, we'll have to renegotiate my priority list and timelines." Remember, someone once said: "Burnout is less a sign of failure and more that you gave yourself away."

(4) Failure, Helplessness and Crisis. Here's where you start feeling, "Damned if I do, damned if I don't; damned if I stay, damned if I leave." Your coping seems to be unraveling. And with prolonged stress, you may develop more than a hard attitude: you may also be hardening your arteries, e.g., having blood pressure problems. And, prolonged tension also affects our brain chemistry, eventually making us vulnerable not just to moodiness, but to clinical depression. It may be time for some medical or professional counseling.
Fourth stage burnout is the crisis point; it’s crunch time. You must push through the feelings of exhaustion, failure or shame and reach out for the help and resources you need. And I know from first-hand experience.

**Keys to Rehabilitation and Rejuvenation**

Back in the 80s, I was a very unrealistic doctoral student trying to turn a mystical-like experience in psychoanalysis into a doctoral dissertation. Talk about being off the academic wall. As I would later writer: "Academic flashdancing definitely whirled to a burnout tango." Fortunately, there was a silver lining: I became an expert on stress and burnout!

In hindsight, I evolved a process of self-care that, I believe, can be instrumental for both burnout recovery and prevention. Consider these strategic steps for "R & R" – Rehabilitation and Rejuvenation:

1. **Good Grief.** While the burnout experience ultimately helped clarify my career path, it took several months to get out of the "Big Muddy" and "Big Moody." I needed time to tend to my wounds. Also, a major loss can undermine your sense of identity. I needed to know that significant others still loved and respected me despite my feelings of academic and personal humiliation. You may need a mentor or a counselor who can reconfirm your pre-crisis identity, who can see your strengths when you are fixated on your weaknesses. And you don’t have to wait till you are in the fourth stage to start grieving. In fact, recognizing the need to grapple with a changing reality, to let go early on is a sign of ego strength, and "letting go" is a powerful burnout prevention tool.

2. **The Four "R"s of Burnout Recovery: Running, Reading, Retreating, and Writing.**

   a) **Running.** After regaining my energy and balance, I started a regimen of daily jogging. First, thirty-forty minutes of nonstop large muscle movement (jogging, brisk walking, cycling, swimming, etc.) will get those disposition-enhancing endorphins pumping. The chemical influx helps slow a racing mind and helps lift a sluggish mood. Also, running or jogging is great for grounding you when you’re feeling vulnerable or when your life feels uncertain and up in the air. There’s a beginning and end point culminating in a tangible sense of control and accomplishment. This routine can readily evolve into a success ritual, a robust tool in the prevention and recovery from burnout.

   b) **Reading.** In some of my darkest hours I turn to humorous novels or cartoon books (like Calvin and Hobbes) to add some absurdity, if not levity, to my perspective. Hearty laughter also releases endorphins, giving vital organs a brief but vigorous internal massage. As the erosive effects of burnout had spiraled, my playful and humorous mindset had withered. How wonderful it was to laugh again and to chuckle at the irrationality of my outrageous egoal quest. Self-accepting laughter is a great antidote to shame. And if reading still feels like a strain, turn on those Seinfeld reruns.

   c) **Retreating.** After my academic meltdown, I needed time to reflect on this ego-and identity-shattering process, how and why I generated this situational and existential traumatic tempest. Retreating allows time for engaging some existential biggies: What are my skills, gifts, and talents? What are my emotional, knowledge, and learning gaps? What direction(s) and what enterprises really feel like me? The blank canvas is scary. There’s no absolute way or pre-existing structure. The blank canvas is exciting. There’s no absolute truth or pre-existing limits. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: *Follow the open road and discover or recover your soul.*

   d) **Writing.** Journaling through angst and loss is a time-honored tradition. And contemporary research indicates that taking the time to express and analyze your emotions through writing provides a stress-relieving anchor in a stormy, troubled sea. Reflective writing can also be a source of self-discovery – a tool for your healing, understanding, and action, as well as a medium for keeping the faith.
And one of my favorite ways to prepare for serious writing is by reading. Reading for enlightenment followed the abovementioned lighthearted variety. I started devouring books about burnout, and then began to write about it. This academic lemon would make lemonade by becoming an expert – therapist and lecturer – on stress and burnout...and spread the word far and wide. (Obviously, once an ego-driven narcissist.…)

3. Transition and Diversification. The grieving path – from shock and sadness to fear and rage – and the retreating process have three basic goals: (a) to mourn and let go of a painful or problematic past or path, (b) to reenergize and refocus you in the present and (c) to enable you to envision, design and achieve a vital future. As Nobel Prize-winning author Albert Camus observed: "Once we have accepted the fact of loss we understand that the loved one [or loved position] obstructed a whole corner of the possible, pure now as a sky washed by rain."

Recovering from burnout or rebuilding the fire means exploring anew or illuminating unusual horizons. This might include such career path changes as:

1) taking a sabbatical; perhaps doing some extended travel,
2) consulting for or doing an internship (paid or volunteer) with an educational foundation or institute,
3) going back to school to pursue a heartfelt interest, or even returning to the classroom as an educator and
4) pursuing a different position or job, a new geographical location and, in some cases, even making a major "out of the career box" transition. While one should carefully consult with family, friends and advisors, this period of healing and reflection is also the time to listen not just to your head but also to your heart. It may be time to take leave and return home from the burnout battlefront.

Final Reflection

As I once penned: Whether the loss is a key person, a desired position or a powerful illusion, each deserves the respect of a mourning. The pit in the stomach, the clenched fists and quivering jaw, the anguished sobs prove catalytic in time. In mystical fashion, like spring upon winter, the seeds of dissolution bear fruitful renewal.

Engaging with these three strategic steps will provide preventive fireproofing while enabling you, if necessary, to recover and rejuvenate from a burnout experience. These ideas and actions will stimulate you to define and design your transitional future. And finally, these are words to help us all...Practice Safe Stress!
Here's the Stress Doc's guidelines for reducing chronic stress and for preventing or recovering from burnout: Develop "Natural SPEED":

**S = Sleep.** If I may be lyrical, don't be cheap with your need for sleep. It's nature's way to ebb and flow and help you grow. While recent research questions the health benefits of excessive sleep (over eight hours) a pattern of less than six hours for most people yields cognitive impairment, that is, a loss of mental sharpness. Lack of sleep, not just all work, makes Jack and Jill dull. Also, sleep research supports brief napping (10-40 minutes) during the day for mind-body rejuvenation.

**P = Priorities.** In a "do more with less" world, it's imperative to grasp two organizational and interpersonal maxims:

a. **Pareto Principle.** (named for an Italian sociologist). 80% of your results are produced by 20% of your activities. So focus on the strategic when problem-solving or trying to be productive. The principle also means you can drop 4/5 of what you are doing without feeling guilty.

b. **N & N.** Establishing limits on and boundaries with others is critical for generating positive expectations and achievable goals, especially when quantity and quality are paramount. The essential tool: the ability to say "No" and to "Negotiate." In other words, don't "Just do it." Tactfully yet assertively discuss what's "urgent" (must get done now) versus what's "important" (which gets prioritized) as well as develop manageable timelines. There really can be life after deadlines!

**E = Empathy.** Many folks place their own stress in perspective by helping or, at least, supportively listening to others. Just make sure the shoulder lending is not a one way transaction. If you are always the pillar, those who lean on you may not be quick to see when you're feeling shaky. This is especially likely if you habitually play a heroic, self-denying superman or superwoman role. At work and/or in your home life, have at least one stress buddy with whom you can let your hair down (especially on a "bad hair day." As a t-shirt purchased for an ex-girlfriend proclaimed: "How can I control my life when I can't control my hair?")

**E = Exercise.** The benefit of regular exercise is both physical and psychological. Thirty minutes of vigorous, non-stop, large muscle movement activity -- brisk walking, swimming, bike riding, dancing, etc. releases brain chemicals called endorphins which are the mind-body's natural mood enhancers and pain relievers. It's less a runner's high and more that we can step back and see things with a calmer disposition and fresher perspective. Also, exercise itself can be a positive ritual. When everything's up in the air, doing a 2-3 mile walk or jog creates a beginning and end point for a tangible sense of accomplishment and control. And as we'd say in N'Awlins, the "lagniappe" or added benefit: "I like feeling virtuous!"

**D = Diet.** More than a waistline is at stake. A diet high in saturated fats (red meat, whole milk products, fried oyster po-boys; it was tough eating sensibly in "The Big Easy") and simple sugars (sodas, chips and cookies and excessive chocolate; sorry folks) induces drowsiness and mental torpor, not to mention clogged arteries. And too much alcohol and caffeine is a roller coaster headache -- moodiness or depression often follows aggression and agitation. Balancing protein, fruits and vegetables, complex carbs, grains, nuts and sufficient water is vital for optimal energy and alertness along with cardiovascular health. Remember, a mind is a terrible thing to waist!
Q: Do you have one tip to help organizations deal with workplace stress?

STRESS DOC: In a 24/7 world that's cycling from "lean-and-MEAN" downsizing to ever faster upgrading while periodically spinning scarily out of control, managing stress and effective team communication and cooperation are on everybody's mind in today's diverse workplace. The pressures to sustain individual and organizational productivity and morale have never been greater. My suggestion: management and employees (or association members) participate in dynamic and interactive, inspiring and fun-filled "Practice Safe Stress" speaking programs and training workshops having meaningful group exercises and problem-solving discussions. With "hands on" concepts and skills and job relevant exercises, participants channel stress, frustration and real conflict into safe sharing, cooperative/creative action and team building.

Mark Gorkin, LICSW, "The Stress Doc" ™, a psychotherapist, an international/Celebrity Cruise Lines speaker and syndicated writer was recently interviewed on BBC radio. The Doc is also America Online’s "Online Psychohumorist" ™ running his weekly "Shrink Rap and Group Chat" on AOL/Digital City. See his award winning, USA Today Online "HotSite" -- www.stressdoc.com (recently cited as a workplace resource on National Public Radio). Email for his monthly newsletter recently showcased on List-a-Day.com. Look for his upcoming book, Practice Safe Stress: Healing and Laughing in the Face of Stress, Burnout & Depression. For more info on the Doc’s speaking and training programs and products, email stressdoc@aol.com or call 202-232-8662.