

## CHAPTER 76

### Best Practices for Practitioner Self-Care

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#### Getting Started

Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, detachment from the job, and feelings of inadequacy and lack of personal accomplishment (Dentsen, 2002; Freudenberger, 1980; Maslach, 1982, 2003). Additionally, burnout is associated with many other psychological and health symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints. While there is debate about whether there is a “process of burnout” with preliminary symptoms, there is little disagreement that the ramifications of burnout are serious. In addition to personal distress, burnout is associated with absenteeism, poor performance, and high turnover rates. In sum, the human costs of burnout have a negative impact on not only the service provider but also the service recipients and the institution. When one considers the fact that schools and children represent two of society’s most important attributes, it is essential that we do whatever we can to sustain and maintain good workers.

#### What We Know

##### | Organizational Factors

There is considerable evidence to support the view that organizational factors contribute significantly to burnout, with practitioners in large, impersonal bureaucracies appearing to be the most susceptible (Maslach, 2003; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). This research points to the important role played by the culture, climate, and structure of the organization. However, there are some things individuals can do to protect themselves and handle the

strains associated with burnout (Meltsner, 1989; Pines, 1982). Indeed, some research suggests that the process begins at the point of hire (Koeske & Kirk, 1995).

The complex environments school social workers practice in could be characterized as “high risk” for burnout. Ambiguities and conflicts in roles, often coupled with value dilemmas, lack of autonomy, high workload, job insecurity, and violence, all precursors of burnout, characterize the context of practice in school social work (Astor, Benbenishty, & Marachi, 2004; Pincus, 1997). In addition, the so-called paradigm shift involving “collaboration between schools and community agencies” creates an even more complicated system (Allen-Meares, 2004). While the number of social workers who are experiencing symptoms of burnout may be low, failure to deal with relevant stressors may result in an emotionally exhausted, cynical, and inadequate worker.

### **Research Support for Interventions and Practice Methods**

The Maslach Burnout Inventory, characterized by its emphasis on *transactions* between the person and environment, is considered the gold standard in the measurement of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Burnout is conceptualized and measured by the three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. While there is a strong body of research on the phenomenon of burnout, evidence-based interventions to deal with burnout are limited (Maslach, 2003). Most interventions focus on the individual worker, not on organizational characteristics, which, according to the literature, play a significant role in the development of burnout. Furthermore, while notions of person – environment or job – person fit introduce a general framework for analysis, burnout is considered more an “end state,” something that may be the result of “chronic misfit” (Maslach et al., 2001). Interventions, therefore, focus on the negative attributes of chronicity and attempt to develop preventive strategies aimed at increasing worker resilience to burnout (Skovholt, Grier, & Hanson, 2001).

There is considerable evidence that a supportive workplace environment will mitigate or “buffer” against the negative consequences of stress. However, it is essential to distinguish between different types of support – emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal (Acker, 1999; Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Baruch-Feldman, Schwartz, Brondolo, & Ben-Dayana, 2002; Greenglass, Fiksenbau, & Burke, 1996; Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1989a; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984) – as well as different sources of support, such as coworkers and supervisors (Hagihara, Tarumi, & Miller, 1998; Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1989b), which appear to have differential impacts on stress and burnout. In contrast, social undermining behaviors and actions heighten the process of burnout (Duffy, 2002; Gant, Nagda, Brabson, & Jayaratne, 1993; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001).

Figure 76.1 identifies the widely accepted dimensions central to burnout assessment. The model indicates that there are direct effects on burnout from the person, organization, and client. This model also denotes that social support and undermining falls between the preceding domains and burnout, suggesting the notions of buffering or heightening. Table 76.1 presents the definitions of the various elements in the model. This robust model is supported by research conducted around the world with numerous professional populations (e.g., Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001; Zapf, Seifert, Schmutte, Mertini, & Holz, 2001). According to this model, burnout interventions *must* consider personal, organizational, and client factors. Each dimension plays a role in the susceptibility to or likelihood of developing or producing symptoms of burnout.

It is important to note that state-of-the-art burnout intervention is rudimentary at best. There are no empirically validated or controlled studies, and there are few studies on burnout among school social workers. As such, the ensuing discussion provides a model with a generic but proven base and is useful for school social workers.

<INSERT FIGURE 79.1>

**Figure 79.1.**

Conceptual Model on the Situational Correlates of Burnout

**Table 79.1**

Definitions of Situational Correlates

<i>PERSONAL DOMAIN</i>	
Skill/Competence	The extent to which individuals believe they possess the necessary training and skills to perform their job
Value Conflict	The extent to which individuals feel their personal values are in conflict with what is required in the job
Commitment	The extent to which individuals believe in the “goodness” of the work and have an attachment to the organization
Personal Control	The extent to which individuals believe that there are sufficient resources and authority to conduct their work in the most efficacious and autonomous manner
<i>ORGANIZATIONAL DOMAIN</i>	
Role Ambiguity	The extent to which there is absence of clarity about the nature of the job
Role Conflict	The extent to which there are conflicting demands from different parts of the organization and frustrations encountered by fulfilling one goal while contradicting another
Workload	The extent to which there is an excessive quantity of work that is expected on the job
Financial Reward	The degree of satisfaction with the compensation and benefits received by individuals for what they do
Promotional Opportunity	The extent to which an individual believes there is a career ladder and fair opportunities for promotion
<i>CLIENT DOMAIN</i>	
Case Factors	The extent of difficulties inherent to a client and his/her context that an individual perceives to be present in the provision of services
Fear Factors	The extent to which an individual believes there is personal danger in the conduct of work activities





Criticizing yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Second-guessing your							
decisions and actions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel like you are not							
getting any positive feedback	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Personal Strategies

The popular press is full of books on stress management with prescriptions ranging from good eating and exercise, to Yoga, meditation, or kick boxing. There is nothing wrong with any program that helps you deal with stress; what matters is finding strategies that work for you.

### Identifying the Symptoms

An array of psychological, behavioral, and physical symptoms are associated with burnout. As with most psychosocial symptomology, it is the subjective experience that matters (Azar, 2000). The more prevalent and consistent the symptoms, the greater the need to take action. Check yourself on the symptom checklist and keep track for 2 to 3 weeks (Table 76.2). If the pages become filled with check marks, it is time to do something about it.

### Coping With Stress

Now that you know you are “stressed out,” how do you cope? Pay careful attention to your social resources. *Social resources* are individuals or offices you can talk with or rely on when you need help and support. Think about family, friends, and co-workers, as well as institutional resources in the school or your church, temple, or mosque. Be specific. If you are not sure how to handle a bullying student, talk it over with a colleague. If you had a really bad day, go out in the evening with a friend. Simple solutions – but the research tells us they do work. This is the time to use your network of resources.

### Problem-Focused Coping

When thinking about your psychological resources, what can you do to increase your mastery and control over the situation? If you feel overworked and overburdened, run-of-

the-mill problems may take on lives of their own. You may begin to wonder about your competence and your ability to handle difficult situations. You are reluctant to talk with the family of a child who is failing most of his classes because you are not sure whether anything will help. Ask yourself why. Is this family belligerent? You worked with this family before and it did not do any good? To regain mastery over the situation, it is necessary to regain confidence. Work with a colleague or observe someone else at work; do some additional reading on the topic; try something different. Remember that it is probably not lack of skill that is making you reluctant, but the demands and context that are making you feel helpless.

### *Emotion-Focused Coping*

If, on the other hand, you are dealing with a situation where the stress producers are structural and unchangeable, consider what you can do to minimize its impact. You have to work many hours after school, and you worry about spending more time with your family. You feel that if you see one more child coming to school without breakfast, you are going to get sick. These may be realities of the job over which you have little or no control, and this is where personal well-being programs come into play. Consciously engage in and plan these activities; do not leave them up to chance. Developing control over your life will enhance your personal well-being and make you a more effective professional.

### *Maximize the Possibility of Success*

All of us want to be successful at our work, but what do we mean? There are, of course, the obvious markers such as a pay raise, bonus, or a promotion, but these are infrequent. We should validate our successes more frequently to nourish our emotional well-being, as well our self-efficacy in our work. The tendency in this regard is to rely on uncontrollable external sources: a good word from the principal, a thank you note from a student, a teacher asking you for advice. While these are affirming, relying on external validation as the only



legitimate avenue of efficacy can, in the long run, prove harmful (Acker, 1999; Raquepaw & Miller, 1986).

In contrast, there are two aspects of work that you control: professional expertise and personal relationships. According to Harris and Franklin (2004), "The breadth of knowledge and skills needed to work effectively in schools is more than any one individual may possess" (p. 281). However, keeping abreast of what is new in the field will result in greater self-confidence and mastery of theory, skills, and strategy. Go to workshops, attend relevant lectures, and read the latest journals; this knowledge will hold you in good stead going forward. It is possible that your school district does not provide financial support for these types of activities. That should not dissuade you. It is your health and performance, and the price you pay now will be well worth the benefits you derive.

Of equal importance is building relationships with helpful people and resources, within both the school and the local community. These relationships will undoubtedly pay off, if not with this student, then with another student in the future. In other words, do everything you can do to make yourself believe you have the confidence, knowledge, skills, and connections to help resolve your clients' problems (see Franklin, 2004). Bandura (1977) called this "efficacy expectation" the "conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce outcomes" (p. 79).

### *Set Realistic Goals*

Just as you may need to pay greater attention to the definitions of success, it is also necessary to recognize smaller accomplishments. It is easy to get frustrated by the sheer number of students you are dealing with, the lack of time you have, or the inability of the system or resources to address them adequately. The fact that a student dropped out in order to work is not necessarily a failure if it prevented this student from failing in school; there is always the possibility that the student can return to school. You do not have the resources or the authority to handle the economic circumstances in this situation, but you may have helped

the student deal with current reality so that he or she can move on with life without remorse and with hope – that is, the alternative reality, and also your responsibility.

Often, workload may not allow you to accomplish activities that you think are important. In a study of school social work practice, Staudt (1991) noted that practitioners wanted to do more group work, but they also wanted to work with individual students. How you perceive these types of situations and choices will help define your goals. The more realistic you are, the more successful you will be.

### *Diversify*

In the world of stocks and bonds, the mantra has always been “diversify!” Similarly, there is a substantial body of research suggesting that a more diverse caseload, more variety in problems and challenges, and more participation in nondirect service activities mediate against the negative effects of stress (Acker, 1999; Bell et al., 2003; Proctor & Steadman, 2003; Rafferty, Friend, & Landsbergis, 2001; Skovholt et al., 2001). Doing multiple tasks and activities, engaging in non-school-related professional activities, taking a continuing education course, and so on will not only increase your intellectual excitement but also help control the development of stress. In this sense, diversifying one’s work activities serves as a preventive exercise.

### *Do Something Different*

Feelings of helplessness are a sure route to burnout. Helplessness can lead to anger, frustration, and emotional exhaustion. Believing that if you simply try harder or do more of something it will result in change is probably a lost cause, particularly if you are beginning to feel frustrated and angry about lack of change. Change your tactics; it may not work, but it will keep you motivated to see whether this “experiment” will work. There is evidence to suggest that if nothing else, doing something different provides a psychological boost and enhances one’s feelings of autonomy. And remember, you do not have to invent all of your

“new” activities. Talk with your colleagues, observe others, read articles – they may all have suggestions on something you simply have not thought of before.

### *“Take Five”*

The “water cooler” and the “coffee break” have become social phenomena and folklore. Strategically, however, this may be one of the most immediately effective tactics for handling stress. It is time out. In the context of service delivery, the social worker who tells the client, “That’s a good question. Let me think about it” is buying important time. Getting up and leaving your office for a few minutes “to pick up some papers” when dealing with a particularly belligerent and disrespectful student allows you to regain your composure. Not providing an immediate response is far better than providing an answer you may regret later. These “moments for thought” are necessary ingredients of good practice.

There is nothing wrong with working the occasional evening or weekend to catch up, but if it is your normal routine, check your symptom checklist again. Time away from work is there for a reason. Make the time; take the time.

The *first* defense against burnout is you. What you do for yourself personally and professionally will help you be a better practitioner. These strategies and tips have a proven track record across men and women of all ages in allaying the symptoms of burnout. The focus, as you probably noted, is on your work. Undoubtedly life stresses may also impact your work, and work stresses may spill over to your personal life. Some of the noted techniques should be helpful regardless of the source of stress. Perhaps the most important point is not to leave things up to chance, but to take control over the situation.

### **| Organizational Strategies**

The bad news is that research tells us burnout has less to do with personal characteristics, and much to do with the organization. But that is also the good news. Many attributes of a workplace are changeable. Just as much as individuals need to be cognizant of their mental health and health status, organizations need to be sensitive to their organizational climate.

Far too often, organizations wait until there is absenteeism, turnover, and poor performance – the organizational equivalent of burnout – before taking action. It is up to administrators, supervisors, *and* workers to ensure that the “system” is sensitive enough to notice problems, open enough to discuss them, and flexible enough to address them. The best practices that follow reflect activities that are feasible within budget-constrained environments. In addition, they also affirm an active status for the social worker in the process of organizational change. They offer opportunities for practitioners to engage in change activities as enablers, collaborators, mediators, and advocates. They also reflect the responsibility of school social workers.

### **Orientation to the Workplace**

The old saying “forewarned is forearmed” is apropos to organizations interested in helping prevent burnout. *Orientation* means providing information about the formal manuals and handbooks as well as unwritten rules, formal and informal protocols within the organization, the key players and decision makers in the organization, and access to and availability of resources. Such an orientation would help you identify the realities of the work context, and therefore, you would not have to learn through trial and error. In abstract, this is a form of critical support called *information support* (House, 1981). School social workers often work in multiple schools, which, in addition to having different key personnel, may have different procedures and expectations. Research on school psychologists suggests that individuals employed in a single setting fare better than those who serve multiple settings (Proctor & Steadman, 2003). This research underscores the importance of an orientation provided by the principals and key teachers, as well as a supervisor if present. A comprehensive and realistic orientation will go a long way toward helping the school social worker get a better handle on the job by reducing role ambiguity and conflict and by maximizing autonomy. If such an orientation does not exist, you should

request it and, if necessary, establish procedures to ensure that such an orientation will occur for future hires.

### **Quality of Supervision**

There is considerable evidence that the quality of supervision can make a significant difference in the quality of work and work life (Azar, 2000; Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002; Gant et al., 1993; Rafferty et al., 2001). Supervisors provide leadership, direction, and feedback on activities and performance, as well as offering support and mentoring. Good supervision not only helps reduce the negative effects of stress but also helps produce better quality service. However, there is nothing intrinsic to good supervisory practices; they require knowledge, skill, and expertise. As such, organizations should foster training and encourage supervisors to attend workshops that facilitate their growth and skills as supervisors. (See also chapter 109.)

### **Continued Training and Education**

There is considerable evidence supporting the contention that young workers are more at risk of developing stress symptoms and, consequently, feelings of burnout (Barak et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). This is not surprising, in that younger individuals are likely to have less expertise and mastery over professional tasks. In essence, these younger workers are likely to lack confidence and self-efficacy in their abilities. To the extent that this notion of self-efficacy holds true, it is of institutional value to maximize the probability of high worker self-efficacy by providing opportunities for training, workshops, mentoring, and supervision. When workers are confident, it is likely to mitigate against the negative effects of stress (Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997). Thus, school districts should require social workers to pursue continuing education classes. School social workers should pressure their school districts and unions to engender and enforce these activities. (See also chapter 113 for further information about continuing education and professional development.)

### **Develop Support Systems**

The evidence is in, and social support does make a positive difference. This could be as simple as having time set aside during the day for workers to talk things over or to go over some situations with teachers, counselors, and others. Sharing concerns, expressing thanks, helping out, and clarifying procedures can reduce stress and strain. Support is not merely emotional, it is also practical and often affirming. To assume that the workplace provides these types of support may be erroneous. Supervisors and administrators should make a conscious effort to build the community of support within the workplace. It should be part of the work routine. (See also chapter 110 for additional ideas on how to cope with isolation and build personal and professional networks.)

### **Safety and Comfort**

Recent research and public events suggest that violence prevention is an increasingly important component of school social work practice (Astor et al., 2004). Thus, quiet work space and safety are not merely bywords, but critical to good practice. Administrators and school districts must have plans in place and be prepared to provide a safe and comfortable work environment. School social workers should make it their responsibility to affirm these rights and not let it slide by under the guise of crowded schools.

### **Key Points to Remember**

Preventing burnout in the schools requires both individual and organizational action. While individual social workers can do much to increase their resilience to stress, organizations can do even more to help their workers become even better workers.

- Learn about the sources of stress both personal and situational. Pay attention to your symptoms.
- Take care of yourself – mind, body, and spirit. Take control of your personal health and well-being.
- Never stop learning. Take classes, talk with colleagues, and observe interactions.

- Set realistic goals.
- Be active in changing the workplace for the better. You will not only help yourself but also make it better for the students and the next worker.

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