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**Perspectives on  
Helping Relationships  
and the  
Helping Professions  
*Past, Present, and Future***

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# **Burnout: The Modern Malady of Helping**

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## **THE BURNOUT PROCESS AND ITS SYMPTOMS**

The incidence of burnout is rapidly increasing among the U.S. populace. Helping professionals are especially vulnerable to burnout because of the heavy time and emotional demands, responsibilities, and uncertainties they encounter by working with others. The need of helping professionals for information and intervention is, then, both personal and professional. It has long been recognized that a person can help others only to the extent that he or she is individually alert, aware, and self-actualized. These characteristics are at the opposite end of the spectrum from burnout. Maximizing individual potential as a life-style will naturally build resistance to burnout; understanding the burnout process and using appropriate intervention techniques will enable professionals to get the most out of life and avoid burnout. Personal awareness of burnout theory and practice provides practical information for working with others.

Stress underlies or complicates many, if not most, of the human problems with which helping professionals work daily. Recognizing and understanding the stress process and its extreme consequences-physical, mental, or emotional burnout-is a professional necessity for people who work with people. Being able to detect when a client is experiencing a stress response or suffering from burnout gives the professional insight into the client's perceptions and needs. Knowing psychological, social, physical, and environmental methods for avoiding burnout and for recuperating from stressful situations gives the helping professional a framework within which to work.

To appreciate how pervasive stress problems are in industrialized societies we need only comprehend that the major life-threatening diseases are no longer infectious diseases but stress diseases. A dramatic illustration of the prevalence of stress in society and the need to control its negative effects is that the three most used prescription drugs are for stress-related problems. These physical and

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mental problems are part of burnout. The symptoms of burnout are easily identified. Most people are familiar with them because they have, at least once, experienced some degree of burnout. As the name implies, burnout means “burning out” or exhausting one's mental, physical, and emotional resources. Tiredness, apathy, disillusionment, and depression are the most common symptoms of burnout. These symptoms are messages that the person has exhausted his or her internal resources or “adaptation energy.”

### **HOW WE GET BURNED OUT**

“Adaptation energy” is a term coined by Hans Selye, an endocrinologist known for his work with stress. He postulates (1974) that we start with a finite supply of life energy or adaptation energy, that each activity takes some of this energy, and that the stress response and even the adaptation to ongoing stressors continue to deplete the supply until there is a state of exhaustion when the person can no longer adapt to the stressor. This exhaustion stage, or burnout, results in mental or physical breakdown and, in its extreme phase, death. burnout.

Each time a stressful situation occurs, a person uses some energy to adapt. The amount of adaptation energy used and the stress accumulated will depend on the person and the situation. We frequently test our adaptation limits while trying to get the most out of our activities. After a full day of activity most people feel fatigued. They rest and start the next day refreshed and ready for more activity. They use their available adaptation energy in activity and replenish it with rest. If, however, a person continues to work even though his or her personal limit has been reached, that limit is stretched. If the person's limit is flexible and is not pushed too frequently, too intensely, or for too long there will be some accumulated energy depletion that creates a temporary state of disequilibrium; but rest, physical exercise, and a change of focus will return the organism to equilibrium. No long-term damage will result and the person's limits may be expanded to sustain more activity in the future. If, on the other hand, physically, or emotionally, a person exceeds his or her personal limit and keeps pressing on as a regular pattern without getting sufficient rest or recuperation, adaptation energy will be depleted, causing a severe state of disequilibrium. If this process is extremely intense or continues for some time, burnout will result.

The depletion of energy explains the burnout symptoms. Physical tiredness and feelings of exhaustion are a natural response. The lack of mental energy can be expected to be expressed as apathy. Without the energy to act effectively in the world, feelings of helplessness that are often expressed as disillusionment and depression are understandable.

Even when adaptation energy is available, a person is constrained by limits,

some of which are physical. A trained athlete would be expected to have more flexibility and less restrictive limits than a person who does little physical activity. Similarly, diet, rest, general physical condition, and physical tone affect the determination of each person's physical flexibility and limits. Not all our limits and flexibility or rigidity are physical. We also have mental and emotional limits. Some things are “unbelievable,” “beyond comprehension,” or “too far out”—past our mental limits. Common expressions of emotional limits are “enough is enough,” “I won't take any more,” “I've had it.” What those limits are will be individually determined and may vary over time, depending on the interaction of physical, psychological, emotional, and environmental factors. The flexibility of mental and emotional dimensions can be increased and limits stretched through learning and practice, just as physical factors can be. Though we vary in our flexibility, the closer we approach our limits the more energy we need to continue. It is possible to expand limits and increase flexibility in all dimensions, but the closer the absolute limit is approached, the greater the effort must be for a smaller gain. Pushing to expand limits is growth; breaking limits is burnout and, in some cases, can result in permanent damage or death.

Early awareness of symptoms is a warning or safety valve. Developing this awareness helps maximize potential by signaling the time to stop. By recognizing burnout symptoms we can increase flexibility when we need it and refrain from exceeding limits when we do not. By responding to burnout signals quickly protect our mental and physical health, job effectiveness, job satisfaction, and quality of life.

People in the helping professions too often operate close to their limits, which results in too great an expenditure of physical, mental, or emotional adaptation energy. In fact, a characteristic of these professions is their lack of clear boundaries. There is always more that could be done for clients needing the help professional's skills. People choose helping professions because they care about people. That caring is both what makes their jobs rewarding and what makes them vulnerable to burnout. Because we do have limits we need to understand the phenomenon of burnout, use prevention techniques, and recognize and respond to burnout symptoms.

## **THE PERCEPTUAL BASIS OF BURNOUT**

Knowing limits is an important first step in avoiding burnout. Individual limits are determined by physical makeup; physical state; past experiences; cultural, social, and personal values; and everything else that affects perception at any given time. The evaluation of perceptions determines what will be a stressor each person and what will be positively stimulating.

Many people say that they work better under “stress.” Pressure, deadlines, and concurrent projects motivate them to achieve. The apparent conflict between stress as a work inhibitor and as an achievement stimulator can be resolved by understanding the curvilinear nature of stress. If we think of stress as an inverted U, or 1 the top or rounded part would be stimulation and the two ends would be stress. One side represents too much stimulation, the other too little. Too many responsibilities, too much noise, too many projects, too much repetition, and too many new experiences can cause a stress response, but so can no responsibilities, no noise, no projects, no repetition, and no new experiences. How much is too much or too little depends on the person, the intensity, the duration, and the frequency of stimulation.

People vary in what constitutes “too much” or “too little” but once the too much or too little point is reached and the stimulus becomes a stressor, there is a general human response called the stress response. Initially, the physical system changes in order to mobilize maximum energy to either fight or escape the stressor. This state of disequilibrium is a high-energy state. The body is brought to its peak readiness for fight or flight. If the system is kept in a state of constant readiness for danger or must continually or frequently adapt to a return to the stress response, it will use much adaptation energy. If there is no opportunity for the system to return to a normal balance or equilibrium, it will keep using adaptation energy until the supply is depleted and the arousal system, a basic part of our survival mechanism, is worn out, resulting in burnout.

Although most of the work on stress has focused on the overload side of the process, underload is a danger also. In a study on job satisfaction, Coburn (1979) found that the most satisfied workers were somewhat overloaded and the least happy were underemployed. In specially created environments with minimal sensory stimuli, people quickly break down and lose touch with reality.

Overload is a threat because of the fear of not being able to meet challenges or cope with stimuli demands. Constant encounters with a stressor or with many stressors deplete adaptation energy as has already been explained.

Lack of stimuli is a threat of a different sort. It threatens the ego, the self. Without opportunities to act effectively, feelings of helplessness develop. Having little or no responsibility can lead to feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. These feelings are threatening and thus stressful. Combating these messages of worthlessness and maintaining a positive self-image require energy.

It is important to remember that the process is perceptual. It is not particular events that cause a stress response, but a person's perception of events and his or her evaluation of the perception. Stressors do not always objectively occur in the present; they can be from the past or the future. They exist in the present through the perceptions or mental images of the person. When the person holds on to a mental image of the stressor and continues to rehearse the event with “if

only I had. . .” or “if only I hadn't . . . ,” the effect of the stressor continues. In a similar way, images of disasters and threats create stressors for the person who focuses on the uncertainty of the future. It is not a question of whether the stressor exists as an objective threat, it is the belief of the person that something disastrous will happen that initiates the stress response.

Some situations are more likely than others to cause a stress response in people, but in each case it is the meaning attributed to the event by the individual that triggers the response. Some examples may help clarify this. Death of a spouse has been rated as the most stressful life event. However, many factors affect the intensity of this stressor. Suddenness of death is one factor. Accidental, unexpected death is more stressful than anticipated death. The death of a spouse who has had a long, painful battle with a terminal disease may be viewed as a relief from suffering. With an anticipated death there is a signal to tie up loose ends, to resolve conflicts, to forgive and be forgiven. A sudden death gives no opportunity to gain closure on the relationship. The surviving spouse will face changes in many aspects of life without a preparatory time and may also feel the frustration of all the unsaid good-byes. Again, it is individual. Some people, even return to the knowledge of impending death, deny the possibility of death and do not use the opportunity to come to closure in the relationship. Others live each day as a process of staying emotionally clear in their relationships so that even with a sudden death there is no feeling of incompleteness. Both of these examples assume some degree of loss, but there is also the case of the person whose marriage has been full of mental or physical abuse who may find the death of her or his spouse a relief. In many situations a mixture of these responses occurs. The stress response will depend on the perception of the situation, the evaluation of that perception, and the amount of time the perception continues with an evaluation that is threatening.

It has been argued that change of any type is a stressor (Holmes and Rahe, 1967); however, more recent research (Gersten, et al., 1974; Johnson and Sarason, 1979; Mueller, Edwards, and Yaivis, 1977; Vinokur and Selzer, 1975) indicates that while the initial response appears to be the same as the fight-or-flight response (Cannon, 1953), there is no negative effect. The valence of the stressor, positive or negative, appears to determine the type of response. Therefore, although positive activities use adaptation energy and can push us to our physical, mental, and emotional limits, the effect will differ from that of a negatively evaluated stimulus. Simonton, Matthews-Simonton, and Creighton (1978) state that the immune and endocrine systems respond selectively to positive and negative perceptions. Positive perceptions create changes that support health while negative perceptions can lead to illness. Using adaptation energy for positively perceived activities can lead to fatigue and a need for rest and recuperation, but the apathy, disillusionment, and helpless feelings that accompany

burnout resulting from stressors should be absent. However, even when activity is positive, it is important to heed signals that indicate a limit is being reached. Breaking absolute limits and depleting adaptation energy in any direction can have damaging effects.

### **PERCEPTUAL STRESS INTERVENTION**

There are four general categories for managing stress: psychological, social, physical, and environmental. Each of these types of stress management has two functions. One function is to decrease the number of situations that are perceived or evaluated as stressors and to decrease the intensity of the stressors. For example, when a person is tired more stimuli will trigger a stress perception or evaluation than when a person is well rested. A situation that is insignificant when the person is energetic can be a major stressor for the same person when she or he is exhausted or overstimulated. The second stress management function activates when a person recognizes that he or she is experiencing stress or burnout symptoms. In this case the stress management task is to intervene in the process to help the person cope with the stressor or stressors most effectively. Psychologically reevaluating the situation as a challenge, organizing and prioritizing energy expenditures, and talking with a friend or an appropriate professional are all examples of the second function of stress management. A third function of intervention is to handle the burnout phase, but since the ways to recuperate from burnout are the same as those that moderate the stress response (the first function); they will be explained together. However, note that recuperation from burnout will require more attention and practice of stress management processes than simple maintenance does.

Psychological aspects of stress management include knowledge about stress and about one's responses and approaches to different stimuli as they affect perception and evaluation of potential stressors. This psychological awareness prepares the person and also provides a means to reevaluate the stressor and determine a course of action. Social support moderates the stressor effects. Use of social support systems to prepare for or reevaluate stressors is another stress management process. Physical exercise, a healthy diet, adequate rest, meditation and relaxation techniques all keep the person physically strong and more likely to have adaptation energy available. These physical factors can also be used to help regain equilibrium during and after a stress response. A "healthy" environment is another protection because it does not add stressors and provides a safe refuge.

The other part of stress management is encountering specific stressors effectively. To manage the stress response and to prevent burnout, it is necessary to be aware of stress symptoms. Without that awareness there would not be a

recognition of the need to intervene. On noticing symptoms it is important identify the stressor or stressors. Unidentified stressors cause continuing anxiety. By knowing the stressor it is possible to choose an intervention method and develop a plan for managing the stressor.

In addition to identifying particular stressors, examining attitudes, approaches, and processes that decrease perceptions of threat can help to change the patterns that cause an evaluation of a stimulus as a stressor. Since the stress reaction is triggered by evaluation of a perception, a psychological process, our search for effective intervention will begin with psychological factors. Because psychological factors are central to the determination of stressors and therefore are perceived stress management, they receive the main attention in this discussion of burnout prevention.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN STRESS MANAGEMENT**

Psychological patterns can bias a person to perceive or evaluate stimuli as stressors and thereby increase the number of stressors with which that person must cope. However, through awareness and training it is possible to use the knowledge of salient psychological patterns to manage stress and to reinterpret potential stressors to discharge their negative effects. The same stimuli that to some people, at some times, can be threatening may be perceived alternately opportunities or challenges.

### **Control**

One of the most researched psychological factors in stress is control. The perception of control can short-circuit the stress response entirely. In a study by Glass and Singer (1972) using noise as the stressor, subjects who were given objects that they were told would stop the noise if they really needed to stop it responded to a stressor differently than a group that had no means of apparent rescue. The response of the subjects who thought they could control the stressor was the same as that of the control group that heard no stressor. In fact, neither experimental group could have stopped the stressor. The objects that were given were not connected to the sound. The important element is that the people *thought* there was a connection and that belief gave them a perception of psychological control.

The perception of no control can have either a positive or a negative effect, depending on the evaluation made by the person. One interpretation of no control

is that the situation is “no longer my responsibility; there is nothing further I can do; therefore, since it is out of my hands it is not my concern.” When a person relinquishes responsibility for affecting a stressor, the stress response ceases. However, if the evaluation of lack of control results in feelings of helplessness, there is a negative effect. Seligman (1975), in analyzing the research on helplessness and control, attributes many stress-related problems, from depression to ulcers, to feelings of helplessness.

Kobasa, Hilker, and Maddi (1979) have found three factors that differentiated high stress-low illness management personnel from high stress-high illness management personnel: a belief that one can control or affect events and situations, the perception that change presents a challenge and an opportunity, and an awareness of and involvement with one's self.

### **Preparation and Expectations**

Preparation for a stressor makes the adaptation process easier. This is commonly accomplished through gathering information and rehearsing various value of responses to the stressor. Effective rehearsal techniques can be categorized as either active or mental. Active rehearsals include drills and role plays. Developing mental images of what will happen and trying out different responses to an internal stressor or a potential stressor are an example of mental rehearsal. Lazarus (1977) postulates that coping may precede a stressor when there are time and opportunity to determine a desirable response through rehearsal and when the development of accurate mental images takes away the surprise element. Accurate mental images or expectations are a preparation for a stressful event. Expectations are formulated from the available information about a potential stressor and the individual processing of this information. Negative effects of threatening stimuli are frequently diminished by information (Mills and Krantz, 1979). One example of the effect of accurate expectations in a stressful situation is found in a study on postoperative adjustments (Janis, 1977). Women who had accurate expectations about postoperative pain recuperated more quickly than those who had denied the significance of the operations and the pain.

In a study particularly relevant for helping professionals, inaccurate expectations related directly to burnout. Sullivan (1979) reports on a special project for autistic children. An interdisciplinary group of helping professionals approached the project with hopes of great progress for the children. After several months the professionals who had worked with autistic children before evaluated the program's effectiveness highly and had no signs of burnout, while professionals who had not previously worked with autistic children believed they were making no progress and exhibited many stress symptoms. Formulating accurate expectation of notations inhibits faulty perceptions or unwarranted

threatening evaluations that can unnecessarily create stressors. Expectations are a yardstick for judging two success measures of work: progress and meaningfulness.

### **Meaningfulness**

Work that is intrinsically meaningful is usually less stressful. This is, however, another case of the curvilinear, or inverted U, aspect of stress. In situations in which a person is extremely invested in an outcome, particularly when the consequences are high (as in life-or-death situations), the personal involvement can increase the stress factor. In most working environments the stakes are not so high and the meaningfulness of the work is a positive factor. For some people it is sufficient that they value their activities. For most people it is also important to have outside validation of the worth of their activities. If family, peers, and society respect and understand the effort that goes into a particular activity and value the process and result, appreciation is one reward for the professional. In Western society one's salary or financial gain is another indication of societal value of a particular work product. Social status and monetary compensation are the main ways Western society expresses what it values. Without one or both of these traditional forms of societal value, it is difficult for man people to maintain internal motivation and satisfaction.

Approach to potential stressors is an element in the determination of whether a stimulus becomes a stressor or a motivator. The Kabosa, Hilker, and Maddi study of high stress–low illness versus high stress–high illness found that the high stress–low illness group approached new situations as challenges. They were motivated by the stimuli, not overwhelmed by change. The approaches people take are determined by their personalities, cognitive styles, past experiences, present state, values, and cultural patterns—in short, their self-concept.

Losing a job can be a devastating event or it can be an opportunity to try something new. For the person who approaches this situation as an opportunity, a new career is a challenge, not a block. Although there is a time to mourn loss or regret change, there is also a time to move on. To abide in depression is unhealthy. People can choose the framing of their experiences, though this freedom is masked by set patterns developed by past experiences, modeling, and learned evaluations. As awareness of these patterns grows, so does the ability to choose different evaluations and responses. Developing self-awareness is a responsibility of helping professionals. Helping others become more self-aware and cognizant of their choices is at the crux of most of our jobs.

For the helping professional, the source of burnout can be seeing too many challenges that by frequency or magnitude become evaluated as insurmountable.

“It makes me tired just to think of another case so complex” can be a response to problems many helping professionals face. The challenge here is threefold: (1) to see if the overwhelming problem can be broken into manageable sections, (2) to recognize which aspects are controllable and which are not controllable, at least the present, and (3) to let go of feelings of responsibility for what is not controllable. A fifth-grade teacher who has a student who cannot read will have to evaluate the situation and determine steps that would represent progress toward a goal. Perhaps developing a desire to read or a positive attitude toward books is a necessary first step. Learning the alphabet or associating sounds with written symbols might come next. In order not to feel burned out because the student is not reading, the teacher must break the behavior into small goals so that progress and accomplishment can be recognized by both the student and the teacher.

### **Organization and Closure**

Two important and closely related elements in creating or avoiding burnout are organization and closure. Organization is the ability to order stimuli into meaningful perceptions. Closure is the process of bringing to a finish a continuing situation.

The cognitive organization process is what creates a perception of order from the myriad stimuli received by the senses. This process differentiates stimuli into units for identification. This is something we assume and take for granted because it is so basic to functioning. Part of the organizational process is sorting out what needs primary attention and what is secondary. In Gestalt terminology this means determining the foreground and the background. The organizational process sorts out specific foci of attention from the general environment. Disorientation is a disruption in this process. When stimuli bombard us at a faster rate than we are able to order them, the experience will be threatening. Not being able to identify and order stimuli leaves the individual with vulnerable feelings because it is difficult to know with unknown elements where threat resides. When we are disoriented, stimuli are unorganized. In confusion we seek the order or patterns in the environment and within ourselves to understand a situation.

In each new or changing situation we scan the stimuli to ascertain dangers. Our ability to recognize patterns helps us to recognize threat and no threat. For example, during World War II, before the air raid system was used, there was a constant state of panic in England (Seligman, 1975). After warning systems were implemented there was a recognizable pattern, an order. Whenever signals were not going off, people knew they were safe and life resumed normalcy.

Learning to drive a car is stressful. There are so many stimuli to attend to at the same time. As we adapt to new patterns and organize stimuli we are able

to differentiate between the foreground elements, which need primary attention, and the background elements, to which we respond automatically. A new job is another illustration of the importance of cognitive organizational structures. As new information is presented it can be confusing and threatening if there is no order to it. Chaotic situations are more stressful because they require the person to create a structure in order to sort out what elements might be threatening and determine how to attend to the different stimuli so as to avoid pain or injury. In contrast, past situations provide immediate approximate structures. They provide a form for adaptation. This form or image can be compared with new situations as an organizational basis. By comparing new situations with the structure of an old one, modifications or accommodations are made. "This is like" and "that is different" ultimately result in the creation of a new structure to fit new situations. On meeting a new person or seeing a new place, it is a common response to think, "She looks like. . ." or "This place is like. . ." As more familiarity with the person or place develops, even the perception of similarity may fade as the identity of the person or place becomes more individual, more unique. Piaget described this process as adaptation, mainly in terms of child development, but his perspective should not be overlooked for its contribution to understanding the cognitive processes of organization and adaptation that occur across all stages of development.

Being able to organize a situation, to choose what needs immediate attention and what can be ignored, helps sort out unnecessary threats. Similarly, being organized about work can help avoid burnout. Organizing what needs to be done in the order of importance is an energy saver and a control mechanism. The direction provided by ordering is a starting point for action. Actively confronting a stressful situation establishes the perception of control and avoids feelings of helplessness, which are extremely detrimental and a major cause of burnout. To organize accomplishes other stress management goals. One must prepare for and establish realistic expectations about a stressor in the process of organizing information about it. Once information about a stressor is organized and structured, an evaluation can be made as to whether it is actually within the control domain of the person. If it is not, the uncertainty of control can be resolved and the person can choose an adaptation mode. On another level, that choice gives the perception of control.

Another psychological factor in burnout is the lack of closure. Everything that is left unresolved requires continuing attention. It is important to complete things even if what is completed is not an entire project; by bringing closure to sections of a large project, progress can be charted.

People need to see progress in what they do. Watching people weave in and out of traffic illustrates this point. They do not actually arrive anywhere significantly faster, but they experience movement. Progress is not only external;

eventually, without a perception of personal growth, burnout will occur. Not all people have the satisfaction of growth through their work. For those who do not, it may be sufficient that their work gives them the *means* to grow or accomplish other things. If activities do not give a feeling of gain, growth, or accomplishment and also do not provide the means to achieve these feelings, there will be a stressor effect. Whenever there is a process of giving out with no reward or return, there is a potential for burnout.

To prevent this from happening to themselves, helping professionals, whose work is overly demanding, other-oriented, directed toward giving, and frequently never-ending and underpaid, *must* periodically review their accomplishments, track their own growth, and clarify and redefine their goals.

## **SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Social support systems comprised of families and friends have been found to moderate stressors in all stages of life—as they say, from cradle to grave. Belonging to a group is one of the strongest human needs. A person may feel less vulnerable as part of a group than if he or she were alone. Potential stressors that can enlarge and become more threatening in one's mental images can be preserved from this distortion when they are shared with another person. Relating perceptions and evaluations of potential stressors to supportive friends or professionals can be analogous to turning on the light in a room full of menacing shadows. Each act reveals that monsters or threats exist more in imagination (the “what ifs”) than in reality. Sharing helps even when stressors are evaluated accurately. It helps the organizational process and can be a means for determining the control or no-control elements in a situation.

Strong social support requires a commitment to others and a level of caring. Verbal and nonverbal communication is the basis for developing and maintaining reciprocal support relationships. Being cut off from communication with a loved one is one of the most stressful situations people encounter. Communicating openly and effectively in your support system requires attention and effort. It also demands skillful communication. Since the determination of stressors is perceptual, listening skills are essential to learning another's perceptions in order to understand his or her concerns. Listening to others' evaluations can also add useful information for reevaluation of stressors when receiving support.

Another part of maintaining social support is being able to communicate both negative and positive feelings. Taking responsibility for one's feelings can allow honesty without creating defensiveness. This builds trust and guards against the accumulation of resentment. Both personal and professional support systems require clear communication.

Feedback from peers should be specific and based on observed data. Helping professionals can be resources for one another by using the skills they have developed to help their clients and by remembering the power of positive reinforcement. Too often people assume that others know which behaviors have positive effects. The person who is acting may be so focused on responding to environmental factors that patterns, rather than cognitive awareness of choices, may be dictating behaviors. Reinforcing positive behaviors by specific feedback increases awareness. This information from respected others helps a person feel valued, competent, and effective—all parts of self-evaluation that make effort worthwhile and prevent burnout.

## **PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF STRESS MANAGEMENT**

Although the determination of a stressor is psychological, the physical condition of a person affects both the perception and evaluation of the potential stressor. Physical state can both increase and decrease the number of stressors and the intensity of those stressors. It is also a key to intervening in the stress response, an integrated psychophysiological reaction, and to recuperating from burnout. Exercise and rest are the two most obvious factors in stress management, but diet and routine should also be considered.

When an animal encounters a stressor it either tries to escape through running away or it fights. In either case there is physical activity. The stress response is a physical change supporting one of those behaviors through mobilizing energy. Social conditioning intervenes in this process for humans, causing them, frequently, to not respond behaviorally to the stress. The absence of fighting or fleeing behaviors does not mean that the physical system did not change and prepare to act, but that the person may have inhibited the natural response. Exercise appears to help the body use extra energy mobilized to encounter the stressor, so it can return to a state of equilibrium. Exercise is also strengthening. When a person is strong and healthy, there is more energy to combat daily stimuli, so fewer situations arise as threats. In Western society, in which so many occupations require mental rather than physical activity, exercise must be planned for. It is not a by-product of most jobs.

When watching animals encounter stressors the most obvious behavior is the immediate action. But that action is followed by rest. It is the combination of rest and activity that returns the system to a true state of equilibrium. Although people do gain rest through sleep, often that rest is insufficient. Accumulated stress can also inhibit sleep, creating a further energy drain. Relaxation techniques help normalize the physical system and give the rest needed to replenish energy supplies. The most researched relaxation technique is the transcendental

mediation program (Orme-Johnson and Farrow, 1976). The technique taught in this program is easily learned and practiced. Progressive relaxation (Jacobson, 1938) is another practice. It operates through the successive contracting and relaxing of different muscle groups. This sometimes combined with mental imagery.

Diet can change the physical state and affect perception and evaluation of potential stressors. Sugar, caffeine, and alcohol can all alter perceptions. Anxiety, depression, nervousness, and tension are common responses to an overload of these elements. Maintaining a healthy diet and being aware of what is being ingested is part of stress management.

Having a regular routine that includes exercise, food, rest, work, social support, and leisure time is ideal. *Balance* is the cornerstone of stress management. The physical elements of exercise, rest and a healthy diet should be basic parts of a program to combat or prevent burnout.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS MANAGEMENT**

Sometimes the stressors causing burnout are parts of the environment. Identifying these stressors can lead to changing them. For example, a clock that makes an unpleasant, constant ticking sound might be an irritant. Having identified the stressor, it is possible to fix or change the clock. When stressors cannot be changed provisions should be made for periodic escape from them. In the case of the clock, if it cannot be adjusted or removed, ear plugs or working in another place might be an answer, but if all else fails, find quiet places to retreat.

One's home environment should, ideally, provide a retreat. When the physical environment is a stressor it is worth the effort to reorder the environment to the best of one's ability. It can be difficult to change an environment that is a stressor because of relationships with others. Communications skills are essential in such cases and professional help often can be critical. Problem-solving skills, including the ability to organize and prioritize, are stress management tools for environmental stressors.

Regular vacations allow mental and physical recuperation from daily environmental stressors. Vacations, like rest, are an investment in increased effectiveness. Being away from stressors allows a person to build up energy reserves and to approach daily stressors with a fresh perspective. Creativity requires latency periods that vacations can provide. However, the vacation must be mental as well as physical. Bringing daily problems along on vacation undercuts the retreat and nullifies the benefit of the respite.

## SUMMARY

Environmental stress management, like the social, physical, and psychological aspects, is only effective when it is practiced. The first step is awareness: awareness of the process of burnout, awareness of the symptoms of burnout, and awareness of stress intervention methods for prevention and recuperation from burnout.

The process of burnout is psychophysiological. The conditions and past experiences that affect both body and mind interact to create perceptions of stimuli and evaluations of those perceptions. Once the evaluation of threat is made, a stressor exists, and the body prepares to escape or combat it. This physical change can be detected through attention to stress symptoms.

Awareness of stress symptoms facilitates the identification of stressors, the source of concern. Once the stressors are located, a reevaluation can be made to determine the degree of threat. When symptoms indicate burnout they signal a depletion of adaptation energy and the approach of an absolute limit. This condition suggests that immediate recuperation measures are necessary.

Intervention can be psychological, social, physical, or environmental. With burnout, all should be explored. Psychologically, attitudes and approaches can be examined as stressors are reevaluated. Control, preparation techniques, expectations, challenge, meaningfulness of activity, and ability to organize and come to closure should be analyzed.

Socially, support systems are helpful in moderating and managing stress and preventing burnout. Both professional and personal support systems are helpful. Communication and specific data-based feedback are useful in developing and maintaining support systems.

Exercise, relaxation, diet, and regular routines are stress management tools. They should all be utilized when recuperating from burnout. They bring the physical system back to a state of equilibrium and help restore necessary adaptation energy so life can be enjoyed actively and fully.

Problem solving, to eliminate environmental stressors, can relieve unnecessary stress. The home environment should be nurtured to provide a refuge from other stressors. Taking regular vacations is an environmental stress management technique that is an investment in more effective activity. Vacations must be mental as well as physical.

Although these techniques have been separated into four categories, it is obvious that they are connected and that each overlaps the others. The most effective burnout prevention is an integrated program that uses all these elements in the best balance for the individual.

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*Note:* This format differs slightly from the original book version.

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