

## PREVENTING BURNOUT

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### Primary Prevention

What can individuals do about burnout? Let's start with **primary prevention**. This means the things that might help everyone prevent burnout. Here we focus on resilience-enhancing behaviors. These are evidence-based activities that can benefit everyone physically, mentally, and spiritually and may help us resist burnout.

- The first of these is **practicing gratitude**. This can take the form, for example, of setting aside time (a few minutes is enough) each day to reflect on a few things for which we're thankful. And [some research](#) suggests that if we include in our lists social activities or something about relationships, the benefit is even greater. My husband and I try to do this together every night over dinner: each of us names three things we're grateful for that happened in the past 24 hours.
- The second resilience-enhancing activity is engaging in daily **physical exercise**. You might first think of running or swimming, strenuous exercise, which is great but not always feasible. Walking, going up and down the stairs, lifting weights, doing yoga, and just moving about rather than sitting at our desks for hours on end also contribute to a healthier body, mind, and spirit.
- Equally important is eating a **healthy diet**. Mom was right when she said, "eat your veggies." It's not always easy to eat right when you're at work, but it does our bodies tremendous good to eat the rainbow (foods of different colors) every day, stock up on fruits, veggies, and complex carbohydrates (like beans and grains), rather than eating fast foods or lots of meat.
- It may sound difficult, but getting enough **sleep** is hugely important. And we now know that this means something like 8 hours a night, plus a nap if you can...no kidding! I had a friend who kept an inflated air mattress in his closet at work so he could grab a nap for 20 minutes during his lunch hour every day. Research has established that people who nap are more productive at work in the afternoon than those who don't—tell your boss!
- Another very useful way to build resilience is to develop **competence** (the skills you need to do your job) and **confidence** (the knowledge that you can do it). We can build our skills through study and apprenticeship, for example. Sometimes we have the skills but don't trust ourselves. Confidence comes about through practice and feedback.
- One of the best-documented ways to enhance our resilience is to build and use **social support**. This means finding people in your personal and professional life whom you can talk to about what's important to you (emotional support) and whom you can ask for help when you need it (instrumental support). We can do this through Skype, Facebook or other social media outlets, or good old phone, written, or in-person contact.
- It's very helpful to try to look at life through a **positive lens** rather than negative one. This doesn't mean to deny that bad things are happening. Rather, it means searching for the good in our life



circumstances, facing challenges with realistic optimism rather than with dread or gloom, and trying to find lessons in the inevitable setbacks we all encounter.

- Finding **meaning** or purpose in your daily activities and your work can be very helpful to preventing burnout. Knowing how your job fits in to the larger picture of your agency's mission is one example that can keep us connected to the value of our work.
- We cannot overemphasize the value of engaging in a **spiritual practice**. For some people, this will mean prayer or other practices reflecting their faith. For others, meditation, spending time in nature, engaging in meaningful contributions to others can all be spiritually nourishing. A friend of mine spends time almost every day helping out her friends and neighbors, with a loving heart and generous hand. She is a spiritual rock star.

## Reflection Questions

- What are three things for which I'm grateful that happened or of which I was especially aware in the past 24 hours? Include at least one that involves other people.
- What could I do today to be more physically active than yesterday?
- What healthy food choices could I make today?
- How can I get more sleep tonight than last night?
- Are there skills I need to develop that would help me be more effective in my job? How can I increase my confidence in the way I do my job?
- Is there someone I could connect with today, even briefly, someone to talk (or write) to who understands and cares about me?
- Is there any positive aspect to a tough situation I'm in right now? Anything I can learn about myself or others that might help me next time around?
- How does the work I'm doing this week relate to my agency's mission? Can I think of any benefit, however small, my work has produced in the past week?
- Where might I look for spiritual renewal, for meaning and hope today?



## Secondary Prevention

If you feel like you are losing your sense of meaning in your work, if the people you're there to help don't matter as much to you anymore, if you're beginning to feel emotionally depleted or used up, if you don't feel like you are accomplishing much at work...what can you do about it? We can use the term **secondary prevention** to refer to suggestions aimed at folks who are in stressful jobs where burnout is a strong possibility, which includes humanitarian workers!<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of possible sources of burnout, read *What to do About Burnout: Identifying Your Sources*.

First of all, how well do your **values** and those of your agency **fit** one another? For example, you may feel that it's very important to be deeply engaged with and helpful to individuals, while your agency may be oriented to assisting as many people as possible, even if it means doing something small for or with large numbers of folks. If fit of values is an issue, it helps to look for commonalities, places where your values match, as well as to think about whether you can learn to value the things your agency thinks are important.

What about the **fit** between your **interests, talents, and skills** and your job description? Collaboration and conversation with your boss or co-workers can help you both to understand the fit issue and to enhance your skills or expand or shift your job description if this is a problem area.

As we all know, **workload** can really affect people. It's inevitable that we will sometimes feel like the amount of work we have to do can't be done in the available time. But if your job constantly demands more than you can accomplish, this is an area requiring attention. Some approaches include learning to work more efficiently, asking for more help, or developing longer task or project time lines.

Sometimes taking on **new tasks** can revitalize your job, especially, if you aren't that interested in it these days. Of course when burnout is on the horizon, a natural response is to feel like doing less. Yet adding a new task or working with new people can add zest to your work days. Sometimes I volunteer to do something additional even when I can't see how it will fit into my schedule because experience has taught me that I can work more efficiently when I'm engaged in something new.

**Reorganizing** the way you currently do your work or **restructuring** your work day can also be helpful. Sometimes I want to sit at my computer and work in a focused way for hours, only getting up to stretch every 20 to 30 minutes. At other times, I find that breaking up the focused work with phone calls, e-mail, or non-desk work energizes me.

**Focusing on what one is doing** is more helpful than looking for external signs of progress or success. Knowing you are doing your best can provide satisfaction. When we do look for external signs of progress, we often look for big changes. Big change comes about through small steps, and learning to value glimmers of progress is a useful perspective.

Finding a **role model** at work could also help prevent burnout. We all know someone who's been doing humanitarian work for a long time who seems able to sustain himself or herself in the work, to enjoy and value it. If you can identify such a person in your agency or elsewhere, you may be able to learn from him or her about ways to stay engaged.

**Taking breaks** from work, during each day for meals, walks, or short conversations with others, can replenish all of us. Another type of break comes through taking vacations as well as **rest periods** between assignments. Such "rebound time" is vital to long-term resilience, as it allows us to consolidate and integrate our experiences before we open the doors to a new set of challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the suggestions in this paper are based on the important scholarly contributions of Drs. Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter.



Many people find it useful to take time for **private reflections** in the form of meditation, prayer, or writing in a journal, listening to a favorite piece of music, or going for a walk in nature. A colleague of mine used to keep a sketchpad and pencils next to her desk. After doing something particularly difficult, she would take a couple of minutes to draw something as a way of putting her feelings on paper. You don't have to be Picasso for this process to be valuable!

## Reflection Questions

- Do your values match up with those your agency? Is there any overlap? Are there places you can “grow” your values to increase the fit?
- How well do your skills match your job requirements? If not very well, is there a way you could gain new skills or could your job description be changed to build on your strengths?
- How often do you feel like you can't accomplish what you are expected to do within the given time frame? What would be one way to address this problem next time you face it?
- Is there something that your agency needs that you might enjoy doing? Could you ask about taking on something new for a defined period of time? If doing so might put you on overload, is there something else you can give up or put on hold for awhile?
- Would it be more interesting to do your tasks in a different order tomorrow?
- What have you done unusually well in the past week? What task can you give your best to in the next week?
- What can you learn from talking with or observing someone at work who seems energized?
- When is the next opportunity to take a 5 minute break? A lunch hour that includes a nap, time for reflection or connection, a walk? A day off? A vacation? Write it in your calendar!
- What is your favorite way to relax and reflect, and when can you next do that?



## What Agencies Can Do to Prevent Burnout?

Humanitarian organizations strive to improve the lives of their beneficiaries by providing first-rate services. An important goal that promotes this mission is to reduce staff burnout.

A major objective in reducing burnout is to create an organizational culture that recognizes the risks of humanitarian work as well as its rewards. Agencies can move in this direction by acknowledging that this work is stressful for both workers and their families. Doing so reduces the stigma of burnout, encourages staff to do whatever they can to prevent and address it, and opens the door for agencies to do the same.

Below we offer four agency strategies along with a wide range of possible ideas for ways to implement them. The strategies and many of the tasks are based in contemporary research, some with humanitarian workers. We hope this list will stimulate your thinking to develop your own tasks or to modify or apply these to your work place.

### **Strategy I: Adjust agency policies and systems to help prevent burnout**

- Task A: Put in place and enforce worker- and work-friendly personnel policies (adequate compensation, time off including rest, relaxation, and renewal; professional development activities; a formal system for addressing concerns, conflicts, and complaints; professional development; physical and mental health benefits). Provide these benefits for both national and expat staff.
- Task B: Enforce zero tolerance for sexual harassment and bullying in the work place.
- Task C: Provide accurate job descriptions including clearly articulated reporting relationships (who has authority over whom, for what), update regularly (ideally annually) with those who hold the jobs, outline clear paths for advancement within the agency or make it clear that advancement isn't likely or possible and why.
- Task D: Develop and enforce boundaried work expectations , e.g., 40 hour work weeks whenever possible and extra support during times when it is not.

### **Strategy II: Facilitate interpersonal communication between workers, between staff and managers, and throughout the agency's hierarchy**

- Task A: Facilitate bi-directional communication across the hierarchy.
- Task B: Give regular and frequent feedback on successes (small and large, individual and agency) as well as shortcomings.
- Task C: Include workers in decisions that affect them.
- Task D: Provide staff with the big picture about how their jobs fit into the agency's mission and how that mission fits into the country's situation, as well as agency progress toward goals.

### **Strategy III: Provide training**

- Task A: Prepare people for their work through orientation to both agency culture and job; training; and information about new assignments, including orientation to the culture for expats.



- Task B: Provide training in staff resilience (what it is, why it matters to worker and workplace, how to enhance it).
- Task C: Provide training in direct and indirect trauma (what it looks like, how it affects people, how it will affect their work, what to do with it in themselves, and how to work with others who are affected).
- Task D: Help workers understand their conflict styles and how to relate to others with different styles; teach conflict management skills including assertiveness so people learn how to express their concerns constructively.

#### **Strategy IV: Provide staff support programs and activities**

- Task A: Provide competent supervisors and managers who can guide, support, reinforce, and develop staff. Focus on recruiting, training, developing, and supporting managers.
- Task B: Balance support and challenge for all workers to combat stress and boredom.
- Task C: Attend to fit between worker and workplace, and between worker and job, especially as jobs and job descriptions evolve over time ([Maslach & Leiter, 2008](#)).
- Task D: Develop work teams to enhance morale, social support, and interdependence across work tasks.
- Task E: Provide rest and renewal activities and opportunities to reflect upon and consolidate experiences. This includes time to bounce back and as well as a process beyond debriefing for integrating experiences between deployments.
- Task F: Provide regular and frequent access to families and friends (e.g., Skype).
- Task G: Provide support for families of deployed people, which might include communication channels, job possibilities for spouses, and virtual support groups for spouses and kids.
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