

WHAT TO DO ABOUT BURNOUT:

Identifying Your Sources

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You know the feeling...It's Wednesday and you don't feel like getting out of bed. No one seems to appreciate what you're trying to do, and everyone wants something from you. You feel numb, without much patience for anyone's feelings, including your own. Nothing seems to make much of a difference. Even the people you're working for, the beneficiaries, don't really seem to matter. These are signs of burnout. But you probably knew that already! So what can you do about it? This series of blog posts will address that question.

Often people who are burning out find that their productivity at work begins to decrease. This is discouraging to them and perhaps to co-workers as well. One possible response at this point is to work longer hours to make up for the lack of productivity. Another response to burnout is to give up, to withdraw. Unfortunately, neither of these responses helps much. Commit to finding a better solution!

The earlier you can address burnout, the easier it will be. All of us have bad days at work or days we really wish we were somewhere else. But burnout is a chronic problem that results from long-term conditions in which we don't have enough sense of accomplishment in or control over our work, or where expectations and capabilities don't match well enough. Fortunately, there are many strategies for addressing it.

As with most problems, we can either deal with the situations that created the problem (we'll call them "sources") or with the end results (we'll call these "outcomes"). In many instances, it's good to work with both, because that can give us more paths to consider.

Burnout can have different sources for national and ex-pat staff, although some are shared. Common sources of burnout in humanitarian workers include:

- A persistent gap between job expectations and one's skills, abilities, knowledge, talent, or gifts.
- A bad match between the job and the person.
- Not enough signs of effectiveness or progress.
- Too much challenge.
- Continual boredom (this can be either a source or a symptom of burnout).
- Frequent travel, long hours, or difficult/dangerous work environment.
- Balancing the expectations of managers, co-workers, donors, beneficiaries, family, and oneself.
- Lack of appreciation, fairness, or feedback. Bias or misunderstanding.
- Not enough control over one's working conditions.
- Responsibility for things you can't control.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What is draining you? Take some time to identify the sources of your burnout. Whom can you talk with about your work situation at your organization? Perhaps your supervisor? Or a trusted friend who does similar work (at your own or another agency)? Is there someone who can give you helpful feedback? Once you identify your sources, consider whether you can change any of them. Start with the easiest.

What are the expectations for your job? Do you have a job description with clear responsibilities and goals? Have you been doing many tasks that aren't part of your job description? Do you expect unrealistic results from yourself or your agency (either too much or too fast)? Does your boss hold you (or do you hold yourself) responsible for things you can't change? If so, it may be time to discuss these expectations with a friend, a peer at work, or your supervisor.

When did you last receive feedback from your supervisor? Is it time to ask for a performance evaluation or some informal feedback?

How is your agency doing with respect to its mission? Do you understand how the work you do every day fits into the mission? Are you aware of issues in the country that make the work more challenging? Would learning more about the culture in which you're working give you a bigger picture that might be valuable?

When you are finished with work at the end of a day, what environment do you return to? A family that has lots of needs, a lonely compound, a place where you can connect with people who know you, personal problems that must be addressed? Each of these poses unique challenges for humanitarian staff.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Follow these ABC's:

Become **Aware** of what's getting to you and how those issues are affecting you

Seek **Balance** among work, rest, and play; time alone and time with others; giving and receiving

Connect with people (friends, family, co-workers) you trust, respect, care about.