

Signs and Symptoms of Professional Burnout

High stress levels, personal frustration, and inadequate coping skills have major personal, organizational, and social costs. Stress is not a mental illness, but a part of everyday living. Each of us is potentially vulnerable to the problems of too much stress and too little coping ability.

As Special Care Counselors, we must be aware of the signs and symptoms of professional burnout so as to be able to recognize them in ourselves.

The following is a list of some of the most common indicators of professional burnout:

1. High resistance to going to work every day.
2. A pervasive sense of failure, as indicated by such expressions as "I can't do enough"; "I can't get it right"; "I'm no good anymore."
3. Anger and resentment.
4. Guilt and blame: these might be expressed in such ways as, "No matter how many hours I work, I never finish and I feel guilty about leaving. I'm in a 'no-win' situation."
5. Discouragement and indifference.
6. Negativism.
7. Isolation and withdrawal.
8. Feelings of tiredness and exhaustion.
9. Frequent clock watching.
10. Extreme fatigue after work.
11. Loss of positive feelings.
12. Postponement of victim contacts.
13. Inability to concentrate or listen to information.
14. Feelings of immobilization.
15. Cynicism toward victims, co-workers, or the world in general.
16. Sleep disorders, including difficulty either in falling asleep or in staying asleep, or sleeping an adequate amount but not feeling rested upon waking. These disorders occur regularly over an extended period.
17. Self-preoccupation.
18. Becoming more approving of behavior-control measures, such as tranquilizers.
19. Frequent colds and bouts of the flu.
20. Frequent headaches and gastrointestinal disturbances.
21. Rigidity in thinking and resistance to change.
22. Suspicion and paranoia.
23. Excessive drug use.
24. Marital and family conflict.
25. Free-floating anxiety, evidenced by such expressions as, "I am constantly worried and anxious, but I can't pinpoint what I'm upset about. It just seems to hover there."
26. Tunnel vision: as stress increases, perception of available options narrows.
27. A sense of increasing helplessness.
28. Fear that "it won't get better."
29. Fear of losing control.
30. High absenteeism.

Both counselor and client are subject to stressors, and both can become incapacitated as a result of unmanaged stress. Special Care Counselors need to take time to think about the importance of self-awareness, self-protection, proper nutrition, time to play, personal stress management, and wellness in their lives. Ultimately, it is about taking responsibility for being a responsible counselor.

Some Ways to Manage Stress

The following are suggestions for keeping stress within tolerable limits:

1. Eliminate stressor foods from your diet. Nutritional stress can be as debilitating as emotional stress.
2. Get enough sleep and rest.
3. Exercise regularly and appropriately for your age and fitness level, especially by engaging in an activity that you enjoy doing.
4. Be realistic about what you take as “givens” in your world. Work within the reality of “what is” today.
5. Realistically assess what you are able to do in your particular situation.
6. Schedule time for fun. Allow time each day to experience good feelings.
7. Schedule time each week for dreaming, thinking, wandering, exploring, planning, and being in touch with your dreams.
8. Schedule regular recreation or vacation time. The quantity of time spent is not important; the quality of time spent in recreation is a key to stress reduction.
9. Be sure you receive your minimum daily requirement of positive nurturing.
10. Set realistic goals in all areas of your life.
11. Consider the following carefully;
 - a. Everything I do is the result of a choice I make.
 - b. Every choice I make benefits me positively in some way even though I may not know what the benefit is at the moment.
 - c. I have inside me everything I need and all the tools I need to guide my life successfully.
 - d. I can choose to gain greater self-awareness.
 - e. I am responsible for 100 percent of my life.
 - f. The degree to which others control my life is the degree to which I allow them to control it.
 - g. I cannot voluntarily change my feelings, but I can always change my behavior.
 - h. Any problem I experience in my life is a problem that I have created for myself.
 - i. If I choose to continue creating a particular problem for myself, I do it because
 - i. I receive some pleasure or unacknowledged benefit or payoff for continuing the problem, or
 - ii. I can avoid a greater or more fearful problem by perpetuating the current problem. In other words, if I solve the current problem, I am afraid the greater problem will occur.

12. Develop interests outside your specialized field.
13. Identify what is important to you.
14. Find someone to talk to.
15. Surround yourself with people who have a positive attitude.
16. Find an ongoing support system to access as needed.
17. Be aware of situations that may trigger an unresolved issue.
18. Recognize the effect that the sufferer's pain has on you.
19. Acknowledge the feelings that you have and allow them to be whatever they are.
20. Recognize that working harder, faster, longer, or punishing your body will not relieve the pain.
21. Recognize that neglecting your own needs, interests, or health will eventually create more pain.
22. Slot into your appointment book a time for yourself. This does not require a lengthy period of time. It does need to be doable. Be creative!!

Source: *Elements of Crisis Intervention* by James L. Greenstone and Sharon C. Leviton. Brooks/Cole: USA, 2011.