

The Therapist and Burnout

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A more appropriate title for this paper might be "Burnout: A Case of Distance, Pursuit and Reactive Distance." But why?, you might ask—most people who burn out are inveterate pursuers. Just so, but from a systems perspective, we believe that pursuers themselves are generally distancing from something or someone.

Employing Fogarty's concepts of four dimensional self,¹ expectations and emptiness,² I propose in this paper to develop a theoretical rationale to support the hypothesis that a person who eventually burns out is often under great stress, exacerbated by unrealistic expectations dealt with by intensely pursuing people and jobs, and concurrently distancing from his insides, his loneliness, his frustration, his finiteness and ultimately from the inevitability of his own frailty and death.

Freudenberg has done a great deal of clinical research on burnout. He defines it as "a depletion of one's self, and exhaustion of one's physical and mental resources; it involves wearing one's self out by excessively striving to reach unrealistic expectations acquired from one's family or the values of society."³ An individual experiences burnout when his inner resources are consumed as if by fire, leaving a great emptiness inside, even though his outer shell may seem more or less unchanged.⁴ One might compare this person to a burned out building; the structural shell is all that remains; the interior lacks depth, texture and life.

Generally a person who burns out, previously has been enthusiastic, energetic and optimistic—

a doer. Gradually a dulling and deadness sets in. The energy turns to exhaustion, the enthusiasm to anger, the optimism to despair. His life seems to lose meaning, his relationships seem empty. He is tired, frustrated and forced to put forth increasing energy to maintain the pace he has set for himself.⁵ On closer inspection, one often finds that people who burn out have built their lives on unrealistic expectations of themselves, of others, and ultimately of life.

The paradox is that under conditions of increased stress, such as births, deaths, illness, successes or change of any sort, potential burnouts tend to increase their expectations of themselves and others. They expect members of their family or work situation to respond to their increased stress by heightened activity. It is assumed that people should appreciate their efforts. If they work hard, clients should change. The underlying assumption is that if one cares enough and does enough, people will not be unhappy, get sick, age or die. If things aren't working out right, it is because they are not doing enough. They must do more.

And yet, all the research on stress points out that a main cause of stress is unrealistic expectations.⁶ For example, in a film series on stress developed by Concept Media, a summary of major stress research is presented. The films point out that reviewing one's expectations and anticipating stressors are important ways of managing stress. It is explained that unrealistic expectations are a major cause of stress because people assume that tires will never wear out, machinery will always function, service will always be prompt, and other people will always respond the way they are "supposed to." When these expectations

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are not met, they often respond with intense stress reactions which far exceed the seriousness of the situation.⁷

By having more realistic expectations, a person can often avert or subdue more intense reactions such as: muscular tension, shortness of breath, coldness in the extremities, irregular heart beat, perspiration, intense anxiety, and severe emotional reaction. Hans Selye, the original stress researcher, defined stress as a specific response of the body to a particular demand. The specific gastrointestinal and hormonal changes he observed were labeled the General Adaptation Syndrome or G.A.S.⁸

However, the current trend in stress analysis research is heavily in favor of a cognitively based theory.⁹ Stress is considered a generic entity involving many variables working in concert rather than any one specific negative emotion, stimulus or response.¹⁰ This idea has moved stress research from an emotion or arousal context to one in which the individual's interpretation and evaluation of a stimulus-filled environment becomes the basic for a response to the stress experience, and in which emotions and physiological responses are reviewed as byproducts of cognition.¹¹

The cognitive branch of stress research is based on Piaget's theory which states that innate schemata are the underlying basis for growth and life. Piaget describes the interaction between person and environment as a process whereby people assimilate the environment and accommodate their own structure to learn and survive.¹² Using this framework cognitive psychologists suggest that a mental operation underlies and affects the physiological level of response.¹³

This approach points out that in the critical progression of events following stressor-person impact, "cognitive functioning occurs which encompasses all neurological levels of system control, autonomic regulation, elicitation of feeling states, sensory selection processes, individual and species preservation; as well as the cortical structure contributions of memory and mental operation. The latter two functions, memory and mental operation, taken together, form a basis for thought and for the evaluation of the stressful event."¹⁴

Since our family offers the genetic input that influences our response to stress and provides the first school in which we are taught to be a son, daughter, husband, wife, mother, father, employer, employee, that is the main school in which

our unrealistic expectations develop. Subsequent schools and professional families contribute to our expectations. Actually, roles are considered "families of expectancies." Expectancies about our actions, motivations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and values. Once we acquire particular roles, families of expectancies become the context for carrying out these roles.

Burnout may provide an opportunity to re-furnish our personal structure, as it were, the structure remains as when a building burns out; however a complete redecoration and refurbishing and rebuilding is needed. Our expectations have to be viewed in terms of the Present, the Past and the Future and taken back to our extended families to study this again. And that leads to the next two concepts which I will employ in developing the hypothesis that a person suffering burnout is under great stress exacerbated by unrealistic expectations and dealt with by pursuing other people while distancing from his or her insides or, as Fogarty states, his depth dimension.

In his theoretical formulation, Fogarty talks about a four-dimensional self including a depth dimension, the self-dimension which houses spiritual elements, abstract and concrete thinking, feelings and emotional processes and the complete physical makeup of the person.¹⁵ He points out that it includes the known, the unknown but knowable and the unknowable. There is no activity in this area. It is an area for exploration and rest but not movement. Fogarty compares it to a rich but unknown country filled with natural resources waiting to be tapped.¹⁶ Burnouts spend little time exploring and developing this vast natural resource of self. It is the most neglected area in a burnout's life. If he had tended to the fires burning within this dimension he could have tempered them before they grew out of control. Rather, the burnout spent so much time worrying about other people or objects and moving towards them that he neglected or avoided his self-dimension and burned it out.

Fogarty postulates that the second or vertical dimension represents movement towards objects. Burnouts spend a lot of time in this dimension writing reports and papers, cleaning the house, doing, doing, doing.

The next dimension of movement, which is towards people, is another dimension where burnouts expend a lot of energy worrying about employees, clients or family, helping them, teaching them, trying to change them, etc., etc.

The fourth dimension or the time/space dimension is another problematic area for potential burnouts. There is never enough time to accomplish all that needs to be done. Burnouts tend to spend a lot of time in the future dimension trying to change things and to make the world a better place. Rarely do they spend time in the present just experiencing themselves or their lives. They are too busy trying to avoid the past or to move beyond it, or planning for the future.

Study the burned out mother who arrives in your office, drained and unable to muster enough energy to continue the rest of her life. She often has a prototype in previous generations. Observe the burned out executive returning from a whirlwind business trip across three continents, who imagines that his feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction will miraculously disappear as soon as he divorces his wife of thirty years. What were the dynamics in his family? Is he the great hope? Look closely at the college senior who has spent over sixteen years of his school life totally focused on gaining acceptance to medical school, and now drowns himself in alcohol to avoid the deadness he feels on achieving his goal. Is he expected to be the successful one, not like his n'er do well father? Closely watch the therapist who after five years of working in an alcohol counseling center says: "What is the use, these people are hopeless; their problems are too overwhelming. What difference does it make; it's only a job." What family script is he living, or what is he running from?

There is a thread that runs through each of their lives. Closer investigation reveals that each of them has developed unrealistic expectations of themselves, of life and of other people. The whole basis for their lives was often built on a notion that if one was self-sacrificing, worked hard, tried to please other people, and achieved enough education, money, success and friendships, one would feel happy, appreciated, secure, loved and as the popular song goes: "You're going to live forever."

How does a person develop these unrealistic expectations? One of the commonest pitfalls for the growing child is observing the family hero or the family failure. The child is constantly reminded that father is an irresponsible self-centered person who cares only for his own welfare, a model to be avoided, while mother is a wonderful woman who, although sickly, cooks and cleans

and does all the laundry. She never complains. She would rather get the child a new dress than buy one for herself. The child's happiness becomes her happiness. Or perhaps the hero to emulate is an outstanding older sibling, or a successful grandparent or aunt.

I am working with one family in which Louise, a twenty-year old college student, was born two months after the death of a highly revered, successful and talented grandmother. Louise was named for her and was expected to fill the empty space left by her death and to reawaken the dream which died when her grandmother died. Louise was always regaled with stories about her brilliant grandmother. How dedicated, bright and talented she was. How special she was and what a loss to the family.

Through her growing years, Louise fulfilled the hopes and dreams of her family. She was the perfect child and young woman—bright, witty, competent. So like her grandmother. However, she arrived in my office, a very sad, frustrated and exhausted young lady who wanted to temporarily drop out from the whirlwind life she had created. Louise had developed an image of herself that was totally unrealistic. Her activities suited her grandmother but were of little interest to Louise. However, rather than admit this to herself or to her parents, Louise became sickly and stayed home from school and work. She arrived in my office because the conflict between her true self and her image became too overwhelming. She was in the throes of burnout.

According to Freudenberg, the people who fall prey to burnout are usually decent individuals who strive hard to reach a goal. Their schedules are busy and whatever the project or job, they can be counted on to do more than their share. They are usually the leaders among us who have never been able to admit to limitations. They are burning out because they have pushed themselves too hard for too long. They started out with great expectations and refused to compromise along the way.¹⁷

A burnout experience usually has its roots in the area of life that seemed to hold the most promise, or in reaction to the situation in the extended family, a storybook marriage, perfect and happy children, a position in the community, a successful career, money, power, a life of service.

As you can see, burnout doesn't occur to the underfunctioners around us. It is usually limited to the dynamic, charismatic, goal-oriented men

and women, the eternal optimists determined idealists who want to remake the world and to create happier Utopia. They want their marriages to be the best, their work records outstanding, their children to shine. When trouble sets in, it is usually a result of over-commitment or over-dedication, or ultimately over-functioning. As systems theorists we know that reciprocity takes place in systems so that when one person over-functions, other members of the system begin to under-function so that the hard driving, optimistic, potential burnout can never create the Utopia for which he so desperately yearns. This is because his expectations include other people, and a world that was here before he was born and will remain after he has died. The context for his life is inappropriate for a growing, changing dynamic world and inappropriate for an aging person, and since the aging process begins at birth, we are all aging. But, being the eternal optimist and pursuer, and perhaps the great hope of the family, the standard bearer, he tries and tries and works on and on and pursues and pursues until he notices changes in himself.

His energy level is depleting, he feels chronically fatigued. He pushes himself harder but starts to have trouble sleeping; he wakes up exhausted, starts to become irritable and impatient. Boredom and detachment sets in, skepticism and cynicism creep into his life. But then the old omnipotence sneaks in: "No one else can do it. Only I can." Then he begins to feel unappreciated and mistreated and increasingly suspicious of his environment and the people around him, even his family. No one understands. Later he feels disoriented, his memory starts to go; he is not the clear thinker he once was, his span of concentration decreases. Eventually he may become depressed and develop physical symptoms. Then he becomes divorced from many of his feelings. Freudenberg points out that this detachment has a way of intensifying into the more serious D's—Disengagement, Distancing, Dulling and Deadness. At that point we have a reactive distancer who has gone through the phases of distance from his insides in the depth dimension, and pursued people and objects in the lateral and vertical dimensions, and focused little of the time dimension on the present, and virtually little energy on the depth dimension, the dimension of self. The therapeutic goal is to get the system into balance so that as Fogarty suggests, 25 per cent of one's energy is expanded in each of the

four dimensions; then one's system is in synchrony.

Fogarty's articles on emptiness and closeness will provide further understanding of this process of pulling a reactive distancer back into a pursuit of his changing and real self, rather than his image of self, which has been fueled with unrealistic expectations originating in his extended and professional families. People who burn out seldom take time for that quality of aloneness. They are caught up in a whirlwind of activities and are generally divorced from their depth dimension. Often people get on treadmills like these because there's something they wish to avoid. Some area of their life doesn't fit but they don't know how to deal with it, or believe they had better not deal with it. Behind all that business may be a fear of fear, illness, aging or death.¹⁸ There is an old saying that "life is what happens to you while you are planning your future." Through avoidance, we keep those unwanted detours and twists of fate out of our awareness. By keeping busy we avoid closeness and intimacy. Because to be truly intimate is to remove the image and to let the true self with all its weaknesses, faults, and strengths show; the curtain of our self-image needs to be removed in order to be intimate. The burned out person has had excessive human contact but little closeness.

One barrier to closeness is not talking and sharing parts of our depth dimension with others perhaps because it is out of our awareness. Another barrier is that our expectations of other people often interferes with our listening to them. Rather than trying to listen and understand them and get to know them we are often judging superficially with preconceived notions and expectations and thereby precluding closeness.

Since the underlying cause of burnout is the dichotomy between the expectation and the actuality and when effort spent pursuing a person or a task is in increase proportion to the reward received, it is time to balance the equation. The treatment for burnout is not more people or more activity of any kind. The treatment according to Maslach, a pioneer in burnout, is to spend much more time alone, away from the hustle and bustle, the excessive stimuli.¹⁹ Maslach points out that there are four phases in burnout. First, people feel emotionally exhausted. Later physical exhaustion creeps in. In the second stage, they develop negative cynical dehumanized attitudes about the people with whom they work. They feel negative

about their clients as well as themselves. They start moving into a shell—do the minimum amount of work to get through a week. Then there is a final stage, a period of total disgust in which someone becomes sour on self, humanity, everybody.

If you can identify yourself in one of the early phases, it may be time to pull back from the pursuit. If you are in later phases of burnout, pull back from the reactive distance. Change the flow of the movement away from the vertical and toward the depth dimensions. Repattern that involvement and energy towards the dimension of self where you can take the unrealistic expectations back to your extended family and you can learn what is, and what is not possible.²⁰

To support this move to the depth dimension, one can study research findings reinforcing the notion that a strong sense of self is helpful in dealing with the inevitable stressful life events that touch all of us. Kobasa studied the effects of stressful life events spanning a three-year period on the health and illness of a group of executives. She found that the high stress/low illness executives (in contrast with the high stress/high illness executives) had a strong commitment to self, an attitude of vigorousness toward the environment, a sense of meaningfulness and an internal locus of control.²¹ The sense of meaningfulness and internal locus of control seems to support the notion that they move from their depth dimension as a base of operations.

However, the journey to the depth dimension is frightening. In his award winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker explores the concept that man's innate fear of death is a principal source of his activity.²² Moustakas in his book, *Loneliness*, develops the notion that loneliness is a condition of human life, an experience of being human which enables the individual to sustain, extend and deepen his humanity. He points out that "man is ultimately and forever lonely whether his loneliness is that exquisite pain of the individual living in isolation or illness, the sense of absence caused by a loved one's death, or the piercing joy experienced in triumphant creation." Moustakas agrees with Fogarty when he says that it is necessary for every person to recognize his loneliness, and to become intensely aware that, ultimately, in every fiber of his being, man is alone—terribly, utterly alone. Efforts to escape the existential experience of loneliness can result only in self-alienation. When man shuts himself off from this fundamental truth of life, he shuts

himself off from one significant avenue of his own growth and if he does it by heightened activity, he runs the risk of burnout. Constant talk, surrounding oneself with people and work, modeling one's life on authority figures or people with high status, works for a while but not forever.

There are lots of superficial remedies for burnout. They include music, meditation, massage, yoga, running, exercise, junk reading, a vacation, a day home from work, a pill, a good joke, a new spouse, creating variety in your practice or in your life. But in the long run these are stop gap temporary measures. In the end the way to deal with burnout is to take a journey inward at your own pace, with your own guide, initiated by you or by the circumstances of your life, such as the death of a loved one. The journey is scary and ultimately ends in death but one may come out of it with more realistic expectations that are grounded in life and death as they truly are, not as we think they should be.

I would like to conclude with an excerpt from one man's journey through the depth dimension.

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood. How shall I say what wood that was! I never saw so drear, so rank, so arduous a wilderness! Its very memory gives a shape to fear. Death could scarce be more bitter than that place! But since it came to good, I will recount all that I found revealed there by God's grace.

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