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Burnout

Do you know anyone who burned out of graduate school? Do you worry that you may burn out of graduate school? People joke about being used up, exhausted, overburdened, burned out. What is burnout? Who is at risk?

Burnout is a process that happens gradually over time. It creeps up on a person through an accumulation of random minor negative thoughts, sporadic lost hopes, and a series of small disappointments in oneself. Burnout is a painful process that includes emotional exhaustion, a loss of pleasure in interpersonal relationships, and a diminished sense of self worth. Burnout is the result of trying too hard for too long in a situation where the odds are against meeting one's expectations. People who burn out are intelligent, dedicated people who have high expectations for themselves.

Most of the cures for burnout focus on how to get away from the cause of the distress. The job is considered the prime factor that causes burnout. But, in the same situation, some people burnout and others do not. The usual advice is to get some time away, to take a vacation, change environment. This advice is good. However, the problem is that most of these remedies are ways to heal and to recover from burnout once it has occurred. And they all include getting away. The fact is that people who are completely burned out on their work find that the only cure is to change what they do. This is a terrible loss to the individual and to the work. It seems that a better option is to know the early symptoms of burnout and to do something to prevent it from happening.

It is important to know if you have the personality factors that put you at risk to burn out. If they are present, you can learn ways to change to prevent this unfortunate outcome. The early symptoms of burnout are vague. Perhaps it's an occasional disturbing sense that the work you do is not as important as you previously thought it was. It could be thinking that the deadlines that were important not long ago are now silly, or they are ridiculously ambitious. Do you have a tendency to skip group meetings with thoughts that they are boring, the meeting will just be the same old thing? Maybe there is a feeling that going to work is the last thing you want to do. Perhaps you feel a growing lack of interest in keeping up with the newest literature, or an occasional feeling that this is not what you want to do, even feeling trapped. These may be little moments on rare occasions, or they may be nearly constant nagging concerns. Either way, it is important to pay attention to them. Burnout is a very personal process and it happens gradually. How much do these thoughts effect your general attitude about yourself and your work? Are they the result of a more general style of thinking that puts you at risk to burnout?

Many prominent researchers agree that when we change the way we think we change the way we feel. Pessimists have a tendency to think about bad events in a generalized way. On the other hand, optimists think about bad events as specific to time, place, or event. Pessimists feel that bad things are likely to happen; optimists feel that good things are likely to happen. Pessimism puts one at risk to burn out. Optimism can be insulation against it.

Pessimism and optimism [as defined by Martin Seligman, Ph.D.], are a combination of three polar opposite coping mechanisms. A pessimistic outlook on life is composed of the following three factors: 1) a stable attribution of cause for bad events - "Bad things happen," 2) an internal attribution of cause for bad events - "It is likely that bad things happen because of me," and 3) a generalized attribution and expectation for bad events - "Bad

things always happen to me, everywhere." Of course no one feels this way about everything, but if there is a tendency toward this mind set it can have devastating effects upon one's life.

On the other hand, optimists feel that while bad things do happen they are more likely to be specific to the event; they are not likely to happen again; and they are frequently due to external causes. Optimists do take responsibility for bad events, the difference is that the optimist does not convert a bad event into an expectation of future bad events. The bad event is contained; it is specific.

Since part of the cause of burnout can be the result of a negative system of thoughts, it makes sense to try an optimistic, positive strategy of thoughts. Try optimism. Listen to yourself. Do you say, "Bummer, that always happens," or do you say "Bummer, maybe it will turn out better next time." Do you say, "I always do that wrong." Or, do you say, "I'll figure out a better way next time." Some attention to your thoughts and a few simple exercises to change some thoughts can help prevent the emotional exhaustion, the lack of enjoyment in interpersonal interaction, and the loss of general well being that comes with a pessimistic style of thinking. Try optimism.

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