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# HEALING BURNOUT

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**Burnout can have a devastating effect on individual well-being and on the well-being of society as a whole. Unfortunately, burnout develops and gradually and most individuals suffering from it do not realize they have it until they can no longer work or maintain their relationships.**

**Haling burnout consists of a few straight forward steps, which are also described in the author's works on communication-focused therapy (CFT). The focus is on finding relevance and meaning again in various areas in life and in reconnecting emotionally and cognitively.**

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## Introduction

Burnout is largely a product of the society we live in and our interactions with it. The more we are in communication with others, the more messages we receive and send, the higher is the chance for collaborative success, but the greater is also the risk of burnout, especially if we do not know what goal we are chasing or why we are doing our daily routine. The problem is most often not that the world is faster or more interconnected, but that many people do not know the reasons they are going after their daily for. The solution for burnout has to do with meaning, but especially with true values, interests and aspirations. The road to get there is through communication, as, for example, in a psychotherapy.

A loss in seeing meaning and relevance in the world often lie at the heart of burnout. Reconnecting is an effective way to get out of it. This may require some changes. However, the important first change is an adjustment in perspective, which then leads to other changes. The changes in perspective are usually easier to accomplish than if one tries to force a change in situation, behaviours or thoughts, and it is also less prone to induce fears and anxiety.

## Helplessness

Burnout was probably rare in stone age societies, and it takes highly artificial conditions to induce burnout in animals. While it is possible to induce burnout symptoms in lab rats when they are exposed to persistent stimuli causing high levels of negative stress and arousal, this is unlikely to occur outside the lab. However, under these conditions the animals show symptoms that are similar to those of people suffering from burnout. They have low tolerance for even minor stimuli, such as noise, and seem to experience helplessness and high levels of psychological distress. Their life expectancy is reduced, they no longer eat regularly, often lose weight, show signs of exhaustion and after a while suffer from bodily conditions that ultimately lead to an early death. They seem to have learned that they are helpless and that their avoidance behaviour is ineffective. Like people they seem trapped in a hopeless situation, but, unlike humans, they really are.

It may be difficult to experience the feeling of helplessness because it only seems to increase anxiety and fears. However, an important step to emerge from a state of burnout is to reconnect with one's emotions, and that means all of them. The reason is that all emotions are signals. There are no 'bad' emotions and they all can provide valuable information about oneself and one's interaction pattern with the world. The key is to interpret these signals and gain insight into what is 'out of sync' in the present and where they want to take one in the future. Just the process of doing this makes the feeling of helplessness disappear.

## Finding Meaning

Burnout is often approached from the wrong angle. It is not really that we have to change what we or how we do it but evaluate the reason we do it for. I have seen many patients who went through life without thinking about their values, interests and aspirations. One might think that it is a sign of genius not to have to mull these questions, but actually many highly creative people struggle with such existential questions daily. The question is whether one does something constructive with it or the ruminations are just for the sake of ruminating. To find meaning in things, and to rediscover what is meaningful to oneself, usually requires taking a step back and beginning to reflect on thoughts and feelings more as an observer than someone who is getting caught up in them. This does not mean disconnecting from thoughts and feelings but disengaging from the anxiety and fears they might trigger in oneself.

Many people routinely do that do not bring much happiness and enjoyment, which increases the risk for a number of psychiatric conditions, among them burnout. The tendency to ignore the own feelings and thoughts about burnout is often strong out of a fear of change. However, a change in perspective that lets one see more meaning in the world is hardly something one needs to be afraid of. Just the opposite, a richer life leads to more positive feelings and greater happiness in the long-run.

Several techniques to see more meaning in the world are described in the author's papers on the use of communication-focused therapy (CFY) for anxiety, depression and other conditions.(Haverkamp, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2018) Communication is usually an important tool because the basic parameters and what one considers meaningful, valuable and relevant shows in the meaningful messages that are communicated internally and externally and in how one communicated internally and externally. The therapy session is such a place where skills can be practiced engaging in and reflecting on communication and so to gain insight, which helps towards a change in seeing things.

## Boundaries

Being a care provider or teacher in a less than ideal environment often leads to burnout if one has a need to 'give it all' and 'care for others as if this were the last day'. Although burnout can occur over time in a variety of situations, it is mainly triggered by events in the workplace or in a relationship. The external cause is usually a prolonged external stressor, such as a mobbing situation or an unhappiness with the current job or relationship. The internal causes are often preconditioning personality aspects, such as the inability to say 'No' or to keep an appropriate distance to other people's problems. It almost always requires both, the external and the internal factors, to lead to a full-blown burnout. If one feels secure and confident with oneself, one might just leave the job where one gets bullied and so avoid burnout. On the other hand, working in a loving and caring environment will probably not lead to burnout, even if one has difficulties saying 'No'. Healing burnout also means making life easier by choosing environments that conform better with the own personality, values, interests, needs and aspirations. While learning to fight back and defend

oneself can be an important skill to learn, one may still not enjoy it if fighting in any form does not agree with the own personality, and over the long-run there is no point in repeatedly having to do things one does not enjoy.

The skill to draw boundaries is built and practiced through communication, both with oneself and with others. As previously mentioned, it does require assuming an observer's viewpoint, at least in part, to escape from getting sucked into fears and anxiety and to formulate an idea what an appropriate and satisfying boundary may be like. Drawing boundaries is not about cutting off communication, rather it is about making communication more helpful by letting through meaningful and personally valuable and relevant messages while not becoming a sponge for other people's issues.

## Communication

Burnout often requires professional help because it comes with the sense of hopelessness and helplessness, which tends to make 'self-help' difficult. Burnout has to be solved through communication, which no longer works effectively. Patients with burnout have lost touch with themselves and others. Humans need communication with meaningful messages, that they can use to regulate themselves and change the world around them. In the case of burnout, one often observes a freezing of the personality to become rigid and brittle in the face of change, as well as the fear of potential fragmentation and disintegration from it. The self is imprisoned, and communication dies down because any change or influence seems extremely stressful.

Through the interactions with a therapist unhelpful communication patterns can be identified, such as an inability to say 'No', and new communication strategies and patterns be developed. Important is also that in a meaningful exchange own values, needs, interests and aspirations can be identified and explored. The therapeutic setting should be a space for experimentation, where new ideas and interaction styles can be developed without the fear of judgment or repercussion. Overcoming fear and anxiety when it comes to social interactions is an important part of therapy. Over the long-run, a patient should become his or her own therapist, having acquired the skills and the insight to use any internal or external exchange of messages as an opportunity for growth and individual development. Still, helpful communication spaces, situations and people should be part of the new set of strategies.

Healing burnout requires long-term changes, and many of those involve finding the environments, people and activities which fit one's own basic parameters, the values, needs and aspirations one has. These parameters change little over time, and it can be helpful to explore why one engages in activities that do not seem to add to one's individual happiness. Maybe one tries to fulfil someone else's expectations? Can we really know what someone else needs and wants, unless that person actually says it? Does the other person actually know what makes him or her happy? All this reverts back to communication. If everyone tries to be happy for themselves, would not everyone be happy? Is it possible to force another person to be happy? Helping others makes happy, but when it comes to burnout, the work needs to begin with the focus on one's

own values, needs and aspirations. This does not mean other people do not play an important role. One learns about oneself from one's interactions with others.

## Escaping Burnout

There are a few central steps that need to be taken, whether one tries to deal with the issue oneself or works with a professional, all aim at a more flexible and open communication that allow the individual the freedom to look at what it is really important to him or her:

First, it is important to realize that one is experiencing an actual or potential burnout situation. Without this acknowledgment it is difficult to face the resistance not to touch one's routines, thought and behavioural patterns. It also helps with the aversion to change. There may be fears that one may have to make undesirable changes but doing almost anything that creates extra breathing space to think and reflect and avails room for change, effectively counters the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that is central to burnout.

Secondly, assessing one's values, needs, wishes, dreams and aspirations, and having a vision of what life might look like in the future paves the road to successful change. It also means assessing and analysing the feelings that are associated with thinking about the future. Depressed thoughts and negative emotions are relatively common in burnout and thinking about the future can seem meaningless or even painful. Assessing one's situation in the safe environment of a therapy session does not have to mean immediate change, but it helps to fight the hopelessness and helplessness that are associated with burnout.

Thirdly, since burnout manifests in the interactions and relationships we have with others, it requires looking at one's own communication patterns and how best to respond to someone else's unhealthy communication style. How we interact with other people is shaped by our past life experiences, and if they have not been so good, they can make us fearful even in the present. If your father was given to unpredictable emotional outbursts, you may be fearful in situations with your boss, a (male) authority figures. Since the father's behaviour was not predictable, you feel helpless. Feeling helpless and hopeless, you are unlikely to reflect on how to defend yourself effectively and on understanding the dynamic between you and your boss, which could help both of you. The world has become an unpredictable place, you are on constant alert at the workplace and this will ultimately lead to burnout when the exhaustion takes its toll. Maintaining the space to take a step back and reflect on the situation can prevent this.

Building new communication patterns requires insight in the present ones, which can be developed through reflection in the therapy sessions. Good communication patterns and a sense of knowing where one stands and where one would like to go next are affective antidotes to burnout. Change should occur in steps that can be planned and reflected on. The future does not have to be mapped out in any detail, as this deprives us of the possibilities that are not yet known to us. But one should sort out one's fundamental values, one's needs, and the things one would be unwilling to compromise on, as well as have an idea in which general

direction the journey should go next. A lack of sense of direction makes one more susceptible to stress, pressure and burnout. Have the courage to visualize the future.

Fourth, it is important to determine the relationships and things which are helpful and which are not. This may not always be easy to tackle because of fears that this could lead to people turning away or even loneliness. But there is no reason to threat it, because it really means taking control of one's social life rather than losing it. Meaningful change is good, hasty decisions almost never.

Fifth, as you become clearer about yourself and your interactions with the environment and your communication patterns improve, you will gain trust in your ability to shape your environment. You will also notice a greater attraction on other people. The negative voice in the back of your head telling you that you don't know what you are doing dies away. As you gain greater trust in yourself, you have more faith in your internal compass, and this effectively prevents anxieties, burnout and a number of other conditions. This will also bring greater clarity about the values and interests that are important to you. This makes decisions easier and helps you orient yourself towards the future.

Self-confidence is best built by not thinking how to get it, but doing the things you would do if you had it. This requires thinking about the things you like to do, as well as your values and aspirations. What challenges you in a positive way? What gives you pleasure? Achievements only improve your self-confidence if they resonate with your values, needs and aspirations. Many people are afraid to look deep down into themselves to find answers, not necessarily because they assume there is something unpleasant, but because they fear they might encounter a void. This is why it is helpful thinking about one's values, needs and aspirations, because they are there no matter what.

Sixth, taking new perspectives on the world and developing greater openness to the good things in life develops automatically if you do not give up and get the help you need. Take a new look at the world and be open to what it tells you. Burnout is a closure of the mind, and the best antidote to it is to open one's eyes and engage with oneself and the world.

## Lasting Change

Since we have discussed mostly changes and perspectives and skills the changes usually last as it is impossible to unlearn a new perspective or skill one has acquired at some point in time as long as the memory of it lasts. However, several psychotherapeutic approaches which focus on techniques, as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) does to an extent, may not have the lasting effect of those that focus on internal change, such as psychodynamic psychotherapy or communication-focused therapy (CFT) which was developed by the author. (Haverkamp, 2017a, 2017b)

In the long run what counts is that someone who suffered from burnout at some stage in life does not get in situations again, internally and externally, which lead to a burnout. Having a sense of the own basic

parameters, the values, needs and aspirations, over the long-run protects very well against burnout. Making the right decisions in life is much easier once one knows where one is going.



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