



WOHRC FACT SHEET

WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RESOURCE CENTER

Job Burnout in the Helping Professions

Job burnout is a kind of exhaustion—both physical and emotional — that has become epidemic in the helping professions. Those who experience it describe it as a feeling of emptiness or depletion, a sense of being weighed down or trapped.

A large number of nurses, teachers, day care and social workers simply give up and leave their jobs. But many others cope by becoming more and more detached from their students or clients. They start to keep them at a distance, to shorten the time of their contacts. They begin to “go by the book,” become petty bureaucrats. Others take the problems home, where they interfere with their family relations.

Causes of burnout

The causes of burnout are many, but clearly in the helping professions much has to do with the work itself. Helping people with problems is emotionally draining. Surveys have established the not-surprising fact that emergency room nurses, for instance, suffer from more burnout than those in pediatrics or general service. Workers who have constant contact with clients or students get burned out faster than those whose work is more mixed. Day care workers, although they reported that their work with children was the most gratifying part of their job, were far more burned out when they were “on the floor” throughout the entire day.

Staffs that are reduced by cutbacks and budget crises, so frequent in these times, can intensify the problem. For example, the numbers of unemployment counselors are being cut at the very same time that the number of unemployed is rising.

“Burnout is inevitable when a professional must care for too many people,” writes Dr. Christina Maslach, a well-known researcher at the University of California. “There’s higher and higher emotional overload. Like a wire that has too much electricity, the worker emotionally disconnects.”

People in the helping professions, it is often remarked, tend to see their work not simply as a job, but as a “calling.” They feel impelled to help people, but often they cannot be successful through

The process of burnout, notes Dr. Herbert Freudenberger who is credited with inventing the term, is so gradual that the person experiencing it often does not realize it is happening. All that she knows is that she seems to be working harder and harder and accomplishing less and less. Stress symptoms such as insomnia, gastrointestinal disease and high blood pressure occur. Many such workers find themselves turning to cigarettes, alcohol and drugs to help them get through the work week. Frequently, the victims blame themselves rather than analyzing what about the job may be contributing to these problems.



Prime targets for burnout are teachers, like this one in a Brooklyn classroom.

United Federation of Teachers

no fault of their own. Besides, success is hard to measure in many of these professions. A patient may get well and some students may bloom before a teacher's eyes. But many clients provide little feedback. Some, in fact, may blame the worker when they make no progress. Colleagues and administrators rarely remark on how well one is doing. There is little to stoke the emotional reserves of the helper.

Women taking care of others

Women's issues are intimately connected with burnout, note social work consultant Diane Ryerson and psychologist Dr. Nancy Marks who have conducted innumerable workshops and training sessions on the problem. Although male physicians, psychiatrists and legal aid lawyers also suffer from the syndrome, most line workers in schools and social agencies are women. Constant



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Nurses, with constant responsibility for others, are also prone to burnout.

responsibility for others is a potent source of burnout. In addition to "giving of themselves" to students and clients, many have home and child care responsibilities as well. This gives them what Ryerson and Marks call "dual careers in giving."

Furthermore, they note, women unlike men have been socially conditioned to measure success not by productivity and financial reward but by the meeting of human needs. The administrators of schools and agencies are traditionally male and are seldom sensitized to the needs of their female employees. The latter, in turn, seldom have been trained to press their own needs.

The result, say Ryerson and Marks, is that many women professionals feel "powerless and helpless in systems dominated by a male hierarchy."

Public indifference contributes

The public perception of the helping professions as not very important or worthy of much funding also contributes to burnout. "It's women's work and so nobody sees it as important," is the way one day care worker succinctly described her profession. Day care provides probably the most dramatic examples of socially and politically-caused burnout. According to a recent national day care study, workers in this field, despite considerable education and training, earn close to or under the minimum wage. The staff turnover at most child care centers is 15 to 30 percent a year which exceeds the national average of 10 percent for most human service fields, reports the Child Care Staff Education Project. Day care workers commonly buy supplies for their underfunded centers with money out of their own pockets. Yet federal funds for day care are continually cut.

In spite of all this, day care workers join with other helping professionals in calling for changes that can result in burnout prevention, even now under existing circumstances.

What can be done

■ One widely recommended reform is **lessening the hours** that all helping professionals spend in direct contact with clients. This can be achieved not only by flexible hours and a shorter work day, but by allowing workers a greater variety of tasks within the day. Dr. Maslach calls for "time-outs," not merely rest periods or coffee breaks, but opportunities to voluntarily do other, less stressful work, such as paperwork or attending meetings. If these are built into the schedule, she suggests, other professionals can temporarily cover for the absent worker — a much better way of coping than allowing the burned out professional to limp along, failing to meet client needs.

■ Many researchers of burnout also stress the importance of **peer support** — the formation of support groups, special staff meetings and workshops in which workers can share burdens and help each other to solve problems. Particularly difficult patient or client problems might better be handled by a team focusing on the problem, some suggest.

At one social agency, for example, social workers meet for an hour each week to discuss their problems in dealing with certain clients. By sharing suggestions, helping each other, they form what is in fact a support group.

■ **Administrators, too, should give more support**, they say. Dr. Robert L. Kahn of the University of Michigan recommends the expression of "liking, respect, admiration" for colleagues and those one supervises. "It is supportive to confirm their own realistic impressions" that the job is difficult, he says, "rather than let them think their sense of strain implies a defect on their part." Dr. Maslach even suggests that in some situations, such as social work, clients be oriented to act as partners in solving problems rather than mere receptacles of help. Thus the worker is not always giving and never receiving, while the client is also strengthened. She also suggests that at the outset client and worker discuss their expectations of what can be accomplished. In this way, no one starts out with unrealistic goals which can only meet with frustration.

Experience with burnout workshops dramatically illustrates the benefits of sharing and support groups, say Ryerson and Marks. But the benefits will be short lived unless administrative reforms are also made.

Administrative reforms

■ In addition to shortened hours — including a more flexible attitude by administrators toward part-time professional work — many writers on burnout call for a more democratic workplace. It is essential, they say, that **those who work directly with clients have some say in the making of the rules that govern their work**. It is also important to develop some kind of meaningful evaluation procedures so that workers have some realistic feedback about their performances.

■ Many helping professionals feel trapped in their careers because they have no place to advance, other experts point out. Many able line workers are never promoted because the next job requires a different kind of training or degree. **Administrations should create, and workers should press for, career ladders that allow for reward of skills**. Dr. Michael R. Daley of the University of Wisconsin suggests the creation of posts such as "advanced therapist" or "direct service consultant." Others call for lateral job transfers, inservice training, increased opportunities for managerial experience.

■ Ryerson and Marks recommend that in their very training **helping professionals be taught to recognize their own personality needs and coping styles**, how to spot symptoms of burnout and what to do about them. Learning to cope with stress, they suggest, may involve not only handling the symptoms but learning political skills which can be used to achieve administrative reforms.

Political skills may also be needed, some say, if helping professionals are to make the public more aware of the importance of their work, and to gain the funding and the salaries they deserve. □

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