

WTF!

OK

BURNED OUT!

A Conglomeration of Thoughts  
on the subject of  
TEACHER BURN-OUT  
as  
Compiled  
by  
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for the  
South Atlantic District  
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## DEFINITIONS

Burnout is

- the severe depletion of physical, spiritual, and emotional energy
- a disillusioned point of <sup>e</sup>dispair resulting from accumulated tensions
- a disease of the helping professions
- a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion marked by physical depletion and chronic fatigue, feelings of helplessness, unhappiness, and by development of a negative self-concept and attitudes toward work, life, and other people
- When the demand for energy exceeds the fixed supply of energy available at any given time
- a killer
- a state of fatigue and frustration that occurs when a person's work cause, or way of life don't produce the expected reward
- that point in time when the substance that made (a person) go has been expended, leaving only the empty casing

## SYMPTOMS

- negligence
- callousness
- apathy
- uncompassionate in human relations
- unconcern or lack of understanding for fellow workers
- emotional exhaustion
- personal devaluation
- negative attitudes
- a feeling that the individual has little effect on overall product or service
- lack of motivation
- boredom
- procrastination
- the "Omnipotent Syndrome" (A sense of being totally responsible for the problems of the congregation and totally indispensable to parishioners)
- feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, trapped
- lack of interest in sex
- inability to say no
- discouragement
- feeling used
- irritability with the class (or fellow workers)
- loss of interest
- non-productivity

## VICTIMS

- 85% of all professional people (doctors, nurses, technicians, supervisors, executives, administrators, educators, clergy, etc.)
- those who have been very dedicated to their work over a long period of time
- idealistic who set rigid standards for themselves
- the "on fire" parent (teacher, pastor) is the prime candidate
- high achievers who care greatly and are determined to help others

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

- inability to cope with constant stress
- a feeling of isolation from fellow workers
- inadequate staffing
- long and continuous hours at work
- failure to see end result
- multiple role expectations
- difficulties in finding time to nurture our emotional and spiritual health
- failure to produce expected results
- mental and family stress
- uncertainty about call to ministry
- strife among staff personnel
- poor administration
- writing conference papers on Burn Out

## STAGES

If you have diligently read the last two issues of The Lutheran Educator, you are familiar with Ken Kremer's Survival Quarter. This novel teacher-developed approach to the last 9 weeks of the school year might bring a smile to our faces for its uniqueness and cleverness, but more likely it brought a groan to our lips. "Ohhh! the work that must have taken."

"When did he find all the extra time to prepare this?" "Boy, he must have some exceptional kids!"

But I would venture to say we wouldn't have to look too hard to find similar situations for each and everyone of our teachers. Perhaps what we find may not be a single situation of such magnitude, but we would find numerous smaller ones which would produce a quantity and quality similar to Mr. Kremer's endeavor. If we would stop to look, we would find many expressions of love, concern, dedication, and sacrifice that go with the role of being a parochial school teacher.

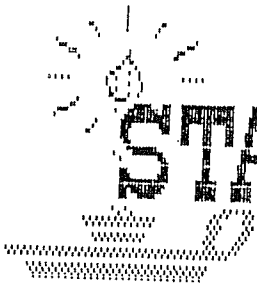
Usually when one first enters the teaching ministry there is a high level of enthusiasm, high ideals. The new teacher is on fire! "I've got the world by the tail," and now - watch out world of education! However, like most good things, this can be overdone. Too much of a good thing can cause a loss of perspective and a lack of recognition of limits. The expectations and demands that teachers place on themselves can surpass the resources available. When this happens, trouble is on its way.

Optimal teaching takes place when energy available is in balance with the demands made on it. Energy supplies can increase and with this expansion comes the capacity to take on more and more tasks and responsibilities.

However, at any given time the amount of energy is fixed and when the demand exceeds the supply, burnout begins. Recognizing the need for this balance of energy and demand helps the teacher recover from burn out or, better yet, prevent it!

Most contemporary teachers will testify to the fact that there has been an increase in the demands made on their time and energy. Coaching, choir (directing), organ playing, VBS & S.S. teaching, attending meetings, etc., are demands placed on us over & above our classroom work. The demands and obligations we have as spouses and parents, especially in the early years of teaching, are very real and often great. The busy teachers who precariously juggle these demands and obligations suffer from the stress of this conflict. All of this is taking place in a quickly changing world which itself is full of stress. The cumulative impact of these pressures can be overwhelming. Today's teachers are very good candidates for burnout, and the caring, idealistic, enthusiastic - in short, "on fire" - teacher is the prime candidate.

The feelings of burnout do not appear overnight. They evolve over time with the feelings most often appearing in stages. These stages are not mutually exclusive. Teachers don't leave one set of feelings as they approach each successive stage. Rather the feelings of burnout are cumulative, causing increasing suffering as they proceed. The stages of burnout are:



# STAGES OF BURNOUT

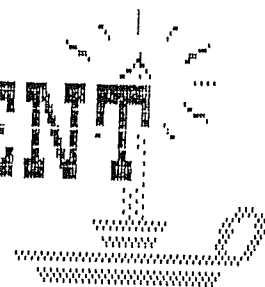
\* GUNG-HO

\* DOUBTS

\* TRANSITION

\* PULLING AWAY

\* CHRONIC  
DISENCHANTMENT





The beginnings of burnout are so subtle that one might wonder that early feelings contribute to the syndrome at all. The gung-ho stage may have begun long before the teacher stepped into the classroom for the first time. The processes which brought us into the teaching ministry are many and varied. But whatever the process, the time came when two powerful feelings were at work: joy and fear. The sense of joy and an anticipation of Call Night and graduation was coupled with the realization that the responsibilities were huge. As time went on there was a flip-flopping from one emotion to another and not always in synchronization with each other.

Combined with this emotional struggle may have been the development of a set of subconscious beliefs about being a teacher. Even though they carried this belief around, many teachers never spoke of them. Their beliefs, however, are not uncommon and are often reinforced by society. Some of the beliefs that teachers in the gung-ho stage hold are:

- Being a teacher is the most laudable thing an individual can do.
- Giving 100% every day to the children in my classroom is barely good enough; its what all good teachers do.
- The success or failure of the children in my room depends entirely on me.
- I will never be bored in my role as a teacher.

How do teachers in the gung-ho stage behave? In general, they are over-enthusiastic about their job. They connect too much of their self-worth to the responses of their children. They establish rigid and unrealistic standards for themselves and for their children. Some specific examples of stage one behavior:

- Dropping out of all outside activities.
- Refusing to allow anyone else to work with, care for, or influence their students

- Doing too much for their children without requiring that the children take on some responsibilities.
- Spending every possible moment in the classroom.
- Feeling guilty if they need a break or want to lavish some time and attention on themselves.

Teachers in the gung-ho stage have the notion that no other human being could do anything better in their classrooms than they could themselves. When a teacher feels indispensable, two problems related to burnout occur: fatigue due to overwork and guilt feelings when the teacher attempts to reduce the load and allow others to help. Teachers feel as if they are shirking responsibilities. While nothing is wrong with enthusiasm for one's calling - it is warranted and desirable - over-enthusiasm based on high expectations is a trigger for burnout. When a teacher refuses to compromise between expectation and reality, the schism that results heralds the beginning of the second stage of burnout.

Teachers moving into the doubts stage begin to experience a growing sense that something is wrong. Frequently they internalize the feeling that "I am doing something wrong." Never stopping to realize that high expectations, rather than poor teaching, are to blame, they begin the vicious circle of catch up. As a result of guilt feelings they may for several days overextend themselves with teaching duties. Then, when fatigue sets in, they "underdo" for several days, eventually experiencing even more guilt. The condition of being tired all the time becomes a way of life. Even though such teachers may be getting plenty of sleep, they rarely feel rested. There was probably a time in the past when they were high energy people, but now they feel as though they are dragging themselves from one task to another.

As the doubts stage continues, resentment toward their work builds. They experience the "Hey, what about me?" reaction. They feel that all they do is give, give, give, while all the children in the classroom, the principal, the pastor, and the congregation do is take, take, take. Many teachers in their zeal to do more, establish a pattern of constantly putting out more energy than they receive. This is possible for awhile, but after a period of time they tend to suffer "energy bankruptcy." When they get to that point, they expect that others will come to their rescue and "do" for them. They are often disappointed.

The feelings and behavior that appear during the doubts stage result from teachers' questioning of whether they are acting in their own best interest. This questioning is not hard to understand, considering when burnout begins: in the gung-ho stage when the teacher believed that a deep sense of worthiness, happiness, and fulfillment would result from his/her teaching experience. The expectations are not met; the beliefs do not turn out to be true.

Burnout is likely when people believe - and act on that belief - that one role in life can satisfy all their needs, that one focus can support all their vision. Teachers on the road to burnout have built on sandy soil, subjecting themselves to the winds and tides of their profession's demands and needs, thus stunting their own growth.

Teachers handle this threat to their identity in one of two ways: by taking on the challenge and thereby arresting the cycle of burnout; or by retreating and ensuring thereby that the cycle will continue. The next stage - transition - is where these crucial decisions are made.

Of all the stages of burnout, this one is the most critical because it is likely to determine the happiness and health of the teacher for a long

time to come. Teachers' experience with burnout can evolve toward one of two ends. They can either reassess the condition of their lives and decide to make some changes, or they can continue along the road to burnout until reaching the stage of chronic disenchantment.

The foundation of these choices is actually a question of control. The burning-out teacher is experiencing a loss of control in life. A problem with most of us who serve our Lord is that we get so tied up in our work, and our ideas that we forget that it is first of all God's work, God's responsibility. If people don't respond, don't appreciate what we are doing, don't meet our expectations, we can and should turn the problems over to Him. The battle is not ours. It is God's.

A burned-out teacher in the church is a great danger. He/she becomes frustrated, negative, bitter. Extreme burnout is total disgust. Such attitudes are contagious and can contaminate not only the atmosphere of the classroom and the school, but that of the entire congregation. Perhaps this is partly what the writer to the Hebrews had in mind when he wrote: "See to it ... that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile man." (Hebrews 12:15)

By using the transition stage to take charge again the teacher can begin the path to growth. Teachers who take advantage of the warning signs of the transition stage move toward correcting the imbalance which has slowly tilted their feelings and behavior toward the negative. If a teacher has not been willing or able to re-establish a healthy balance, he/she will begin to compensate for the imbalance with more negative and withdrawing actions. This starts the stage of pulling away: continued overwork coupled with movement away from colleagues and children, which will cause the teacher to become more fatigued physically and mentally and to drift down

toward illness. Pulling away leads to alienation.

The withdrawal of this stage is a protective, but destructive, effort. Unlike the previous stage, very few of the factors associated with pulling away are positive. The changes that do occur are initially a means to escape the problems of burnout, but often they serve only to further imprisonment. Those who reach this point usually need counseling.

The two most prevalent feelings occurring during the pulling away stage often appear simultaneously: "I dislike ..." my students, my job, the principal, etc; and "'they' are out to get me!" When teachers make statements like these, they have usually been driven to the edge of tolerance and finally admit their true feelings with a large mixture of guilt. These teachers have not made the distinction between liking the child but disliking the behavior.

An increasing paranoia now sets in. Often the ordinary behavior and/or mishaps of childhood begin to be viewed as plots devised by the students. Mud on the floor, noises in the classroom, a misplaced paper, a spilled carton of milk are blown all out of proportion. The teacher begins to think, "They're doing these things because they hate me." Even though the perception is wrong, the formerly giving teacher never expected such a return, and it hurts.

Many teachers who are burning out begin to take every thing too seriously. They become dispirited and as they become aware that others are avoiding them because they are depressing, their sense of despondency mounts. Loss of friendships, intimacy, and a growing despondency result in a feeling of being right on the edge. Their fuses shortened, burned-out teachers feel that they are a powder keg primed to explode at any moment. And they often do. As a result they drive others even further away.

As pulling away continues, the cumulative negative feelings and actions finally accomplish the task of completely isolating the individual from the potential love and support of those around him/her. This results in the final phase of burnout - chronic disenchantment. Those who have reached this stage objectify their children. In its milder cases, objectification takes the form of abstract labels when referring to students (or others). Instead of Billy or Julie, it's "my troublemaker," "Mrs. Smith's daughter," or "that thing in the first row."

Objectification often slips into derogatory or abusive language when addressing or describing children. Terms like "turkey," "meatball," "lazybones," "dipstick," or "prima donna," thinly disguised as terms of endearment, actually convey underlying rage. A passive warfare grows as children respond in kind with their own derogatory terms, such as "the warden," "the old bag," or "the grouch." Such passive and disguised hostility indicates that the last stage of burnout is present.

Another sentiment present in this last stage is the "I don't care anymore" attitude. At one time enthusiastic, committed, concerned, dedicated, and heavily involved teachers are now passively angry, withdrawn, apathetic, and do not seem to be able to commit energy to anything. Other aspects of the chronic disenchantment stage are confusion, disorientation, and boredom. Often whole days go by and they can remember very little. They feel unhappy and begin to wonder whether or not they are having a nervous breakdown. Burned out people have little energy left to invest in changes. They feel trapped in a never-changing routine. This static existence limits their search for new and exciting activities.

One of the key factors of burnout is that teachers often blame themselves

for their negative feelings. Guilt - and it is strongest in the final stage of burnout - is the inevitable result. Self-esteem is at its lowest when they are feeling bad about feeling good.

#### TRAPS

Two researchers, Dr. Joseph Procaccini and Mark W. Kiefaber, have enumerated several factors that are critical to the incidence of burnout or that accelerate the course of burn out. They call them traps because they are often either concealed or appear attractive to the point of not being recognized as dangerous. Like many traps they lure the victim in, but getting out, while possible, is much more difficult. These traps are time use, crucializing, money, and guilt.

Time is one of the most precious blessings our Lord has given us. However, there is a fundamental dilemma relating to time: many teachers feel they do not have enough. The fact is they have all the time there is - 24 hours a day. I'm sure that without much difficulty each of us can call to mind two opposite individuals. We all know a person or persons who are involved in many things - full-time job, community responsibilities, church officer, Pioneer volunteer - and yet has found time to play tennis twice a week. And the other who has much less responsibility, always running around, but never accomplishing anything, never catching up. The key difference is not the amount of time available, but the management of time.

Those who have poor time-management skills have difficulty sorting out high priorities from low priorities. They have not analyzed what is critical in their activities and what is not critical. As a result, they often spend their time pursuing low-priority objectives to the detriment of the higher level ones. Another trap related to time is the inability to delegate.

Teachers who burn out inevitably are poor delegaters. They truly believe that only they can do what is needed; that they are indispensable. This teacher generally has few timeouts or emotional breathers. On the other hand one must also be aware of a kind of "delegation in reverse." An almost universal characteristic of teachers who burn out is their inability to say "no".

Teachers who burn out have a tendency to see all things as major issues. They magnify the importance of decision points beyond recognition. This is the crucializing trap. An over-intense concern literally consumes the energy of the teacher. What should be routine becomes crucial. A part of crucializing is worry. "Will I get my report cards done on time?" "What am I going to do with Danny?" "How am I ever going to get those papers all corrected?" and on and on. Worry and crucializing do take their toll. In the long run it is the teacher who pays the price.

Need we say much about the money trap? Part-time job, working spouse, bills, bills, bills, and bills certainly add stress. As providers for families we strive to accumulate more & more money & material goods for the present & future benefit of our families. As church workers we know well the pressure of budgets in operating our schools. Because burnout victims are basically givers and providers they are prime candidates for this trap.

Guilt, of course, is a relative thing and is very much related to self-expectations. As it has been intimated several times in this paper, guilt is the most powerful and the most common of these traps. Guilt sensitivity varies from person to person, but burned out teachers generally experience guilt to a much higher degree than others. They often feel that they never do enough for their children. The caring teacher is most sensitive to failure in this area and usually feels very guilty about it.



## FINAL THOUGHTS

The greatest tragedy of teacher burnout is that many excellent teachers never reach their full potential, or they are lost to the teaching ministry altogether. The old idea of "it's better to burn out for God than to rust for the devil" sounds good on paper, but it is a rather poor philosophy. It is far better to have a teacher pace himself/herself over a long period of time and remain consistent, than to burn out in the first four or five years of his/her teaching life and then "rust for the devil."

And therein lies the crux of the matter: the devil! And the world, and our own sinful flesh! I'm sure as we read through the first parts of this paper those thoughts did cross your mind. After all, what label can we put on such things as worry, guilt, name calling, anger, bitterness, etc., but sin? And hopefully, one other thought at least crossed your mind as you read or listened. (You have been doing that, haven't you!?) "But for us fights the Valiant One." Where is our trust in Him? Obviously, in reading secular research on burnout one will find no reference to this, the only real solution. The emphasis is always on what the individual must or must not do. The focus is on "I".

If we go back briefly to the stages of burnout, most, if not all, of us must admit to having been in the first and second stages more than once. The key to avoiding burnout does lie in the transition stage and where we go for help. How often have we "preached" at our students: "Search the Scriptures;" "Call upon me in the day of trouble;" "Seek and ye shall find;" "Pray without ceasing"? Have we really practiced what we preach? What a friend we have in Jesus! He is the transition! The peace and calm we yearn for are found in Him and His abiding Word.

Old Elijah had made it through many years, but finally he had hit stage five. He had burned out! Ran away! Totally gave up! "What's the use Lord? I'm the only one left!" What a beautiful lesson God taught burned-out Elijah as he sat in that cave, depressed and feeling all alone.

A masterpiece (although the modest author would never admit it) on trust is "Moses Struck a Rock" by Richard Grunze. This article is found in the latest issue of The Lutheran Educator. If my fingers weren't already sore, I'd copy the entire article for you, but ... well, you'll have to read it for yourself! Grunze brings this well-known incident in the life of Moses right to my own door step and shows me how many of my actions in the classroom are no different from those of burned-out Moses.

One writer suggests that when the stresses of life beset us we remember three things our Lord teaches us about our problems.

1. There is no such thing as an "accident," only incidents in the perfect will of our Savior God. (Psalm 37:23, Proverbs 2:8, Romans 8:28-30)
2. Our problems are "custom-made": Our trials and difficulties do not come because of random chance. Each is a test specifically chosen by the God who would save us for Himself; chosen to fit our individual spiritual needs, chosen to show us our weaknesses, to flex faith's muscles, to increase patience and develop Christian character. (Romans 5:1-9, James 1:12)
3. Troubles come to pass; they do not come to stay! Our Lord promises that He will "never allow us to be tempted above what we are able to bear, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape that we may be able to bear it." (I Cor. 10:13) "The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations ..." (II Peter 2:9) "For a season" we suffer this or that affliction, but our "light affliction" is "but for a moment" and works for us "an eternal glory that far out weighs them all." (I Peter 1:3-9, II Cor. 4:17-18)

Problems and everyday life can be and are stressful if set apart from constant reflection upon the assurances of our God. But problems, even everyday life, can be restful - full of rest - when we remember our Father's words to us.

We may even learn to say, "Thanks, Lord! I needed that!"

## INDISPENSABLE

When you're feeling so important  
And your ego is in bloom  
When you simply take for granted  
You're the wisest in the room  
When you feel your very absence  
Would leave a great big hole,  
Just follow these instructions  
They will hymble any soul.  
Take a bucket filled with water  
Put your hand in to the wrist,  
Pull it out, the hole remaining  
Is how much you will be missed.  
Splash wildly when you enter,  
Stir a lot and splash galore,  
Then stop, and in a minute,  
It looks just like before.  
The moral of this story  
Is do the best you can  
Be proud, but please remember,  
There's no indispensable man.

## TESTING FOR BURNOUT

The questions below are designed to assess your situation. You should think about each question before you respond. Award 1 to 5 points for each question, using the following rating scale when responding:

- 1 - Absolutely no
- 2 - Probably no
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Probably yes
- 5 - Absolutely yes

1. Do you have feelings that you are irreplaceable? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you dread weekdays? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you feel powerless to make a difference with your children? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you feel persistent pressure - too much to do and too little time? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Do you wish you could spend more time at your teaching duties? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Has your physical appearance changed for the worse? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Are you losing things more? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Are you overextended? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you feel like fighting with your children? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Do you feel that your children really don't appreciate you? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Are you having more arguments with your spouse, friends, and neighbors? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you get depressed more? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you feel nervous when you try to relax at the end of the day? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Do you have colds, lower back pain, or insomnia? \_\_\_\_\_
15. Are you guilty about your lack of success as a teacher? \_\_\_\_\_

### SCORING

If you had a total score of:

- 15-30 You are coping with teaching.
- 31-39 You are doing fine, but pay attention to any changes in attitudes, feelings, or behavior.
- 40-49 You are on the edge of burnout; take preventative action.
- 50-60 You are slipping into warning stages.
- 61-69 You are sliding into alarming burnout reaction; take action immediately.
- 70-75 You are burned out; seek help at once.

Adapted from Parent Burnout by Dr. Joseph Procaccini and Mark W. Kiefaber, 1983.  
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