

Recognizing Burnout

Drs. Larry and Lois Dodds



When I went off to Peru, as a young physician, I was fulfilling a life dream. An aunt had given me a book on the life of David Livingstone when I was seven years old. I read that book and said that I'm going to Africa to take care of the natives. I had that dream all the way through high school, college, and finally went to medical school. When Lois and I met and married, we both had the goal of going to the mission field. Finally the time came and we went off to the jungles of Peru. So for me, this was the culmination of a life goal. I was finally doing this-going out and saving lives and stamping out disease. The first term went very well, but on our second term, the two other doctors that were working with me had to return to their home country because of medical problems in their families. So, I had the same work load as when there were three of us. I kept that up for about another seven years, but finally it did me in. I just burned out. I got to the place where I didn't care anymore. So, I'd like to talk about burnout because I have personal experience. I will say this is something I recovered from, but it took some time.

There are a lot of jokes made about burnout. Some people say, "I'd rather burn out than rust out." I think those are both bad options. The goal is that we are in a marathon and we are to cross the finish line. So burning out is not really an appropriate response. The word comes from rocket science when they were using chemical rockets. The rocket would take off, the fuel burning and push it higher and higher until finally, the fuel burned out and then the rocket coasted a short distance, and then would fall back to earth and crash. And there were people who were doing that-expending a great deal of energy, doing great things. Then something happened where they just kind of ran out of fuel, coasted, and then fell back.

You might have a lot of demands on yourself that may not have much to do with your own desires. Probably the biggest thing is pushing yourself too hard for too long without adequate time for recuperation. This is very common in people working in anything to do with other people. It happens in doctors and nurses, pastors, policemen, firemen, school teachers, social workers. It's working with other people and giving out all the time, but not taking the time to get your tanks refilled again. One of the things that happens is it starts off very slowly. They are aware of something wrong, but they are not sure what. Then all of a sudden all of the symptoms can just kind of explode, and they are wondering where this came from. One of first things is that people are aware they are running low on fuel. They just get to the place where they are exhausted and a few days rest is not enough to restore them. You can feel worn out. Or you may take off a few days and then you realize you need another day to make it. Then pretty soon, you need another day to make it. But if somebody asks you how you are doing, you say, "I'm doing okay." The paradoxical thing is indeed denying that anything is really wrong. The symptoms are the warnings that you are burning out become an enemy is to be resisted. You don't want to deal with it because it doesn't fit into the vision of yourself. I am strong. I can make it. God is

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sufficient. I can do these impossible things that don't affect other people. That is one of the real difficulties. Along the way, you may start getting bored or cynical, start misinterpreting things-that people are doing things to me. You start to feel like you're a utility. It is something like depression, but it is a little different than depression because if you are not in the work situation, you are feeling pretty good about yourself. As soon as you get to work, things really fall apart. You might feel tearful, and things make you cry easily. You may find yourself detaching from other people.

I remember very clearly the day that I thought those people, in other words my colleagues, are doing something of which I am very proud. That very statement-'those people.' It's not what we are doing. It's them and me. And you start separating yourself emotionally from your colleagues. There may be a lot of anger. Seems like the harder you work, the less you get done. You can feel very irritated and you can lash out at your colleagues and your family, at your organization because they are supposed to be doing something to protect me. And you can get to this stage of this crisis where things are really bad. It's never going to change. You feel like a victim. You feel trapped. There are not any alternatives. There is no way out. Or you start fantasizing about the lottery and how you can get out of it by winning the lottery. That occupies a great deal of your time. You start developing tunnel vision. You can't see other options or possibilities. All you can see is what's in front of you. You don't think of other options. And you can get very hopeless. This is really a serious situation. What is really happening is you have used up all your emotional energy giving to other people until you have nothing left. Your tanks have run dry or you may be running on fumes. In the meantime though, you are becoming angry at everybody else for the demands they make on you.

I can remember when I was at my worst. People would come and make reasonable demands on me-a child had a temperature of 104 degrees or somebody was bleeding, or had a broken leg and I felt in my heart that I was very resentful at having to take care of them because I didn't have the energy to care anymore. That's one of the worst things for me. Here I am a Christian. I am a doctor. I'm supposed to do this. I'm supposed to show the love of Christ, but inside I was resentful and angry. I tried not to show the anger. As far as I know, nobody picked up on it, but I never asked anybody. But it was just a very frustrating time. I remember telling Lois one day, if I don't get out of here I'm going to die. I just felt something inside of me was going to die. Fortunately a few days later, our director asked if I could go into the capitol city to take another role and I almost asked how soon can I go because this was an honorable way out. It was just a difficult time and I felt badly about myself.

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Let me say this, I was having daily devotions. I was teaching an adult Sunday school class. Lois and I were in a wonderful caring support group. We met every Thursday night to pray for each other. I was open and sharing what was going on. I said this is me, not the organization, but I don't know what is going on. So I was doing all the right things spiritually, but it wasn't meeting the need. I will say this, even though you are doing the right things spiritually, you can still run out of emotional energy. And the only way that I know of to really recover from burnout is to step out of the situation that is making demands on you. Then you can start going through the reparative process. That's quite a process in its own right, but you have to step out of the situation. If you stay in the situation, you won't improve.

Some questions you might ask yourself if you are feeling low or identify with some of the things I've been talking about. What were my expectations when I started this? Did I really think that I'd be able to meet everybody's demands? Did I really expect that I didn't need as much sleep as everybody else? That I didn't need as much vacation as everybody else? Then another question is-where did these expectations come from? Are they idealized concepts that I have-that a servant of God should be able to work 26 hours a day? Eight days a week without rest? Or have other people lay these expectations on me? Perhaps from parental things-it's not worth doing unless it's worth doing well. I remember something that Ken Pike used to say that not everything worth doing is worth doing well. That is very wise. Do it well enough. Then, are these expectations realistic and appropriate? As I went through it, I began seeing I had some unrealistic expectations about myself. Another question is-how have I taken care of myself? What have I done for my own nurture and development? In contrast to that is-how have you not taken care of yourself? You may have not allowed enough time off. You may not have done activities to really do those things that are refreshing to you. What is refreshing for you is perhaps different than what is refreshing for me. What is it that really refreshes me?

The last question I would ask myself-what is it that I really want to do in order to best use my gifts and history that God has given me? God has equipped me with gifts, abilities, has given opportunities. How does He want to use that? So perhaps what I'm doing right now that I'm getting burned out in-there may be another way to use those things, a more appropriate way for the work of God's kingdom. Burnout is painful. I went through it. But I learned so much about myself in the process, I would not trade what I learned in the process. I would not want to do it again, but I would never trade in the process because it was a life-changing experience in the best sense. It was positive and a lot of good things came out of it. But it's worth recognizing, if you are picking up some of these symptoms-You are getting angry, resentful at other people, feeling cynical, feeling used, getting to the place where you don't care anymore. It doesn't matter. You need to ask yourself some honest questions. Am I really

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burning out? If so, what can I do to change the situation? How can I replenish my stores so that I can keep going?

At another time, I would like to talk about Elijah. Elijah was a person I think who was burned out and never fully recovered. But God mightily used him anyway, even after he burned out. So even if you burn out, burnout is not a sin. Burnout is not a mental illness, but it can be a tool that God can use in you to mightily change your life and affect your life to make it even richer. So, if you see these symptoms in yourself, you need to talk to a trusted friend and express really how you are feeling. If you have professional help, either a physician or a counselor available, talk with them or a pastoral counselor. Talk to your leader and describe what you are going through because if they really know what is going on, they will let you take the time out for care so that you can continue.