Professional Burnout: Selling Your Soul for a Living

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It has always been an imperative for nurses to be committed to their profession and to surpass themselves when providing care and showing empathy to their patients. For them, it is fortunate that the image of the caring, hard-working and compassionate nurse remains untarnished; otherwise, nurses would feel cut off from their collective subconscious and feel less humane in their duty to listen and to care for others.

A patient needs to feel that he can rely on a trustworthy, empathetic individual during his time of pain and suffering. Our society considers this idealistic, romanticized version of the nursing profession to be normal, but it comes at a price. Dealing with death and suffering on a daily basis and being unable to cure the terminally ill can become a burden.

The Concept of Humanitude

- Encompasses all the gifts that humans have given to each other throughout the ages to make us who we are today.
- Calls for humanitude begin at birth and continue throughout our lifetime through care and social interaction.
- Nurses demonstrate humanitude by providing and demonstrating care and empathy.

The price of care

Nurses provide care in a work environment in which there are inherent difficulties associated with their professional roles and responsibilities. Performing humanitudes (as described by Albert Jacquard[^1]), constantly being available to others day after day, and the strain of overwhelming work schedules eventually exact their toll.^[2] As Shylock noted in

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, this profession can cost you a *pound of flesh*.\(^3\)

All care providers are potentially subjected to fatigue and intellectual, emotional tensions arising from the weight of their duties and from long work hours standing up, moving from one patient to the next.

Some care providers find it more burdensome than others to deal with their work conditions and feel worn out inside, as if they were burning up from within. This uneasy feeling is what is commonly referred to as professional burnout syndrome. It strips its victims of their vital energy, leaving them feeling empty within their own bodies.

Also referred to among care providers as *burnout*, this condition raises the following question: “Should nurses be considered depreciable, disposable and replaceable assets?” If the answer is yes, where is the humanity? If the answer is no, how should nurses care for society’s most vulnerable without becoming prey to the distress of those individuals? Burnout is a phenomenon which requires serious consideration because it is widespread and wreaks considerable havoc upon its victims.\(^4\)

**To hell…**

Hell aptly describes the life of a victim of burnout. Severing the link between work satisfaction and accomplishment can result in physical pain which increases with the victim’s level of psychic pain. The victim may experience a wide range of disorders such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, headaches, digestive problems, low back pain, cystitis, and so on.

Like Atlas, the victim feels like he is bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. Deep down, the victim feels worn-out and deprived of physical, emotional and intellectual abilities. This feeling is accompanied by a deep sense of frustration, impotence and emptiness.

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At the professional level, a victim of burnout feels inadequate and no longer able to fulfill his assigned tasks. At the personal level, the victim tends to isolate himself and to distance himself from the source of his suffering - work. The end result is that he ends up overwhelming his coworkers and team mates, leaving them dissatisfied with his performance.

A victim of burnout will appear normal on the outside and attempt to remain autonomous without asking for help. He is like a building which has been burnt on the inside but which has kept its walls intact. As French poet Charles Beaudelaire urged in his *Flowers of Evil*, everyone wants his pain to be nice and behave. However, if the victim of burnout makes no effort to put an end to his condition, it will continue to destroy him and speed his journey to hell. And yet there’s the proverbial idea that work is health.

**Professional consequences of burnout**

- Feeling of being inadequate both personally and professionally
- Difficulty relating to others; isolation
- Aggressiveness and conflicts with coworkers and patients
- Depersonalization and shutting down to others
- Inability to demonstrate empathy and compassion for others; cynicism
- Loss of meaning in work and in life
- Absenteeism and sick leaves

**Risk of having care providers suffering from burnout**

- The risk of offering mediocre services and abusing patients increases when care providers work in environments in which care is provided to dependent persons, seniors and physically and mentally disabled individuals and in which working conditions are unfavourable, difficult and favourable to burnout.

**When one loses meaning in life**

In a context of insecurity and anxiety, the individual who is exhausted physically and emotionally will begin to depersonalize events around him. For a care provider, depersonalization means shutting down to others and being unable to show empathy to the patient being attended to even if this is the cornerstone of the attendant’s profession.

Cynicism and asocial attitudes become defence mechanisms for burnout victims. At this stage, once relations with others have become dehumanized and work has lost its meaning, burnout has almost completed its endeavour: the victim has experienced a narcissistic failure. Everything which made up the care provider’s self-confidence and self-esteem has been shattered.

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The victim feels like he means nothing to others and to himself. The burned-out nurse runs the risk of administering care in a cold, even brutal manner. She also risks sliding down the path to aggressiveness and abuse in a context in which patients are vulnerable due to their age or disability.

The roots of the disorder

Asking what causes burnout is normal. As in many human conditions, there are numerous factors associated with burnout.

The emotionally demanding job description of nurses, for example dealing with emergencies, human suffering and acute stress, has quickly been identified as a potential culprit. Obviously, one must wonder how any individual can deal with pain, despair, death and suffering day after day without being affected in the long term. However, there are more reasons why care providers burn out.

The personality of the care provider also plays a role. Not all care providers burn out at work. Idealists, perfectionists, altruists (especially those who act like saviours) are more susceptible to burnout. That is because many such individuals base their self-esteem on their job performance. Another category of person is also at risk: those who seek love from others at all cost, who aspire to recognition through the way they act rather than for who they are. Codependency or emotional dependency is unhealthy when it becomes an endless

Personal Factors
- A codependent personality for whom giving means everything
- An overabundance of personal problems in one’s private and family life
- Problems conciliating work and family life
- A frustrated professional identity in which initiative, pride and boldness are not asserted
- Lack of self esteem

Work-related Factors
- Emotional surcharge due to constant proximity to death and suffering
- Stress arising from overwhelming responsibilities and frequent emergencies
- Denial of competencies and skills and absence of recognition on a daily basis
- Lack of support and room to grow in team
- Irregular and late night work schedules
- Overworking, especially during periods of staff shortages

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call for commitment. Servitude can only result in disillusionment in the lack of recognition from patients, in the rigid framework of the workplace, and in the multitude of responsibilities assigned which often lack the resources necessary to complete them adequately and which offer little room for autonomy and self-fulfillment. The care provider fitting this profile risks becoming more fragile and psychologically worn out, and might eventually burn out.

As tasks become burdensome, as skills and competencies need to be renewed and updated, as technology becomes more complex, as hierarchies become more rigid and impersonal (even conflictual), the job loses its meaning and becomes a source of dissatisfaction, stress and frustration. The care provider will feel immensely powerless. This can lead him to consult. Unfortunately, he might also develop dependencies: alcohol, neuroleptics, sleeping pills, and so on. If he does, he becomes a thorn in the side of the health team. That individual can no longer transmit the image of hope and the will to live to his patients.

**What can be done to avoid becoming a victim of professional burnout?**

First, it is important to note that it is possible to fight burnout; however, it is much easier to prevent it. There are means to alleviate burnout, but they are not cure-alls and not solely for caregivers. There are things that individuals can do; organizations can also do their share by bringing changes to the work organization and by improving the climate in the nursing departments.

Managers must consider whether it is worth implementing certain mechanisms to prevent stress and depersonalization from taking hold of individuals and teams in their organization. They must also ask whether they are too commonly absorbed by utilitarian principles and tend to treat staff like disposable resources. Dehumanizing job requirements and the absence of employee recognition play a significant role in employee dissatisfaction and in the onset of burnout; they also disrupt health services. Instability within teams, rampant absenteeism and inefficient presenteeism among worn-out care providers should be a warning sign to management and inspire change (hopefully) in existing mentalities at the workplace.

**Recognition is a form of work compensation**

Most people are familiar with the hierarchy of needs pyramid developed by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), a U.S. psychologist known as the father of humanistic psychology. Above the bottom physiological and safety needs come the need for love, belonging, self-esteem and

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self-actualization. It is now generally accepted that satisfying those needs is essential to the achievement of personal balance, health and survival.

So why is it that many of those needs remain unanswered or are insufficiently provided for in the workplace? Simply put, the most basic physiological needs are often denied as employees are forced to eat lunch quickly, whenever they can. They often suffer from fatigue due to variable shifts, spending long hours standing up and dealing with work-related stress.

Occupational safety is also all too often ignored. This results in accidents and exposure to potentially infectious microbes.

Love, belonging and self-esteem are perhaps the most neglected needs in nursing. They generally cover a whole set of factors at the source of care provider dissatisfaction. Examples include the absence of recognition by managers, coworkers and even patients. Paradoxically, it is the consideration and satisfaction of those necessities which employees consider most essential - after compensation and before the relevance of their work and work climate.

Marie-Anne Dujarier noted that recognition at the workplace is a complex matter in our modern-day society, which places greater emphasis on individual rather than group recognition. Workers want to be recognized as unique individuals with their own personal characteristics and needs. Nurses are not the exception to this rule. Their coworkers and managers also want to be recognized for their contributions to the workplace. There exists a desire to legitimize employee motivation and commitment in workplace accomplishments. Work is no longer just the sum of tasks

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performed; recognition must also be extended to the effort and competencies put to
contribution. It is like the adage of putting your heart and soul into your work.

In his book *Le désir de métier* (The Desire for a Profession), Florence Osty noted that
collective requests are being set aside in favour of the recognition of the
unique necessities of individuals. Obtaining recognition has become
a stake in building trust, respect and self-esteem. Denying
recognition results in frustration, resentment and potentially delinquent behaviour.
Nurses experience the same frustrations as
other workers. In addition to this, they also complain about degrading conditions at the
workplace due to staff shortages and rapid technological innovation (they must constantly
keep up to date). This leads to stress and loss of identity, thus affecting the quality of their
work and the quality of their relationships with their patients. These significant sources of
dissatisfaction make it difficult for nurses to achieve self-esteem and fulfillment in their
identity and worth as professionals.

### Means to Avoid Professional Burnout

- Managers and team leaders can recognize the skills and work accomplished by care providers under their supervision.
- Coworkers can also recognize the work of their peers.
- Management can take into consideration the problems associated with care providing such as work overload, overwhelming schedules, and physical and emotional tension.
- Managers and care providers can ensure that there are effective, instructive, uplifting, motivating communications in the teamwork.
- Managers and care providers can cooperate to offer room for professional growth and the development of a feeling of self-accomplishment.
- Administrators can organize work loads that conform as best as possible to the needs of personnel.
- Nurses can be trained to identify and help their vulnerable peers; discussion groups can also be formed.

Self-esteem as a factor of psychological balance

Recognizing an employee and his work has a direct impact on his self-esteem, which plays an
important role in personal development, the ability to adapt to difficult situations and the
execution of tasks. In their book *L’estime de soi* (Self-Esteem), Cristophe André and François
Lelord note that humans in general ask three fundamental questions: “Who am I?”;
“What am I worth?” and “How am I doing compared to others?” The final question is
essential to raising our self-esteem. Personal questions are important, but concerns about our
professional identity and our relations with others also have a significant influence on our
sense of being competent.

Extremely self-confident individuals find it easier to take initiatives, to adapt to difficult
situations and to achieve serenity in life and in their professional responsibilities. Therefore,
whether it is in nursing or in any other profession, employee recognition is a great tool to
boost efficiency, to create harmony among coworkers and to prevent frustration and burnout
from occurring.

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How to stimulate self-esteem?

How can conditions which favour self-esteem at the workplace and in our personal lives be created? Christophe André and François Lelord note that expressing appreciation, giving employees the feeling of being competent and giving them sufficient autonomy to control their environment can help build these conditions.\(^\text{12}\) In nursing, positive reinforcement, the acknowledgment of competencies and autonomy for creativity and personal initiative are all too often lacking. The absence of recognition can become a risk factor for frustration and burnout. All individuals are fragile and vulnerable. Recognition remains an essential stimulus for nurses, as it would be for any other individual. Recognition has an impact on our physical and mental health and well-being.

Means at our disposal

In a system such as ours, there are things over which we have little control. Nonetheless, we need to ask ourselves what we can each accomplish individually. The most satisfying expressions of recognition usually come from coworkers.

The urgency in executing tasks in nursing often leaves little room for care providers to show concern for their peers and appreciation of their work. Recognizing a coworker is both free and simple. All it takes is to tell them that they are doing a fine job, that the manner in which they apply their skills and knowledge is much appreciated, that they bring warmth and empathy to the workplace, and that their needs as individuals are being looked after.

Providing mutual support and assistance also encourages recognition. They protect workers from feeling overwhelmed by their duties and feelings. Properly structured teamwork in which both a human and professional dynamic coexist should prevail.\(^\text{13}\) People all too often forget that teamwork is a strength. To recognize a fellow human being means that we also recognize our own strengths, weaknesses, distress and personal limits. Humans are unequal in their ability to cope with stress; some are more resilient to its effects than others. Personality plays a role, but other factors are also at play. Some care providers experience tension at home, or problems in their couple or must cope with disease. They may also have trouble conciliating work and family life.

The Concept of Boldness

- **Boldness helps counter the adverse effects of stress.**
- **The concept of boldness stems from the values, beliefs, feelings and psychological tendencies of the individual.**
- **It is expressed by the individual’s work commitment, control of competencies, self-confidence and openness to risk and change.**


Although it is now easier for us to imagine that care providers can burn out, we should not be surprised that burnout also affects managers of projects and departments as well as individuals who are entrusted with a variety of obligations to fulfill. At any level, at the source of professional burnout lie values that have been denied and disillusionment regarding work, its worth and its appreciation and recognition by others. In a sense, it is a failure of ego for individuals who have higher ambitions and who have fully committed themselves to their duties. Whatever one’s position in the medical hierarchy, fulfilling tasks which are often both demanding and unappreciated can make an individual more vulnerable and lead to burnout. Showing appreciation for the commitment and organizational abilities of coworkers, as well as providing support, can have a positive effect.

**Building an armour of pride, joy and resilience**

Care providers must consider how they can remain fit. The concept of *boldness* to reduce the adverse effects of occupational stress has been much evoked lately. Boldness helps doers and go-getters by bringing their courage, renewed interest in work, daring and creativity to the forefront.14 Not all people have the intrinsic ability to show boldness, but training can play a helpful, determining role according to Delmas et al.15

Personal development is also among the significant factors which help counter burnout. This evolution can encompass both personal and professional aspects of an individual, from learning new disciplines to relaxation and centering methods. Such methods can help individuals find meaning in how they relate to their inner self, to nature and to others.

People tend to forget that we are all spiritual beings guided by unique values when in the line of duty. Individuals need time to meditate and reflect on the meaning of life, on what they want and how they can achieve their objectives.

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Yet people also need to develop warm, meaningful relations with others. “No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main,” wrote John Donne in his best-known poem. Finding real meaning in what unites us to others, without competition and in simplicity and happiness, can be quite comforting. Everything should be done to avoid Sartre’s existentialist “hell is others.”

By being more attentive to others, care providers can avoid adversely creating an overly competitive, utilitarian environment in which confusion predominates and in which both workers and patients feel left aside. As Mauranges suggested, in this matter, better, more practical training in helpful relations with a set objective of attaining detachment and becoming more amenable to others can help protect individuals against burnout.

A work team in which understanding and mutual assistance prevail and in which there is room for personal and professional development is ideal for supporting workers who are vulnerable to burnout. A climate in which there is room for dialogue, mutual understanding and recognition helps team members recover their faculties and avoid depression. A team that is functional at the interpersonal level is a powerful barrier against solitude and discouragement.

It is important to recognize the need for support in care-providing teams. Care providers belong to a profession in which workers are required to help others. As such, they are at risk of burning out, so why not implement appropriate mechanisms in the work teams by training clinicians for supervisory roles? They could be attentive to their coworkers who are experiencing problems and intervene promptly, from the onset of dysthymia, so that care providers do not have to wait to call upon more significant interventions and specialized resources. Basically, this constitutes an act of prevention. Such a measure may help avoid the long, downward spiral engendered by burnout, sick leaves and the ensuing social isolation of the ailing care provider.

In order to give, one must be fit. To transmit the will to live and to remain bold, care providers must live in the present, spread joy, seek opportunities to laugh, engage in recreational activities that are worthwhile, and protect their relations with others. Seeking and cultivating happiness is a powerful vaccine against gloom.

CONCLUSION

Professional burnout is a tragedy both for its victim and for those who deal with him. It is therefore a moral obligation for care providers to avoid becoming victims of burnout both for

themselves and for their patients. Like anything that is negative, burnout can create victims, especially among those who are weak, fragile or vulnerable to the condition due to personality or to factors in their environment.

Organizational instruments are available to reduce work-related stress; however, acting at the personal level remains the easiest and most efficient area for intervention. Care providers can protect themselves from burnout by having fun, engaging in recreational activities and cultivating meaningful relations with others; they can also practice psychic liberation strategies such as meditation, relaxation or yoga. Regardless of their preferences, care providers can choose to provide mutual aid to each other and to avoid defeatism. Burnout kills the joy of life. To fight burnout is to choose a better life.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


