



Towards Wholeness

A Model for Eliminating Burnout

Written by Suzi Smith with input from Tim Hallbom and Randy Kunkel

Burnout is a concept that's been around for many years and is sometimes misunderstood. It is defined as a depletion of personal energy, a loss of vitality and spirit with a gradual decrease of commitment. It has been difficult for people to admit to experiencing burnout, because admitting you are feeling "burned out" must mean that something is wrong with you as a person. It seems as if burnout can happen to anyone and depends on how you are viewing the many activities you do throughout the day.

Before proceeding further into the subject, let me acknowledge that much of the information shared here about burnout I first learned from the work of Randy Kunkel. When I first met Randy and was introduced to this model of burnout, Randy was living in the state of Colorado in the United States and had been doing research within school systems. He was especially interested in studying teachers in various school systems who maintained a healthy attitude throughout the entire school year. He found a difference in this balanced group as opposed to many teachers suffering so badly from burnout that they could hardly wait for summer vacation.

SOME FACTS ABOUT BURNOUT

Based on Kunkel's research, he estimates that over 85% of the workforce in the United States is in some stage of burnout at any one time. The type of environment that exists within an organization or a family can make a difference in the levels of burnout. It seems that the danger of burnout is high where there are high demands with unclear expectations, or a lack of appropriate resources. In the workplace people often feel powerless. With many industries looking at layoffs and down sizing, people are not even sure that they'll have a job tomorrow and end up experiencing helpless, hopeless feelings when they think about the future of their careers.

When people perceive a lack of personal control over their experience and environment,

where the expectations are unclear,, where there are high demands as well as uncertainties about what will happen next, or are in a high stress job, the chances of burnout also increase. Occupations with high levels of burnout are: crisis social workers, air traffic controllers, assembly line workers and dentists.

In an occupation where you are typically handling one crisis situation after another you are keeping you body in a state of hyper alertness on a regular basis. You might be wondering just how dentists are linked to high levels of burnout.(A dentist spends many years learning the trade, and if she/he doesn't like the work, the skills are not very transferable to other occupations. In addition, most people dislike going to the dentist. Under the best of circumstances, it's uncomfortable and sometimes painful, so many people aren't delighted to be in the dentist's office.)

The burnout from assembly line work comes from the boredom of doing the same task over and over again, as well as a feeling that the decisions about your job are made by other, leaving you little control.

Since burnout can occur in any environment, it is not just an issue related to your job or career. People can burn out quite easily on volunteer activities that we do in our leisure time. Of course, we can also suffer burnout at home in a relationship.

Burnout symptoms have been documented in children as young as 6 where a crisis environment exists with unclear or changing expectations. Where parents are often changing their minds about what they want or

have conflicting expectations, the child becomes confused. The children of demanding parents can also experience burnout.

The social group with the highest percentage of burnout is that of full time housewives with 2 or more small children. Things as simple as shopping become impossible because of one crisis or another, and homemakers can never really plan because they can't very well turn their backs on the kids and ignore them. This is a totally unpredictable environment to be in, where often the woman feels she has no control over her environment. Over 95 % are in some stage of burnout.

The good news about burnout is that it is totally reversible and avoidable. Once you fully understand what's happening to you when you start showing certain patterns in your behavior, you can make adjustments in your behavior and the symptoms will disappear.

HOW DOES BURNOUT OCCUR?

The kinds of activities we engage in as we move through our daily lives seem to fall into three main categories. There are experiences that are draining, that leave us feeling depleted of energy, either before, during or after the activity. It's as if the energy was sucked out of us or taken away from us. We go away with a feeling of discomfort, unpleasantness or dissatisfaction.

On the flip side of that spectrum we have experiences that are nourishing, that leave us feeling energized. It's as if we actually received extra energy through our participation in an activity and we leave it feeling better, happier and more optimistic because of the positive energy associated with it.

In all fairness, we have to admit that some activities in life are necessary to do, and we feel neutral about them. We don't feel either drained or nourished by those experiences – rather we just accept and do them without much thought.

So we have a spectrum of possibilities in how we're experiencing the events of our daily lives – leading from very draining all the way to very nourishing.

Draining.....Neutral.....Nourishing

The same activity may change on that spectrum depending on the circumstances. Driving your car across town to an appointment might typically be neutral. It could become nourishing if you're listening to an inspirational tape as you're driving, or could become draining if there's a traffic jam or detour along the way. Obviously, our attitude towards the activity can change where it fits on that spectrum.

According to Randy Kunkel, burnout begins to appear when we perceive that the balance has shifted to where over 50% of our daily activities are more draining than nourishing. In fact, it is inevitable when the teeter-totter becomes top heavy on the draining side.

Since your perceptions are your reality, if you perceive something is draining, it will be and it will take energy away from you. It's like going to lunch with a co-worker who tells you how awful things are on their job and how much they dislike the people they work with and how frustrating their teenager is because they don't behave.etc. You go back to work feeling as if some of your energy has actually been stolen from you.

Contrast that with a nourishing experience where you go to lunch with a co-worker who is excited to tell you about a new project they're working on that has lots of possibilities, who's got a new assistant that they can't praise enough, and who shares with you a wonderful personal experience they had in a personal growth workshop. You go back to work after lunch feeling uplifted – like you've received something out of that interaction. It adds to your energy levels.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE WHEN WE'RE IN BURNOUT?

There are 5 distinctive stages /phases that people go through when entering burnout. Pay special attention

when you notice a repeating pattern in your life rather than just an occasional occurrence of these symptoms that are mentioned here. Following is a questionnaire where you can take stock of your current levels of burnout.

BURNOUT QUESTIONNAIRE

Put a check by any statements that show a recurring pattern that applies to you currently.

Physical

- Extended Fatigue
- Feeling drained and tired regularly
- Minor physical ailments that linger
- Overindulgence – food, alcohol, sleep, work, smoking
- Your body feels like it's an obstacle

Social

- Irritable and harsh with others
- Difficult to deal with
- Lose temper over small things
- Feel isolated from others
- Put off interactions at home or work

Intellectual

- Avoidance of thinking activities
- Feeling of overload and overwhelm
- Lack of concentration
- Begin to miss deadlines
- Participate in passive activities that allow you to be a spectator- like TV
- Always looking ahead and hoping things will get better

Emotional

- You feel alienated from people and tasks
- You want to be alone most of the time and avoid people
- A continual feeling of boredom
- You perceive you're always meeting other's needs at your own expense

Spiritual

- You stop investing in and getting to know others
- You feel threatened by other's needs
- You begin to doubt your own value system and beliefs
- You're feeling so miserable you must make a change

PHASES OF BURNOUT

Having just completed the Burnout Questionnaire you will now have a better idea of the various symptoms

that are associated with burnout. You may not have all of the symptoms in each of the phases, and when some of the symptoms occur it may have a greater impact on you than others.

Kunkel found that the symptoms are cumulative and progressive, so that you take the symptoms from one phase into the next and just pile more symptoms on top of what you already have. Many of you can probably verify this in your own personal experience.

PHASE I – PHYSICAL

At this stage our body becomes an obstacle and starts getting in our way. We have small aches, pains and illness that holds on and just doesn't go away. We might notice fatigue that is difficult to shake and feeling drained and tired regularly. There is a tendency towards overindulgence at this phase. It could be overindulgence in food, alcohol, smoking, sleep, or work.

PHASE II – SOCIAL

At this stage we begin having trouble sustaining relationships. We lose our temper over small things and become irritable and harsh with others. We have a tendency to isolate ourselves from others, especially people we find draining. We become difficult for others to be around also. Because we find relationships draining, we begin to postpone important interactions, both at home and work, and make no time to be with others socially. You might have issues with people that need to be dealt with, but because they feel draining, you don't confront them directly.

PHASE III- INTELLECTUAL

At his stage, we begin to get a sense of overload and overwhelm and we'll avoid thinking activities. Because of that, we begin to miss deadlines and find it difficult to concentrate for any period of time. We jump from one thing to another and have trouble keeping our attention on one thing long enough to finish it. We turn towards passive activities that don't require any participation on our part. In essence, we become a spectator to life. We may find ourselves watching TV, even though we're not interested in or enjoying a show – just because it is easy. We may fall into a pattern called "watchism" where we're always looking ahead (to the end of the day, to the weekend, to vacations, to retirement) just hoping things will get better and never being fully present to life.

PHASE IV – EMOTIONAL

At this stage our emotions go to a low point where we start experiencing what feels like paranoia and total overwhelm. Nothing sounds interesting. We feel alienated from people and tasks and will even avoid those people we've enjoyed in the past, thus deepening the feelings of isolation. We may seek to be alone a lot of the time and fight off a feeling of constant boredom. (It's almost like going into a cave to hibernate.) We might even turn to alcohol and drugs. We get into a victim mentality where it seems as if all we do is meet other's needs at our own expense. Everybody wants a piece of the action and we're the action would be a perfect description of what this feels like. This also leads to resentment of others, feeling taken advantage of.

PHASE V – SPIRITUAL

At this stage it feels as if we have a broken spirit. Other people's needs pose a threat for us, so we stop investing in others and make no efforts towards relationships. Someone new starts working in the office and you don't bother to get to know them at all. Your child has a problem with their teacher that should be addressed, but that gets ignored. We even begin to doubt what is important to us, like our values and beliefs, leading to a hopeless, helpless feeling. Things that used to be very important to us before just seem less important. It's like, "Why bother, anyway? No one else seems to care, so why should you?" At this point we

begin feeling so miserable that we must make a change.

HOW PEOPLE TYPICALLY GET OUT OF BURNOUT

There are various responses that people have when we get all the way to Phase V of Burnout.

- A very small percentage actually go into clinical depression and need medical treatment.
- Some people (about 20%) make an external change – that is we change something outside of ourselves. We quit our job, move to a new town or get a divorce as just a few examples. Initially, this works well to alleviate the burnout, but if no other changes are made, it can start creeping back and we find ourselves back into burnout again. This is because we create our own environment wherever we go.
- A large percentage of people (about 75%) just accept this draining existence as “normal” and rationalize it so that we can live with it. We might stay in a draining relationship because, at least it’s stable and we know what to expect. Or we’ll stay in a draining job because we’re close to retirement or have good benefits. We just learn to tolerate the burnout. This is called “lock-in”. With this approach, we go in and out of burnout depending on what’s happening in the environment. If we’re given a new assignment at work, we gain new energy for a period, or if we go in for some marriage counseling, things might get better in the relationship for a period. The level of burnout depends upon what’s going on in the environment.
- A small group of people come to realize that we must make internal changes to get ourselves out of burnout. This involves changing attitudes and meanings attached to what is happening around us so that change really works. We might also make external changes, but the emphasis is on how we need to change our own thinking and behavior and become personally responsible for our life.

WAYS TO CHANGE BURNOUT

Your first step in overcoming burnout is to become mindful of the impact your various activities have on your energy levels. Begin by keeping a simple written log for a week of all the activities you participate in during each 24 hour period. Mark an + (plus) by those activities that were nourishing, a 0 (zero) by those that were neutral and a – (minus) by those activities that left you feeling drained. This gives you the opportunity to pay attention to the quality of the activities you engage in each day, and to also assess your energy levels at completion of those activities. Undoubtedly, you will discover that you have fallen into habit patterns with your behaviors and do things that are draining your energy without even thinking about them. By keeping this log, you’re gathering information to find out where the energy leaks are in your life.

An ideal is to identify draining activities, and where possible, replace them with nourishing activities. Here are a couple of examples of this.

- You have been watching the 10:00 pm news every night before going to bed. When you analyze that, you discover that listening to the news is quite draining, so you replace that with reading an inspirational book or listening to soothing music. You may even discover that you sleep better at night by doing this.
- On your break from work, you go with the same co-workers each day, where they do lots of blaming and complaining about work. When checking your energy following your break, you realize that this habitual activity has turned into a draining one. You decide, instead, to take a walk around the block or meditate on your break. These activities can actually replenish your energy and make the rest of the day more enjoyable.

If it isn’t possible to replace the draining activity, the next step is to consider how you can think about it differently to make it seem more nourishing. A good question to ask here is “How does doing this help me in the long term, or tie into my mission and purpose in life.” To find a way to “reframe” an activity, try asking yourself what higher level criteria is being met by doing it. Here are a couple of examples of this.

- You find it necessary to take your ailing mother, who has become unpleasant to be around due to her illness, to the doctor regularly as there is no one else around who can do that. While you’re with her, you

think of all the loving things she did for you when you were young and needed to rely on her for help. These could be simple things even like feeding you, teaching you to dress yourself etc.

- You find filing papers in your office a draining activity. As you're doing the filing and wading through all those papers, you keep imagining how pleased you'll be when you need something and can retrieve it quickly. This will tap into the criteria you have of being well organized.

Another choice is to actually change the way you do an activity to take some of the draining nature out of it. A saying that may help with this is, "If what you're doing isn't working, do anything else that will get you better results." Here are some examples of this.

- You feel drained by your daily commute to work, especially when you're stuck in traffic. You could listen to books on tape or interesting music. You could even use that time to plan out your day in your head.
- You hate the monthly task of cleaning all the moldy leftovers out of the refrigerator. Thinking of it differently, after doing each shelf, you reward yourself with a sip of coffee, a bite of apple or you put on wild salsa music and dance as you do it.

Sometimes if we're already feeling some of the effects of burnout, we lose our perspective and think everything has to be done right now. We have a tendency to take on more and more activities and begin feeling overwhelmed. Often when that happens we are making multiple pictures of all we need to do and talking to ourselves in a fast voice tone. Try moving the multiple pictures out into the distance in your mind's eye so that they become smaller and less overwhelming. Then ask yourself, "What's the next step, or what needs to be done first?" That will allow you to focus on just one picture at a time and eliminate the overwhelming feeling. Also try slowing the internal voice down so that it sounds less frantic. These ways of thinking can make a huge difference in your energy levels as you approach an activity.

SUMMARY OF SELF-COACHING QUESTIONS

- What are the activities I do as habit that are draining – without even thinking about them?
- Where are my energy leaks and how can I stop them?
- How can I think differently about draining experiences to make them more nourishing? How might this task help me in the long term? How does this tie into my mission, purpose or vision?
- Which draining activities could be done in a different way to make them nourishing?
- What would happen in your life if draining activities were eliminated?
- Which habit patterns of behavior have you developed that don't seem to lead to anything positive? How will you make changes in that?
- Ask yourself, "What will happen if I don't do this activity right now, or if I don't do this at all?" If there would be a negative consequence, how can I handle it?

GOAL SETTING

When you're dealing with burnout and want to make some positive internal changes to gain control over your life, it's helpful to think of the necessary changes in small incremental steps. It's important to keep the end result of what you're going for in mind – a rich, rewarding, happy life full of many nourishing activities leaving you in a positive, energetic state. Here are some self-coaching questions that will help direct you as you consider setting goals that will help you achieve that objective.

SELF COACHING QUESTIONS

- What are the pieces/steps that go into reaching my end goal?
- How long will each piece/step take to accomplish?
- What's one thing I could do in the present or near future to get started?

- How will I evaluate my progress?
- What evidence will I have that I have reached my goal? What will I see, hear or feel that lets me know I am getting closer to my goal as well as when I have actually achieved my goal?
- What kind of structure will help me remember to move on to the next step?
- How will I track my progress?
- How will I celebrate each success?
- What will having this goal allow me to do, to be or to have that is important in my life?

As you are moving towards your goal, consider stepping into how good you'll feel when you have a rich, rewarding, happy life full of many nourishing activities. As you step in and fully experience that, take note of how you feel? This will give you the motivation to continue on.

BALANCE

You'll notice as you look at the Stages of Burnout that they actually represent 5 different Life Areas; Physical, Social, Intellectual, Emotional and Spiritual. Many of us have probably had the experience of getting out of balance/top heavy in one of those areas. If you devote an inordinate amount of time or energy to any one of those Life Areas, you can cause burnout to occur in that particular area. I've heard people who write books say, "I couldn't look at it and think about it any more. My brain was tired of thinking." This would be an example of spending too much time and energy on something in the Intellectual area while neglecting other areas of your life. We can all probably think of times when we focused too much in any one of those Life Areas and felt out of balance.

A wise choice is to consider an even distribution of time and energy to all 5 Life Areas so that balance is created across your life. This can lead to a peaceful sense of wholeness. One way to accomplish this is to take a good look at what you're doing currently in each area and then decide what you can plan into your life that would make a difference. Taking a sheet of paper, list the 5 Life Areas down the left side of the page. At the top of the sheet, note what you are currently doing that is nourishing in each of those areas and next to that, what you would add into your life in each of those areas that would be nourishing. That paper would look something like this:

	Currently Doing	Want to Do
Spiritual	_____	_____
Emotional	_____	_____
Intellectual	_____	_____
Social	_____	_____
Physical	_____	_____

SELF COACHING QUESTIONS FOR BALANCE

- What am I currently doing in each of the 5 Life Areas that's nourishing?
- What have I done in the past in each of those 5 Life Areas that was nourishing? If I'm no longer doing them, why did I stop and what will it take for me to add those activities back into my life?
- Which of the 5 Life Areas would benefit from the addition of nourishing activities?
- Which nourishing activities can I add into each of those areas and still maintain a sense of balance?
- When will I add these nourishing activities in? How will I remind myself to actually do these things?

POSSIBLE NOURISHING ACTIVITIES

The following ideas come from students in workshops where Burnout was a topic for discussion. These are suggestions of what might be possible nourishing activities for each of the 5 Life Areas.

Physical

Exercise

- Include aerobic exercise 4 times per week, stretching regularly and
- strength training for healthy bones

Nutrition

- Eat 3 balanced meals daily – Eat breakfast daily
- Maintain an ideal weight

Relaxation

- Practice some form of meditation daily

Smoking

- None

Alcohol

- No more than 2 alcoholic drinks per day

Sleep

- Get 7-8 hours of sleep daily

Health

- Get regular check-ups and monitor your energy levels

Personal

- Learn to cook – make some new recipes
- Have a belly laugh every day – develop a sense of humor

Social

- Join or form professional support groups with a commitment to personal growth
- Increase time spent in key nourishing relationships – decrease draining ones
- Emphasize win-win solutions instead of win-lose solutions
- Focus more on relationship instead of task (getting the job done)
- Eliminate game playing in relationships – focus on authenticity
- Join meaningful volunteer organizations
- Implement quiet time for self
- Stop trying to motivate or change others – focus on self
- Conduct staff discussions on burnout
- Spend more time with family

- Listen
- Plan something with a friend
- Make a social commitment
- Force yourself to say hello to someone every day
- Do something nice for someone with no strings attached
- Start a new hobby that you do with others
- Plan a small party at your home with family or close friends
- Smile at yourself in the mirror every morning
- Take a vacation

Intellectual

- Read an interesting book
- Continuing professional development activities
- Attend Conferences and seminars
- Read professional journals and publications
- Go back to school to learn something new
- Take up hobbies distinctly different from work
- Play cards, chess, crossword puzzles, Sudoku
- Attend cultural events
- Take a vacation
- Pick one or two things to concentrate on and ignore the rest
- Avoid reading the paper or watching the news for a week
- Learn to delegate
- Do something totally new or something you've never done before
- Take one day at a time – one thing at a time
- Stop and “smell the roses”
- Spend a whole day acting like a kid – go to the park, eat ice cream, skip rope
- Redecorate your house or office
- Pet an animal
- Practice being in the present moment
- Take acting lessons
- Take on a leadership position

Emotional

- Get involved in positive work activities
- Attend personal growth workshops
- Look at energy levels and life in general every 6 months
- Change jobs or at least change your attitude to the job
- Use a daily calendar
- Plan time for yourself every day
- Stop smoking

- Practice saying “no”
- Take walks and enjoy what you see in nature
- Change your physical appearance (lose weight, cut hair, change style)
- Splurge on something you’ve been wanting
- Find an alternate work schedule
- Break up your routines (the way you do things)
- Practice day dreaming
- Get involved in an encounter/personal growth group
- Sing or Dance
- Learn to do public speaking
- Be creative – paint, draw, woodwork, knitting
- Take one step at a time
- Speak up when someone is making unrealistic demands
- Do something artistic
- Watch the sunrise, sunset, full moon come up
- Listen carefully to someone
- Assert your feelings when it’s appropriate
- Spontaneously express your feelings

Spiritual

- Attend religious ceremony or do religious activities
- Meditate regularly
- Attend yoga classes and practice yoga regularly
- Conduct a values clarification exercise with self
- Build positive sexual relationships
- Let music lift your spirits
- Ask for a change in assignments
- Change your surroundings
- Force yourself to meet new people
- Break up old patterns that don’t work any more
- Take a bubblebath by candlelight
- Find a confidant you trust
- Plan one activity a day involving at least one other person
- Practice “random acts of kindness”
- Practice being in the now
- Take a risk
- Make a decision you’ve been avoiding
- Leave everyone you meet in a better state than you find them
- Smile even if you don’t feel like it
- Give positive feedback to others

WHOLENESS

Having fully explored the symptoms and remedies that will take you out of burnout, you're ready to turn your attention towards Wholeness, and creating the life you want for yourself. So far, the focus has been on your attitudes and behaviors. Now you have the opportunity to use these same concepts to create an "ideal you" – a you with a healthy identity that you are drawn towards- the you that is healthy across all these dimensions we have explored.

Begin with the physical you. See, hear, and feel the you in the future that is physically the way you want to be ...thinking about the way you look, how you feel, how your body moves, your eating, drinking, sleeping and exercise patterns that give you the needed energy for life.

What is the ideal you of the future like socially? Creating it just the way you want it, notice the nature of your relationships. Consider family, friends, acquaintances, people you work with and even strangers. See, hear, and feel the healthy you that has good relationships with others and interacts with others in ways that are pleasing.

Now, what do you want to create for yourself intellectually in that future healthy you? How are you thinking and using your mind? What hobbies are you involved with? How are you pursuing learning more about the things that interest you and developing your mind? Consider what you're involved with that keeps you sharp and mentally alert.

Having it now just the way you want it in other areas, what emotional states does the ideal you have access to? Consider what you do to fully express your feelings and how you are creating peak emotional experiences for yourself. Which core states do you have regularly that make your life rich and rewarding? Think about how you shift yourself out of emotional states that aren't healthy for you.

Make sure this ideal you has the full capability of renewing your spirit regularly. Consider what this future you does that makes you feel nourished spiritually and makes you feel connected with things outside of you.

As you are considering this idea you of the future across all these dimensions, look at this you, listen to how you sound and what you're saying inside your head. How does it feel as you move through the world being ideally you?

When you're ready, imagine that you actually step into this ideal you, feeling the feelings that are there with all you've created in yourself. Enjoy this experience of the ideal you. It is totally possible for you with the information you now have. Enjoy.

You can experience this final process even more completely on the CD entitled, Creating a Healthy Identity. It is available through www.suzismith.net.

Now that you have all the information, you can now take some kind of inspired action immediately to begin creating the life you want. Decide what you can do, taking control over your own behavior and thoughts to be responsible for being in control of what happens to you in life. Use the self-coaching questions to create a plan of action and proceed towards a rich, healthy, nourishing life and enjoy the journey.

This article was written by Suzi Smith with input over the years from Tim Hallbom. Thanks to Randy Kunkel of Catalyst for development of the Burnout Model used here. Randy Kunkel has a PhD from the University of Denver. He is the Founder and Chairman of Catalyst International in Colorado Springs (catalyst.rk@gmail.com). His major research and training focus is on sustained high level achievement, particularly with the disabled and life challenged.

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