

Caring for Oneself As a Caregiver

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In a previous article, this author outlined what was defined as “*Bereavement Caregiver Burnout*.”¹ We noted that few helping situations are more challenging, or more rewarding, than the opportunity to assist persons impacted by loss in their lives. We also acknowledged that no caregiver to the bereaved can avoid the special stress that comes with entering into the helping relationship.

There is very little documented research available that compares levels of stress and potential burnout across different professions. However, there is a general consensus that helpers to the dying or bereaved experience burnout on a routine basis. This article attempts to allow you to acknowledge if you are experiencing “*Bereavement Caregiver Burnout*” and provide suggested guidelines for caring for yourself as a caregiver.

A bereavement coordinator for a hospice recently inquired, “How is burnout different from stress?” We might overhear a volunteer or staff person comment, “I’m really feeling burned out today.” All of us may have occasional days when our motivation and energy levels vary. While this fluctuation in energy states is normal, burnout is an end stage that typically develops over time. Once a person is “burned out,” dramatic changes become vital to reversing the process.

Psychologist Christine Maslach, a leading authority on burnout, has outlined three major signs of burnout 2:

- EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION – feeling drained, not having anything to give even before the day begins.
- DEPERSONALIZATION – feeling disconnected from other people, feeling resentful and seeing them negatively.
- REDUCED SENSE OF PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT – feeling ineffective, that the results achieved are not meaningful.

Step back for a moment and complete what we will term the “Brief Bereavement Caregiver Burnout Survey” (BBCBS). As you review your life over the past twelve months answer the survey questions.

Grief Bereavement Caregiver Burnout Survey (BBCBS)

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1. Do you generally feel fatigue and lacking in energy?
2. Are you getting irritable, impatient, and angry with people around you (home and/or work)?
3. Do you feel cynical and detached from the people with whom you work?
4. Do you suffer from more than your share of physical complaints like headaches, stomach aches, backaches, and long-lasting colds?
5. Do you generally feel depressed or notice sudden fluctuations in your moods?
6. Do you feel busy, yet have a sense that you don’t accomplish much at all?

7. Do you have difficulty concentrating or remembering?
8. Do you think you have to be the one to help all those people experiencing grief?
9. Do you feel less of a sense of satisfaction about your helping efforts?
10. Do you feel that you just don’t have anything more to give to people?

To monitor your potential for burnout, ask yourself to how many of these questions you answered “yes.” In general, if you answered “yes” to two to four of these questions, you may be in the early phases of burnout. If you answered “yes” to five to seven of these questions, you are quickly moving in the direction of total burnout. If you answered “yes” to eight to ten of these questions, you are burned out!

Guidelines For Caring For The Caregiver

The following practical guidelines are not intended to be all-inclusive. Pick and choose those tips that you believe will be of help to you in your efforts to stay physically and emotionally healthy.

Remember, our attitudes about stress and burnout in general sometimes make it difficult to make changes. However, one important point to remember is that with support and encouragement from others, most of us can learn to make positive changes in our attitudes and behavior.

You might find it helpful to have a discussion among co-workers about bereavement caregiver burnout. Identify your own signs and symptoms of burnout. Discuss individual and group approaches to self-care that will help you enjoy both work and play!

- **Recognize** you are working in an area of care where there is a high risk for burnout. While helping other people has its rewards, it also has its dangers. Keeping yourself aware that you are “at risk” for burnout will help keep you from denying the existence of stress-related signs and symptoms.
- **Create** periods of rest and renewal. The quickest way to burnout is spreading yourself too thin – trying to help too many people or taking on too many tasks. Learn to respect both your mind and body’s need for periods of rest after helping other people.
- **Be compassionate** with yourself about not being perfect. After all, none of us are! As people who like to help others, we may think our helping efforts should always be successful. Some people will reject your help while others will be invested in minimizing the significance of your help. This is particularly true where many survivors like to see themselves as “being strong.” Also remind yourself that mistakes are an integral part of learning and growth, but are not reflections of your self-worth.
- **Practice** setting limits and alleviating stresses you can do something about. Work to achieve a clear sense of expectations and set realistic deadlines. Enjoy what you do accomplish in helping other, and do not berate yourself for what is beyond you.
- **Learn** effective time-management skills. Set practical goals for how you spend your time. Don’t allow time to become an enemy. When working on projects remember Pareto’s principle: 20 percent of what you do nets 80 percent of your results.
- **Work** to cultivate a personal support system. A close personal friend can be a real lifesaver when it comes to managing stress and preventing burnout. If you have already reached the crisis state of burnout, realize you may well need to help of others in making lifestyle changes. Many caregivers have trouble asking for help. If this is the case for you, practice giving yourself permission to seek outside support. Remember, recent research has demonstrated that human companionship and connectedness helps you live longer.

- **Express** the personal you in both your work and play. Don't be afraid to demonstrate your unique talents and abilities. Make time each day to remind yourself of what is important to you. Act on what you believe is important. If you only had three months to live what would you do? Use this question to help determine what is really important in the big picture of life and living.
- **Work** to understand your motivation to help other with grief. As caregivers we strive to restore happiness to other people's lives. Does your need to help others with grief relate in any way to your own unreconciled losses? If so, be certain not to use your counseling relationships to work on your own grief. Find trusted resources to help you work with any old and new losses.
- **Develop** healthy eating, sleeping and exercise patterns. We are often aware of the importance of these areas for those we help; however, as caregivers we sometimes neglect them ourselves. A well-balanced diet, adequate sleep, and regular exercise allows for our own physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
- **Strive** to identify the unique ways in which your body informs you that you are stressed. Do you get tightness in the shoulders, backaches, headaches? Becoming conscious of how your body communicates stress signals to you allows for awareness of stressful situations before they overwhelm you. A constant state of physical tension often results in deterioration, which results in physical breakdown.

Final Thoughts

Again, be aware that the above practical guidelines are not intended to be all-inclusive. This author suggests you and your colleagues develop your own list of how to prevent and work with bereavement caregiver burnout.

Each one of us has our own unique style of relating to the stress of living. Sometimes we manage that stress well, while at other times we need people who care about us to help us to acknowledge the potential of burnout. Hopefully, this article will assist you in assessing your own stress level, and, if appropriate, help you begin to make some changes.

There is no doubt in this author's mind and heart that to help other human beings survive and actually grow during times of loss is a true privilege. Perhaps we can be proud that we want to help make a difference in people's lives, while at the same time remembering the importance of taking care of ourselves as caregivers.

Caring about our life's work, even enjoying it, will probably seem strange if we only see it as a way to make a living. However, if we can see our work as a way to enrich each moment of our living, we may well discover a deep caring within our souls that teaches us to learn and grow each and every day.

References

- 1 Wolfelt, A.D. "Bereavement Caregiver Burn-out: Signs and Symptoms," *Thanatos*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1988.
- 2 Maslach, C. "Understanding Burn-out: Definitional Issues in Analyzing a Complex Phenomenon." In W.S. Paine (Ed.), *Job Stress and Burn-out*, Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications, 1982.

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