

BURNOUT

– is this you?

The stress we live with today sucks at our very soul and saps us of our valuable energy. It is time to take stock, breathe and live realistically in order to avoid total burnout.



The term 'burnout' was first coined in the 1970s by Herbert Freudenberg, an American psychologist who used the term to describe a set of symptoms centred around lack of motivation, cynicism and disillusionment, often seen in health care workers. More recently it has been used synonymously with the term adrenal fatigue. While there is still no clear definition for burnout, it implies that the body's internal energy system or 'fire' is not being sufficiently attended to and is literally 'burning out'.

My work as a medical practitioner and my study of this field has served to refine my thinking about this global phenomenon of the digital age, and opened my eyes to the depth of this phenomenon. It is especially pertinent to South Africa, which has been rated the second most stressed country in the world after Nigeria. I see the effects every day in my practice. I see it on the roads and in shopping centres. I see it reflected in marriages and businesses. I see it in hospitals and addiction centres and at schools. It is a problem.

MALADAPTION TO STRESS

Over the last 15 years, I've worked with hundreds of patients who experience vague physical and emotional symptoms that don't fit a spe-

cific diagnosis. After exhaustive investigations, they are left with no answers and no solutions or simply diagnosed with depression. If we examine the problem within a broader perspective we can see that we are dealing with a spectrum of physical and behavioural symptoms related to the way our system adapts, and then eventually maladapts, to prolonged stress.

Our neurobiological system has been primed for survival based on the stress response. It activates a massive amount of energy into the system when our survival depends on it and in any high demand situation. This system works most efficiently when we replenish our energy resources in the baseline resting mode. The problem is that our baseline has shifted. It has geared up to meet our rushed and complicated lives. Relaxation is no longer a natural state but a forgotten art.

The chemical cascade that floods the system in response to stress gives us a burst of energy, but now gets released constantly in a low-grade fashion, causing inflammation, a dampened immune system, digestive problems, sleep disturbances and irritable behaviour. Many of us deal with these low-grade symptoms for a while, until it begins to threaten our performance and



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relationships, or becomes a question of life and death. Only then do we start to pay attention. Until then, we trudge along in denial. In fact we become quite dependent on 'adrenalised energy' that gets us through the day with the help of caffeine, sugar, alcohol and cigarettes.

THE PRICE WE PAY

We know that our survival-based stress response requires the oscillation of the high energy and periods of rest and relaxation, but we are designed for more than survival. We are innately resilient creatures, primed to thrive through our ability to adapt. Neuroscientists continue to discover the magnificent potential of the brain and how this adaptation actually works. We are only now beginning to discover the potential of the brain to spark up neural pathways in

primitive part of the brain is running the show more than our rational human minds. We are fear based, reactive and are less able to tap into kindness, empathy and compassion, the qualities that make us truly human.

HEALTHY ENERGY MANAGEMENT

So how do we go about the process of adapting our energy management system for the modern age?

We all know that recovery time is important and sleep is essential. We can't escape the fact we need to rest, eat wholesome unprocessed food, and exercise. Attending to the physical aspects is almost the simple part. The other factors demand a certain inner enquiry. Even if we are eating the healthiest diet, exercising daily and sleeping eight hours a night,

‘The more primitive part of the brain is running the show’

response to new environments. The brain is adapting to this fast pace, multitasking, and instant gratification. At a price. The adaptation is occurring in a way that keeps us constantly 'switched on' and that is not supportive of our overall health and energy and our innate need for deep rest, relaxation and restorative sleep.

It is crucial that we find ways to use our brain's ability to adapt to create new upgraded software or habits that support the body's innate functioning.

Before we even get there, we need to acknowledge that this is a problem that none of us have the luxury of ignoring. It is a challenge that we are facing not just in terms of health but in the way that it plays out in our collective behaviour as a society. Living off adrenalised energy also means that the more

our default reactive behaviour like multitasking, impatience and distractibility will keep feeding the adrenalised monster as will our judgements, fears, resentments and guilt-based thoughts.

Energy management asks that we support the body, mind and heart as a whole; that we cultivate a way of living with more awareness of habits of thought, behaviour, choices, and triggers of our stress response. We need to be living more mindfully.

MASTERING MINDFULNESS

As the world becomes more complex, we find that the simplest and most obvious things like breathing and learning to be present in each moment are the most effective methods to cultivate mindful living.

Mindfulness has become a huge buzzword in business as a tool to boost productivity, efficiency and energy. Companies like Google have made it a part of their culture, business schools are bringing it into their curriculum. It's a step in the right direction. But let's not lose sight of the essence of mindfulness. It is a way of using conscious awareness to access compassion both for ourselves and others. Perhaps our 'heart' is our true source of energy.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Supporting our 'Heart's Intelligence' asks us to allow our vulnerability, foster our connection to others, and cultivate greater empathy. The 'heart' also requires constant inspiration, the peace-inducing effect of nature, and the cultivation of gratitude.

The HeartMath institute is an organisation that has done intriguing research on the measurable energy field that surrounds the heart, the heart-brain connection, its relationship to managing stress, and fostering deeper connection with ourselves and others.

One of their biggest studies has demonstrated that negative and positive emotions are easily distinguishable by distinct patterns in heart rhythm patterns. Through certain techniques such as breathing we can alter these patterns and thus their effect on our health and energy.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

We can no longer deny the fact that burnout is becoming a global phenomenon, and one that is threatening the very fabric of society. More and more doctors are seeking ways to address their patients' needs more holistically. There is a massive move towards integrative medicine that is less symptom based and that supports the whole person.

It is imperative that health care schemes create awareness of the problem of burnout and work on methods to support more conscious and energised lives. While some health care schemes support and reward better lifestyles, the approach is still too fragmented. Business needs to move away from the old

paradigm of wellness. We need to consider ways to spark awareness and cultivate more sustainable change in lifestyle and behaviour that supports Body, Mind and Heart. Schools should be making 'energy management' part of their curriculum, starting with simple and practical tools like the use of breathing techniques.

CONCLUSION

Not enough work has been done on burnout in a more integrated way. I believe that we are at a point where we urgently need to address the issue of 'burnout' and the way it is manifesting for us individually and collectively. We have the opportunity within all the systems in which we live and work to cultivate a way of living that is more conscious, integrated and supportive of the whole person; a way of life that is inspired, meaningful, and harnesses our magnificent human potential. Perhaps this is the gift of burnout. ●



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