

Burnout for Parents

Burnout is often hard to detect for the simple reason that to admit to burnout is to admit to some element of helplessness. Most people who suffer burnout are often the last people to notice it because they may cling so tightly to a hope of a goal. It happens when people who have previously been highly committed to something lose all interest and motivation. Typically it refers to one's job but it can equally apply to an intimate relationship or to the tasks of parenting. I will talk here about job burnout but as you read, "think" relationship or parenting if you wish

Sadly, burnout can mark the end of a successful stage in one's parenting. It mainly strikes highly-committed, passionate, hard working and successful parents – and it therefore holds a special fear for those who care passionately about this vocation.

It is a state of undetected exhaustion caused by long-term involvement and investment in the emotional takes of parenting. It also includes the frustration brought about by a devotion to parenting that fails to produce the expected reward – e.g. good, cooperative, model, appreciative children or young adults. Burnout therefore involves both exhaustion and disillusionment. "After all I've done for them", you might hear yourself saying!

Anyone can become exhausted. What is so different about burnout is that it mainly strikes parents who are highly committed to being good, passionate, and appreciated parents: You can only "burn out" if you have been "burning" with light in the first place. While exhaustion can be overcome with rest, a core part of burnout is a sense of disillusionment, and is not experienced by people who can take a more detached view of the tasks of parenting. What happens with parent-burnout is that the job of being a parent gradually shifts from being an everyday pleasure to an everyday stress.

Psychological research has looked at the way in which animals handle long-term stress. What it shows is that after an initial period of adaptation, they survived very well for quite a long period of time until, then all of a sudden, their resistance collapsed without any obvious direct cause. A similar process was seen with bomber pilots in the Second World War, who would fly effectively for many missions, but who would then fall apart as pilot fatigue set in.

We have probably all seen similar patterns in the past, where people become exhausted and their performance suffers. We may all have worked so hard at something, for so long, that the easy things become difficult and life loses its flavour. These are times when rest (often in the form of a good holiday) helps us to approach the tasks of parenting with a new vigour.

Exhaustion and long-term stress contribute to burnout, but they are not the most destructive parts of it. The real damage of burnout comes from the sense of deep disillusionment that lies at its heart. Many of us get our sense of identity and meaning from being good parents. We may have started out with high ideals and may have followed these with passion but gradually what we wanted for our children began to diverge from what-they-ere-becoming.

IN job burnout this is easy to see in doctors and teachers, who may have a strong desire to help other people to be the best that they can be. But it can happen to everyone committed to relationships that involve some elements of vocation. In work burnout people may be ambitious for promotion or may want to “make a difference” to people or organizations in some other way. In all of these cases, these ideals can drive a highly motivated, passionate approach to work.

It is incredible what we can achieve when we truly believe in what we are doing: We are hard working, effective, full of initiative, energetic and selfless. We can find ourselves doing much more than might normally be expected, sacrificing our own needs for those of our children. Even more, we enjoy doing this. We find it easy to enter the hugely satisfying state of flow. Particularly when we are appreciated for what we do, and when we are able to see good results in the faces of our children, this satisfaction can help us to overcome many sacrifices. It is not surprising that people showing this level of resilience and commitment to their work are often seen as being wonderful parents.

The problem comes though when things become too much. Perhaps exhaustion sets in because one has sacrificed oneself and ones needs. Perhaps the love of being a parent begins to slip because of this. Perhaps the expectations and demands of growing children become too great, and the personal resources available are too meagre. Perhaps one’s partner does not appreciate the heroic job that is being done, or does not subscribe to the ideals that you are devoted to. Perhaps teenagers make just too many emotional demands, or the family as a whole is ungrateful and difficult.

Being proactive, energetic, committed people, it is likely that we respond to obstacles like these by increasing our devotion and hard work. However, in these circumstances it is possible that these efforts may have little or no impact on the situation and may even be responded to with increasing indifference

This is where burnout begins to set in. As we get less satisfaction the downsides of our sacrifices become more evident. As we get more tired, we have less energy to give. If our families fail to support us, we can get increasingly disenchanted with them. We become increasingly disillusioned. In extreme cases, we can lose faith completely in our ability to parent and in others willingness to embrace us becoming cynical and embittered, and imagining that our devotion counts for nothing.

This is full-scale parenting burnout. It is time to step back and get a little help. Next week we will take a look at how.