

THE ANTIDOTE TO BURNOUT



Stress is exacerbated by thought habits that act like a clogged water filter in the mind. The solution: recognize and change the way of dealing with habitual thought patterns.

Managing consumes mental energy. The institution makes demands on the leader's time, thoughts, willpower that can easily require 24 hours a day, seven days a week; still the job is not finished. One more phone call, meeting, trip seems necessary to close the deal, visit the customer, motivate the troops, spend time with a key employee, find out what the boss is thinking. Discharging one's responsibilities is often the last thought before falling asleep, the first upon waking.

We all know colleagues who develop that 1,000-yard stare. The demands of the job have simply overwhelmed the person's reserves. He is tapped out. Done. Baked. Toast.

Joanne became one of those people. She ran a call center, having moved up from the phones to the corner office. Had nearly 200 people working for her with the attendant scheduling issues, absenteeism and high turnover, that mark these operations.

Spending eight hours a day resolving people's problems can be a burn-out job. Yet Joanne was doing fabulously, loved coming to work, solving the mini-crises that cropped up throughout the day, often turning out the lights when the hot line hours were over. She was the epitome of the "hands on manager," and her people loved her for it. The days flew by, and Joanne felt contented.

Until she was made the VP & General Manager for all call centers in North America. Now she had four sites, in two countries, and nearly 600 people in her command. At first, Joanne tried to be everywhere at once, even though that was patently impossible. People in her own center became resentful as Joanne spent more and more time traveling or on the phone. Her admin developed a stock phrase when someone was looking for her: "She's in a meeting, and I am not sure when it will be over." Must have been repeating that 25 times a day.

Joanne's replacement at her "home" operation could not fill her shoes; no one could, for Joanne had been the heart and soul of that operation. Performance numbers started falling at Joanne's original operation, but also at every other center. She felt powerless to stop the trend as she ran from task to task, phone call to phone call, meeting to meeting, urgent page to urgent page. She grieved for the days when work had seemed so fulfilling and enjoyable, and actually wished she had never earned promotion.

Joanne was succumbing to a mental trap: that overwhelming feeling of having a million urgent things to do, and trying to do them all at once.

Energy-draining thought habits

Joanne's bugaboo was the assumption that keeping her mental activity high all day long was a good thing. She was proud of being busy-minded, for it appeared to give her the vigor to fight fires and get the job done. Not so. Busy-mindedness is an energy-draining thought habit. Others that dissipate the leader's inner resources also include such everyday routines as:

- Worry, the bigger the job, the longer the list of negative possibilities; unintended consequences easily grow at geometric rates
- Anger, people make mistakes all day long; managers who take these personally will find much to displease them
- Stress, putting pressure on oneself or others is sometimes considered a motivational technique
- Guilt, thinking we are not doing all we could (women seem particularly vulnerable to this)
- Fear, constantly seeing the worst outcome as the most likely occurrence
- Distraction, trying to accomplish two things at once
- Smugness, bred of the arrogance of always having to be right

The list is endless. Just as people are endlessly inventive in what they think about, they can be never-endingly creative in finding good reasons for thought habits which, carried too far, lead to unproductive behaviors.

Accepting stress as the norm

Worst of all, we -- like Joanne -- have come to think there's no other way. When someone asks a co-worker, "How are you doing?" listen for how often the reply is along the lines of "Well, I'm a bit stressed, but otherwise OK." Stress is an assumed feature of the American workplace mentality. So commonplace that the feeling is not even remarkable.

Stress is exacerbated by thought habits that act like a clogged water filter in the mind; they lead to repetitive behaviors without much force behind them. Water backs up; action stagnates. But the moment the filter is cleared, fresh thoughts begin flowing from a wellspring of wisdom, common sense, creativity.

Each of us is born with a channel that doesn't show up on X-rays, but that connects us to that wellspring. We can never lose it or even damage it. But it can get clogged up with all sorts of thoughts memories, worries, judgments, assumptions, on and on.

From moment to moment, our channel may become more constricted or more open. The change is a result of our mood, our state of mind. In lower states of mind, such as confusion, anxiety, despair, the channel narrows. In higher states of mind, calm, exhilaration, inspiration, it opens wide.

Clearing our filters is a matter of recognizing the feelings associated with habitual thought patterns and then doing nothing more than not dwelling on them. The act of clearing one's mind is not a case of "doing something," more a quality of just "being someone." Present. Here and now. In the moment.

David Pottruck, president and CEO of the Charles Schwab Corporation, talked about presence in an interview with Fortune titled "My Idea of Fun" (Sept. 22, 2003). "When I'm on the slopes, all I'm thinking is, 'Stay vertical.' At all costs, stay vertical! Seriously, I'm usually focused on sort of the challenge of the mountain. You don't have time to think of the mechanics move your foot here, point your toe here. You're thinking of the rhythm. You're in the flow. It's such a wonderful feeling. You're moving with the terrain. You can't think about anything else, or you'll fall." In a low state of mind, it's hard to maintain such presence. Joanne began to recognize the effect of her state on mind as she struggled to master her VP role. First, she noticed the feeling associated with being "busy minded" -- as if a hand were actually pressing against her back, right between her shoulder blades, urging her onwards from task to task. She also began to notice those periods when she was calm, content; the feelings associated with that mental state felt wonderful. And Joanne started observing that this state of mind produced a flow of insights, gave her instant access to common sense. She began to change.

When she sensed a busy-minded mood coming on, Joanne took preventive action, usually by taking a short break and walking around her building. Sleeping seven to eight hours became a priority; for she noticed that when she was tired, she slipped into busyness more easily. The TV went to the study, out of the bedroom. Joanne also noticed that hunger affected her state of mind, so she began eating regularly instead of skipping meals. Being around too many people jazzed her emotions, making it hard to stay present and quiet-minded during the day. So Joanne asked her admin to keep her schedule more open, limiting the length of most meetings to 30 minutes.

In a matter of a few weeks, periods of busy-minded thinking happened less frequently; Joanne started feeling much more productive and began getting more satisfaction in leading her people. The mood of the entire organization lifted; calls seemed to go better; people were much warmer and friendlier with each other and the customers. And they started letting Joanne know what a good job she was doing, and how much they liked working for her.

Joanne had found her energy source, inside, waiting for discovery. She even looked 10 years younger! Even more startling, though, was something she began to notice about six months after she learned to "see" the quality of her thinking by noticing her feelings.

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