

Burned Up and Out

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"I don't want to talk to citizens. I don't even want to come to work most of the time. The sergeant has warned me about the sick time I'm using. I dread it when the dispatcher sends me on a call. My nerves are on edge. I have no patience at all. I'm afraid that I'm a danger to citizens, and worse, I'm scared that I can't backup up my buddies! I've just about decided to leave police work—I never thought I would think such a thing, much less say it."



The veteran officer of twelve years who was sitting across from me was speaking without emotion. Each word passing his lips proclaimed the extreme conscious effort he was making to talk in spite of the lethargy that screamed from his posture, demeanor and attitude. This officer—who had won multiple honors, awards and recognition in his exemplary career—was burned out to the point of being completely burned up emotionally.

Burnout can occur at almost anytime in a career, but the twelve year mark seems to be one of the pivotal points.

Job burnout is a form of stress that all people suffer to some degree at various times in their lives. Burnout becomes critical when a person is distressed and begins to feel fatigued and frustrated every day with no relief. Normally people have days when they feel energetic and optimistic, days that are so-so, and days when they are down and frustrated. When your days go from being fa-

tigued and frustrated to despair and anger with no good days, then you might be suffering job burnout without the emotional reserves to rise above the stress.

What is job burnout, and what distinguishes it from other stress? Job burnout is the continuing sense of frustration and tiredness described above that often occurs when a person is dedicated to a calling, career, or cause and does not receive the rewards he expected.

There are many aspects of police work that contribute to burnout. Let's look at a few.

Causes Of Burnout

Police have too much to do and not enough time to do their job. Crime and calls for police service are increasing incessantly, but resources and time to do the job are not increasing accordingly.

One poster said, "The faster I work, the behinder I get."

Another poster said, "We, the dedicated, have done so much with so little for so long, we are now qualified to do the impossible with nothing."

These sayings express feelings of frustration with a shadow of hope that something will be done to improve the situation, but the reality remains, despite the hope, that police have a job that must be done well in seemingly impossible circumstances.

Not only are the demands on police officers increasing, the rate of increase is increasing, that is, the demands on police are accelerating, not just growing. Changes in crime, court decisions, and community expect-



ations occur faster than people can cope with the changes. We are all suffering from the stress that Alvin Toffler called "future shock" in his excellent book with that title.

Police officers must do impossible tasks and meet unrealistic deadlines in the worst of working conditions. When an officer is on a bridge in cold rain protecting the scene of an accident caused by a burglar escaping from a building and is being cursed by a passing motorist who had to slow down on the freeway, the officer wishes that she had the problems of an office worker who is frustrated because the transformer in a light is buzzing and the coffee isn't ready yet. The community expects the officer to clear the freeway immediately, care for injured people, gather all evidence necessary to convict the fleeing felon, not inconvenience other people, and keep citizens and administrators happy.

The demands at home don't relent either. An officer must meet the needs of his family and spend time with them. Yet he works shift work, attends court, and works overtime. He has little control over these times and how they affect his family. He does not receive a large salary to compensate for the time he can't spend with his family. He is further demoralized because he is seldom recognized or appreciated for his dedicated work. In fact, officers are sometimes criticized by the news media, officials and citizens after putting themselves in harm's way to aggressively protect and serve. No wonder so many of you are suffering from job burnout. You're burned up.

The causes of burnout mentioned are not the only causes, and police work is not the only profession that suffers burnout. Regardless, the fact remains that many police employees are suffering from burnout. Officers need to remember that dedicated civilian employees are just as committed and suffer many of the same stresses.

Symptoms Of Burnout

Burnout appears as symptoms in several areas including job performance, health and emotional stability.

Job performance is often affected by lessened productivity, carelessness, and absenteeism. Officers begin to make fewer calls and initiate fewer activities. They become careless, even sloven, in their appearance, and they don't take good care of equipment and cars.

A person might drink more, sleep less, and eat erratically. Drinking more intensifies tiredness because excess alcohol interferes with normal sleep cycles that rejuvenate emotional reserves. Low quality foods from fast food places contribute similarly to alcohol.

On the physical side, the body begins to give out under the distress. People have indigestion, ulcers, and body aches. Higher blood pressure is common. Officers complaining of or feeling more physical ailments than normal need to heed their bodies which are shouting that there are problems.

At an emotional level people become depressed and despair of continuing to try. They are often lethargic, apathetic, and tired. They become anxious and irritable. Their very demeanor is a bright, flashing sign showing the problems within.

If you see these symptoms in yourself or a fellow officer, you might be seeing the effects of job burnout, and the "blue code of silence" doesn't apply. Officers suffering burnout often don't see the temporary nature of their feelings nor the need for support. Be proactive to help a friend—not reactive in bemoaning the loss of a good officer. Contact support services such as a chaplain, psychologist or peer support group. Offer an understanding ear. Don't just sit by and watch a career tiredly soak away.

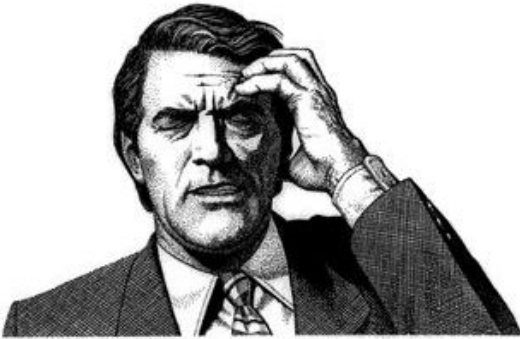
Combating Burnout

The best way to combat burnout is to prevent it. An ounce of prevention is worth a gallon of ulcer medication.

Maintaining physical health and exercise is the most obvious and concrete way to prevent burnout. The paradox is that as a person begins to despair and feel fatigued, she usually stops exercising and taking care of herself. She skips meals and eats junk from

fast food establishments. She begins to sleep less. A downward spiral begins. If you are burned out, start sleeping more, eating good foods, and exercising. The best time to fight the battle is before you are burned out. Establish good habits for eating, sleeping, and exercising when you feel up to the task, not after you see the need.

Don't get into the cycle of working longer hours. Work smarter. Set realistic goals for yourself. Do what you can do, not what you can't do. You are only responsible for what you can do. Administration is responsible for providing resources for the things that employees can't do.



When you go home after a shift, leave the job at work and become a normal human. Enjoy your friends and family. Have at least as many friends outside of law enforcement as you do within. I'm not suggesting that you never

talk to your spouse, family or friends about what you do as an officer or the feelings you have when doing your job. Don't protect them. On the contrary, your family, especially your spouse, needs to understand who you are as an officer. What I am saying is that you are a person first and police work is your career. For example, be a parent guiding your children to adulthood—not an officer laying down the law to make sure your child never suffers through the mistakes of the delinquents you encounter on the streets.

Part-time jobs are a prime contributor to job burnout. If you work as an officer in your off-hours, you don't ever get away from the job which is one the things you need most to do. If you can live without the jobs, don't work them. Do something else to make extra money. It's better to have a few less bucks than to lose a family or a career. Are those few hours per week at a part-time job worth being stressed out all week long, week after week?

Make sure you have people to talk to, preferably away from police work. Talking with someone who cares and is sympathetic helps you sort your feelings. Avoid people who continually gripe about the police department and never seem to grow. They will only feed the despair in you, and you will return the favor by feeding the bad feelings in them. This self-perpetuating cycle is why choir practices never really helped officers out of their burnout. The truth is that choir practices encourage job burnout.

Earlier I pointed out that burnout results when a dedicated person doesn't receive the rewards and recognition she expected for a job well done. People have dealt with that problem for centuries. One answer found throughout Judeo-Christian tradition is spiritual. Read these two passages from the Bible.

Pro 29:26 "Many seek the favor of a ruler, but from the LORD a man gets justice." (RSV)

Col 3:23 "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ." (RSV)

Ultimately, you work for the Lord and you will be judged by the Lord. If your supervisor overlooks your dedicated work, you can be sure that your Lord will remember. Eternal rewards and recognition are better than immediate ones as a brick of gold bullion is better than a copper penny. Keep your spiritual perspective. After all, you are an important part of a much larger war of good against evil in which crime forms but a single campaign.

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