

The road to burnout is paved with good intentions

As a child growing up in a very poor, underserved and often chaotic township in South Africa, Kati had had visions of doing the kind of work that ensured that poor and disadvantaged people received legal representation that they would otherwise not be able to afford. After she became a lawyer, though, she found herself in the midst of a highly contested commercial litigation that went on for more than a year. For Kati, what started off as tiredness and stress escalated into extreme exhaustion. Normally a calm, measured and cheerful person, over the course of the year, she became irritable, panicky, picky and pessimistic. She stopped seeing her friends. She stopped going to the gym before work. She stopped ensuring there was healthy food for her and her family to eat. She stopped going to book club. She stopped reading. She stopped laughing. She stopped everything that used to bring her, and the people around her, pleasure. Kati started consuming way too much sugar, carbs and caffeine. She put on weight around her middle. She felt moody and depressed. She picked fights with her nearest and dearest. She became so irritable and irrational that even the dog avoided being in the same room as her. She stayed at home every night, falling asleep in front of the TV, and struggled to get out of bed in the mornings.

From being a passionate person who was totally committed to and enthusiastic about every aspect of her life, Kati became someone who couldn't see the point of very much.

Everything felt heavy and oppressive and like too much effort. Kati had burnout, and it affected her in every realm of her life – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and relational. And, as most burnout sufferers do, instead of asking for help or slowing down when she started to feel overwhelmed, Kati pushed herself even harder. She tried harder, fought harder, worked longer hours. One day she just couldn't get out of bed. She couldn't summon up the energy to phone her boss and say she was taking a sick day. She couldn't stop crying. She couldn't do anything but sleep or stare out the window.

Kati was lucky – she was able to recognise that it wasn't only her body and mind that were tired, it was also her soul and spirit that felt eroded by doing work that didn't feel meaningful. She didn't, as so many burnout deniers do, develop diabetes, suffer a stroke or heart attack, become clinically depressed or go through a divorce. She was able to take time off and restore her body, mind and soul to relative health. She had the means and the social

and economic wherewithal to stop everything (and I really do mean *everything*) and spend eight weeks resting, sleeping and nourishing herself. It took two months of doing absolutely nothing every single day – two months of being almost entirely confined to her bed or the couch – before Kati started to feel like herself again. She was able to recover her energy and enthusiasm. Her next challenge, that of maintaining it, will be a lifelong one.

Burnout isn't like chickenpox: you don't just wake up with it one morning. It takes a long time to develop – and, unfortunately, it takes a long time to recover from. And even when you've recovered and are feeling better, you'll always be prone to redeveloping burnout. This is partly because once you've experienced burnout, you develop a kind of burnout-induced frailty, but it's largely because of who you are and how you are in the world. It was your thoughts, behaviours and beliefs that caused round one of burnout, and without understanding and changing those, you'll be destined to revisit and re-experience the horrors of the condition – maybe even over and over again.

Since the 1970s, when the term 'burnout' was first coined by psychologist Herbert Freudenberg, our understanding of the condition has evolved. Early on, it was used largely in relation to people working in the caring professions – doctors, social workers, psychologists, caregivers. Freudenberg noticed that people who worked with other people's pain and discomfort were easily burned out themselves as a result of exposure to other people's worries and woes. The concept spread rapidly and soon came to also be associated with business people who were overworked, stressed and exhausted. Today, burnout is used to describe the overwhelming physical, emotional and mental feelings that affect people who work in any and all kinds of high-stress environments. I describe burnout as feeling tired from life, because it's our lives and how we live them that cause us to become burned out.

I don't believe that burnout affects only people who're suffering from career fatigue. Burnout is an equal-opportunity condition and doesn't discriminate in whom it chooses. I've coached burnout sufferers who are high-flying executives, retired folk, university students, entrepreneurs, fulltime stay-at-home moms, and people who are out of work. Those affected by burnout are as diverse as any population. What they have in common, however, is *an inability to prioritise their own needs and desires*.

The 5 whys

One of my favourite movies is *Groundhog Day*, in which the character played by Bill Murray keeps waking up on the same day, in the same place, doing the same thing, meeting the same girl and making the same mistakes, over and over again. He only manages to escape this circle of sameness when he works out what it is that he needs to change at a fundamental level. I often see clients who, just like Bill Murray's character in the movie, have been coming up against the same barriers in their lives, no matter how many ways they've tried to get around them. They've felt bored or unsatisfied by all of their many and varied jobs. They've felt misunderstood and underappreciated in all of their many and varied relationships. They've felt unhealthy and unattractive despite all of their many and varied eating plans. If you don't understand what's causing the problem in the first place, you won't be able to make it go away. Unless you understand what the barriers are, and why they're there, they're going to keep appearing – day after day, month after month, and even year after year. Trust me when I say that at least nine-tenths of the battle is won when you've worked out what the problem is. The secret is in the 'why?' Pick a problem – any problem – and ask 'why?' a few times, and you'll get to the bottom of it.

For example, ask yourself why you're tired.

Why am I tired? Because I didn't get enough sleep last night.

Why didn't I get enough sleep last night? Because I had insomnia.

Why did I have insomnia? Because I can't calm my mind down enough to go to sleep.

Why is my mind so busy? Because I was working on a writing project until 10pm and then I was too wired to work.

Why was I working so late? Because I'd procrastinated, and was in danger of missing my deadline on the project.

By the fifth 'why?' you should have a real sense of the underlying problem – and what the solutions could be.

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