

Burnout? What Burnout?!

Burn-out? What burnout? Blake heard the word and felt a sensation of dread, like a weight in the pit of his stomach. As he listened to his boss Gemma extrapolate about his recent bad judgment calls and lack of creativity, the sensation turned to waves of nausea, each successive one rising up from his gut more forcefully than the last one, finally threatening to engulf him like a thirty foot wave. If he was sick right here in her office, would she fire him? Was she about to fire him anyway? Was that what this was all about? Downsizing and outsourcing were both in the pipeline, he knew. Was the day of reckoning finally here? Maybe one of those young energetic up-and-coming project managers was in the wings, ready to take over his position for less money. Oh God, what doomsday scenario was about to unfold? Gemma's words had become a blur. He heard the word 'break' then 'redundancy'. The image of his highly pregnant wife Mary flashed through his mind. How was he going to tell her? Another flash of all the baby stuff she'd bought on credit. Then he remembered the mortgage. And the car loans. He felt beads of sweat trickling down his back as the weight in the pit of his stomach sank down to his groin sending a swell of acid back up to his throat. He forced himself to swallow and heard his boss' sharp insistent voice command him to sit down. He somehow found the chair and sat.

She leaned across the desk and handed him a folder. "This is your package," she said. The wave engulfed him.

Do you have a client like Blake? Even if you don't, given the current economic climate worldwide I would wager you are likely to have to deal with one in the near future! Blake is one of hundreds of thousands of people struggling to survive in the current sink-or-swim corporate environment, almost inevitably burning out in the process – either to be let go due to anxiety-ridden reduced performance or having a full-on mental breakdown. A recent study found that people putting in more than forty hours a week, are six times more likely to suffer from burnout, an ever-increasing likelihood as more and more companies are demanding at times excessive additional hours from staff who remain after redundancy initiatives have left them to cope with oft-impossible workloads. What makes matters worse is that most employees are too afraid to object for fear they'll be

the next in the firing lines. Sadly, that's exactly where many of them end up when like Blake, they effectively stress themselves out of a job.

Best-selling author Dr Joan Borysenko has been studying this phenomenon recently. 'Burnout is a disorder of hope. It sucks the life out of competent, hardworking people. You lose motivation and vitality,' says the psychologist, "So many of my clients have hit rock bottom, their spirit is gone, there's no smile and no joy in their eyes.' Sound familiar? Whether you have clients in full-blown burnout or just clients headed that way, your work as a coach may require some adjusting as the need for real-time practical stress-coping strategies are called for.

We coaches are often the only people our clients dare to speak to about the stressors they experience, so we have opportunities to identify warning-signs of the downward spiral that ends in burnout earlier than most. Unfortunately, once burnout has really begun, the symptoms are very often confused with depression resulting in anti-depressants and other prescription drugs being taken with little or no result - because there is no medication that can cure burnout. The only cure for burnout is a change in lifestyle, which is, of course where you, the coach comes in.

In order to identify the warning signs in your clients, you first need to pay attention to your clients' beliefs about stress, because the road to burnout very often begins with the mistaken belief that stress is a necessary ingredient for success. Although initially some stress can increase productivity, this will only occur up to a certain point and is never sustainable. In a persistent state of stress your clients will believe that they are being effective when in actuality they are becoming less and less effective. Stress triggers parts of the brain to function in 'survival or defensive mode' causing the frontal lobe - which determines creativity, problem solving and self-evaluation skills - to essentially shut down, The result is that anyone experiencing perpetual stress will lose the ability to see the big picture or to make objective assessments, and instead start acting and reacting in habitual ways, chasing the same old carrot, (whatever that carrot is to them) or avoiding the same old stick (whatever that stick is to them), emotionally reacting to events and people rather than objectively responding, all of which, aside from making them very difficult to coach, places them in a wicked cycle; they're working harder and

harder but getting less and less quality work done! End result? Burnout. If they are already on this downward spiral, the symptoms you may witness include:

Despondency

Anxiety

Loss of motivation

Negativity

Complaints of less energy

Exhaustion

Disengagement

Less in touch with emotions

Over-reaction

Feeling under-appreciated

Insomnia

Headaches

Complaint of tension aches (neck, stomach, back-aches, etc.)

Whether you have identified that your client is at risk for burnout or not, you cannot go wrong helping them build their resilience to stress, either in response to warning signs or as a preventative measure. Here are a few tips, used with great success in Applied Emotional Mastery® (AEM)* coaching with clients, that can easily be integrated into any coaching methodology (and which you will most effectively coach when you have practised it yourself for a few weeks):

1. Recognize the difference between positive and negative stress – or ‘eu-stress’ and ‘di-stress’ – and coach your clients to do the same: *Eu-stress feels good, invigorating and energizing. Di-stress feels draining, accompanied by worry, anxiety and tension.* In eu-stress: keep going & enjoy! In di-stress, STOP what you’re doing, (if you’re in a meeting, excuse yourself to go to the rest-room for 2 minutes). Breathe slowly – extend the out-breath and shift your internal state to a positive focus BEFORE you do or say anything else.

2: Increase your self-awareness (that first, foundational and critical quality of emotional intelligence). Keep checking in with yourself every half-an-hour: are you in eu-stress or

are you in di-stress? How do you feel? Set an alarm on your phone or watch to alert you and remind you. Eventually you will do this 'on the run'. If in di-stress; Go back to step 1, **3.** Ultimately, your self-awareness will help you recognize the warning signs of the downward spiral, should you ever get that far! If & when you do: Go back to Step 1. (You will find yourself getting insights each time you shift your internal state, as it helps your brain change the way it works to access your more creative, wise self.) Use the insights you get from stopping and state shifting-into-a-positive-feeling, to recognize in what ways you can change your lifestyle, attitude, and priorities. What are the steps you can take, practically, realistically, that will help? Here are 5 suggestions to get you started:

1. Attach something bright red like a sticker or elastic, to your phone. Each time you go to answer it, let the red colour remind you to take a deep breath before you answer.

2. Schedule a massage once a week, and keep every appointment!

3. Start each day with five minutes of feeling appreciation for aspects of your life while you breathe slowly – if you don't have time before getting out of bed, do this while brushing your teeth and taking your shower.

4. Get a coach, even if it's only once a month. This can help you off-load tension, get clear on values and goals, and stay on your chosen path!

5. Give yourself half an hour between work and home to de-stress; i.e. Go for a walk, enjoy a pretty view, or have tea or coffee and read something funny.

The most important thing to remember is that we are actually designed to function at our best when we feel good. And this applies to coaches as well as clients: Running on overdrive and anxiety may seem like it's necessary, but that is just an illusion, for at the end of the day it will only run us onto the ground, literally burning us out like overused, neglected engines. Conversely, when we feel good and are well taken care of, we function like well-oiled, super-charged engines --- much more likely to reach our goals!

Jennifer Day

August 2011

** AEM – Applied Emotional Mastery®, a methodology for practical, 'on the go' emotional self-regulation developed by the author, which has been the subject of several research studies. You can read more about it in her latest book BEING WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE*