

Burningout among Missionaries: Systemic issues leading to burnout

By Billy Drum

Source: <https://lausanne.org/global-analysis/burnout-among-missionaries>

Introduction

As a care provider, I should have seen it coming—but I did not. My normally energetic, vibrant, and accomplished wife was experiencing multiple life-altering symptoms that did not make sense to us. She went from being a well-spoken, highly capable, and outgoing ministry leader and teacher to being unable to complete full sentences or make simple decisions. She was experiencing bouts of memory loss and mood swings. In general, she was unable to function in her daily life and it was affecting us all. After consulting with a therapist, she was diagnosed with severe burnout. The struggle for recovery led our family down a road of learning to understand the importance of a good theology of work, the importance of rest and rhythms, and how destructive burnout can be. Fortunately, we are now on the recovery side of burnout and our life and ministry is better for it. This experience led me to research and write my dissertation on burnout among missionaries and mission sending organizations, eventually specializing in burnout as a member care trainer and provider.^[1]

What is Burnout?

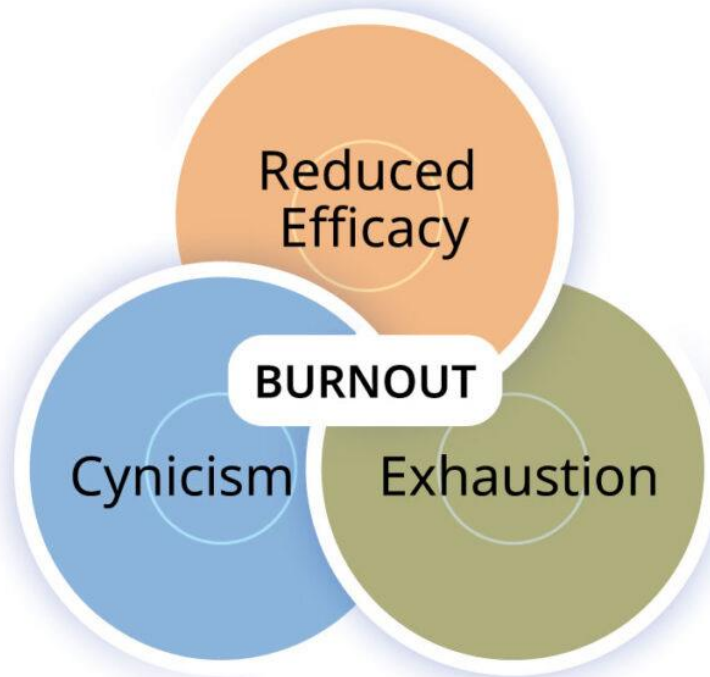
Burnout among missionaries is a growing phenomenon. A Barna statistic estimates that every month, approximately 1,500 North American ministry workers (pastors and missionaries) leave their work, due in part to burnout.^[2] At a whopping USD 500,000 price tag for recruiting, preparing, launching, and sustaining a ministry worker on the field for the first four years,^[3] the cost of attrition due to burnout is astronomical. However, the cost of burnout is not only monetary. Burnout affects families, teams, supporters, friends, and the advancement of the gospel.^[4]

According to the World Health Organization, burnout is a syndrome resulting from unmanaged workplace stress. It is characterized by three main manifestations: exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy acting in conjunction.^[5]

- Exhaustion occurs when there is a lack of physical, emotional, mental, or relational resources to cope with or complete a task.
- Cynicism is manifested when emotions take over resulting in an increased negativity toward work and people related to the work.

- Professional efficacy is diminished as a sense of ineffectiveness and a felt lack of accomplishment.

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A person might be exhausted or feel overworked, but exhaustion by itself does not constitute burnout. Likewise, a worker may be showing signs of negativity or cynicism, but that is not in and of itself an indicator of burnout. It is a combination of all three components which can be identified as burnout and causes people to begin to shut down physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, and even spiritually. ‘When somebody’s burned out, they are done. I mean, they can’t even handle how to get through the day anymore.’^[6] The warning signs of burnout are many, but it is important to note that there are generally three main components: physical, psychological, and behavioral.

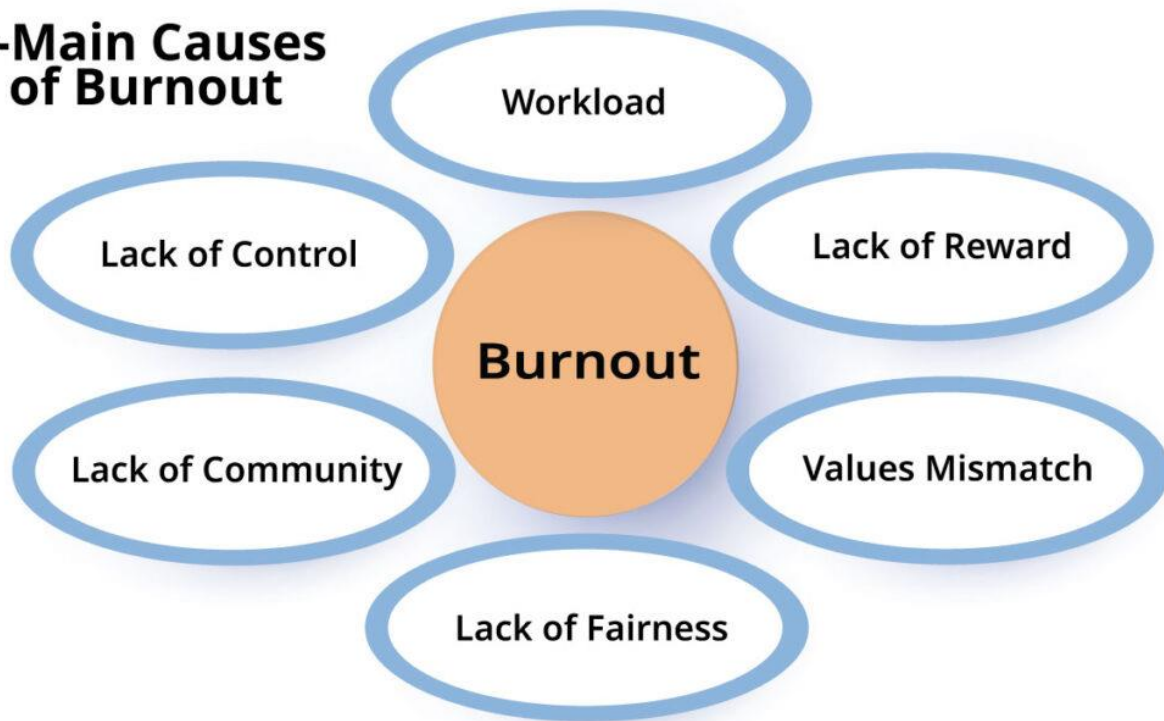
Warning Signs of Burnout ^[7]		
Physical	Psychological	Behavioral
Frequent headaches	Panic attacks	Decreased productivity
Frequent illness	Increased anger	Increased absenteeism
Prolonged fatigue	Frustration	Isolation
Changes in pain experiences	Irritability	Consistent tardiness
Restlessness	Hopelessness	Poor team player
Insomnia	Helplessness	Mood changes
Heart palpitations	Pessimism	Job dissatisfaction
Chest pain	Reduced enjoyment	Increased drug/alcohol use
Cardiovascular disease	Depression	
Digestive issues	Anxiety	

In addition to these signs, they may have difficulty in remembering things or making decisions, and experience feelings of failure and defeat. Often, the person experiencing burnout is unaware of their condition and requires external intervention to recognize and name what is occurring.

Systemic Issues in Organizations that can Lead to Burnout

Maslach and Leiter have identified six major areas of concern that influence burnout among mission workers.^[8]

6-Main Causes of Burnout



A lack of control can occur in various ways for mission workers. Examples include:

- Loss of autonomy and a lack of authority to control the work or decisions made for the ministry.
- Lack of voice in the decision-making processes of the ministry, team, or their mission organization.
- Feelings of being manipulated by decision-makers and those in authority.
- Success metrics put in place by mission agencies or sending churches that are incongruent with local culture and context, or that focus on production and workload.
- Role changes without proper preparation and vetting causing ambiguity, confusion, and role conflict.^[9]

A lack of reward results when work is devalued due to insufficient recognition or negative reinforcement.^[10] Depending upon cultural context, rewards and fruitfulness from successful discipleship, evangelism, and other ministry efforts may be a long time coming or even non-existent. There can be a feeling among mission workers that the work is never finished and that it is difficult to quantify success, which can lead to feelings of inefficacy.

Oftentimes, a desire to see fruit and be rewarded for ministry efforts can supersede the desire for money or advancement.^[11]

Values mismatch or conflict can arise when there is a disconnect between the values of the worker and the organization, or a discord between their worldview regarding work and the reality of daily life in their ministry context. This can cause cynicism, demotivation, inefficacy, and misaligned workload. Values are essential for people to experience a deep relationship with their work, and when the values of the organization and the worker are mutually compatible, they can result in meaningful engagement of the worker and their role.^[12]

Work overload can present itself in many ways. Some examples include:

- Limited time, money, or staff to supply mission workers with the needed tools and support to complete their work effectively, resulting in added hours and workload.
- Workers expecting too much from themselves and others and taking on a much heavier workload than is realistic for their abilities and resources.^[13]
- A self-worth and identity derived from work and performance.^[14]



‘There is no work-life balance, unrealistic expectation, unprotected family time, not enough time with the Lord, lack of Sabbath, workload exhaustion, cultural and language adjustment, organizational perceptions that are not always supportive, spiritual warfare, family and personal illness, aging parents, difficulty in fundraising, homeschooling, relationship challenges, conflict We live in a culture to perform . . . and performance trumps health. Numbers and productivity and getting the job done as opposed to being. We focus on doing more than being, and burnout is driven by that unhealthy focus.’^[15]

There is often a breakdown in community when mission workers launch to foreign fields. Ministry outreaches and recipients of ministry efforts become replacements and fill relationship voids.^[16] Having healthy community is a counterbalance to burnout. People need a place to mutually experience success, celebration, laughter, joy, and comradery. Community also refers to a place where people can experience others with a shared sense of values. When addressed in a work environment, community refers to the relationships within the workplace as people relate to the level of conflict, comradery, teamwork, and social support within the environment.^[17]

Fairness as it relates to burnout is categorized as the comparison of how someone is treated in the organization in contrast with others in the same organization. Organizations must have trust, transparency, and respect.^[18] Workers may experience unfairness as it relates to pay, benefits, workload, evaluations, disputes, promotions, and other factors.^[19] Failure to address incompetence, neglect, or negative people in the organization can lead to feelings of unfairness, hostility, anger, and cynicism.^[20]

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Prevention: How can Mission Organizations Effect Change?

While self-care practices are important to the prevention and relief of the symptoms of burnout, dialogue is needed among organizations and leadership to take a closer look at the practices and policies in place for care of mission workers in cross-cultural settings. Historically, burnout has been a phenomenon that mission workers and their organizations treated when it occurred, if it was recognized at all. A more effective approach would be to recognize the causes and effect change proactively, working toward prevention and

creating a healthier and more resilient missionary workforce. Here are some suggestions toward prevention:

- Develop a baseline and yearly check-up for mission workers and staff regarding burnout health using some of these tools:
 - Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)^[21] to determine where workers are on the burnout continuum.
 - Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS)^[22] to identify a worker's perceptions of work in the six areas (control, workload, reward, community, fairness, and values).^[23]
- Conduct an organizational health survey developed and administered by the Best Christian Workplace Institute (BCWI)^[24] to identify target interventions at the organizational and systemic level.
- Embrace a culture of ongoing training and development at all levels of the organization. Both the leadership and mission workers should be trained in not only mission-related topics, but also on self-care, work-life rhythms, and signs and symptoms of burnout.
- Give attention to training, selection and vetting processes, strengths-based placement, hybrid work roles, mentoring programs, proper onboarding and transition, and job description consultation to help diminish role confusion and conflict.
- Reward the worker in an individualized manner more frequently, spontaneously, genuinely and sincerely, in a variety of appreciation modes.^[25] This requires intentional communication and understanding of the work, context, goals, and achievements.
- Through policies and leadership modeling, affirm and assure mission workers in keeping the sabbath, getting adequate sleep and rest, taking vacation and sabbatical to help maintain a sustainable workload and time of recovery to reduce exhaustion.^[26]
- Provide multiple opportunities and modalities for community building through regional and organizational gatherings, retreats, Bible study groups, celebrating together (even if remotely), communicating challenges, and praying together.
- Constant communication between the field and home office, ensuring transparency between the office and mission workers with clear guidelines and confidentiality,

and keeping people well informed are all trust builders for organizations and their mission workforce.

- Provide training on supervision, mentoring, feedback, and appropriate goal setting.^[27]
- Value workers' input into their roles as those who have decision-making input into their roles can experience reduced exhaustion and higher levels of efficacy.^[28]

Conclusion

Burnout among mission workers and sending organizations is on the rise. While the loss or debilitation of a mission worker is quite costly financially, the repercussions are far costlier to the team, family, marriage, and ministry, and negatively impact the gospel witness. Changes in systemic issues that are contributing to burnout, as well as changes in the way burnout is perceived among workers and leaders both need attention. With some preventative measures in place and some attention to policies and procedures, mission sending organizations could affect great change toward the health of their workers and create more conducive environments for sharing the love of Christ with the nations.

Endnotes

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