

# **Nourishing the Soul In Burnout**

**By  
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Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

Anne Dilenschneider refers to burnout in Christian workers as “Starvation of the Soul.”<sup>1</sup> This phrase captured my imagination as I thought of some of the folk I work with. Some could indeed, using this analogy, be termed to be suffering from ‘malnourishment of the spirit.’ This raised the question for me about whether spiritual direction might help to quicken their recovery from burnout.

In my research I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is burnout and how does it affect spiritual life?
2. Which other conditions are similar to burnout?
3. Has spiritual direction a role to play in burnout recovery?
4. What characteristics of spiritual direction can I bring to the soul in burnout?
5. What particular practices/resources may be of value in directing a burnout sufferer?

### ***What is burnout?***

Burnout is the psychological term for an experience of long term exhaustion and diminished interest<sup>2</sup> which results from an accumulation of stress factors which gradually exceeds the individual’s coping mechanisms.<sup>3</sup> Burnout is expressed in signs of dis-stress<sup>4</sup> including:

- “decreased energy, chronic sleeping disorders, exhaustion
- feeling of failure and reduced sense of reward in vocation
- loss of mental efficiency and engagement
- sense of helplessness and inability to see a way out of problems”
- “cynicism and negativism about self, God, others, work and the world generally<sup>5</sup>
- demoralisation – belief one is no longer effective
- depersonalisation – treating oneself, God and others in an impersonal way
- detachment – withdrawing from responsibilities
- distancing – avoidance of social and interpersonal contacts
- defeatism – feeling of being ‘beaten’, depressed mood state”<sup>6</sup>

### ***How does burnout affect spiritual life?***

O’Donnell observes that long term discouragement can result in an “inordinate self focus that distorts one’s understanding of God’s perspective and decreases one’s faith that God will move.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dilenschneider, Anne, *Soul Care and the Roots of Clergy Burnout*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anne-dilenschneider/soul-care-and-the-roots-o\\_b\\_680925.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anne-dilenschneider/soul-care-and-the-roots-o_b_680925.html)

She writes, “...my doctoral research on transformational leadership and the spiritual life of pastors, as well as 12 years of consulting in the field, show that the causes of clergy burnout and poor mental and physical health are far deeper than poor boundaries, or the failure to engage in self-care, or the seemingly insatiable desires of congregations. Burnout and poor health are symptoms of a far deeper “dis-ease” of soul that has plagued clergy for nearly 100 years. They are symptoms of starvation.

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burnout\\_%28psychology%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burnout_%28psychology%29)

<sup>3</sup> O’Donnell, Kelly, editor, *Missionary Care, Counting the Cost For World Evangelism*, California (1992) 97

<sup>4</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Society’s booklet, “*Managing Stress in the field*”, publ Geneva. <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/pubs/health/managing-stress-en.pdf>, 9

<sup>5</sup> These are direct quotes from Maslach, Christina, quoted in article by Croucher, R, *Stress and Burnout in Ministry*, [http://www.churchlink.com.au/churchlink/forum/r\\_croucher/stress\\_burnout.html](http://www.churchlink.com.au/churchlink/forum/r_croucher/stress_burnout.html)

<sup>6</sup> These are direct quotes from Hart, Dr Arch quoted in the same article, Croucher,

The negativism about self and others and the decreased energy of burnout that lead to work and social disengagement impacts the person's relationship with God. An impersonal way of thinking of oneself and others diminishes ability to connect with a personal God; usual spiritual practices don't bring the usual sense of God's presence. The person may be left with a sense of having been abandoned by God. Physical tiredness and lack of concentration brought about by sleep difficulties further diminishes the burnout sufferer's energy to pursue spiritual activities.<sup>8</sup> There is often a spiritual crisis with accompanying loss in and/or questioning of previously held core beliefs about God, self and the world<sup>9</sup> and the burnout sufferer is easily led to "give up" on self and on God.

I have observed that people in burnout often present as critical of the spiritual practices and enthusiasms of others, and can be negative about their own church or Christian community. In spiritual direction sessions the person is more comfortable talking about work or family issues and finds it hard to even seek God in the experience or to see that the absence of God is significant. It is as if an absent God has become the norm and there is no energy or point to hoping to find the presence of God.

***Which other conditions of physical/emotional/spiritual stress are similar to burnout?***

One of my difficulties as I investigated the spiritual component of burnout was the similarity of symptoms with other conditions and the fact that often two or more conditions may appear concurrently. For example, stress may contribute to a reactive depression and a symptom of burnout is a flattened mood and inability to engage with life which is a symptom of depression. The loss of a sense of God who is present in a dark night experience is also present in burnout. Accidie in its later stages carries an element of depressive illness and distance from God as does compassion fatigue. Each condition can appear with underlying sleep disturbances and sense of fatigue with life and all have an underlying sense of being abandoned by or distant from God.

In spiritual direction the focus is not on diagnosis or treatment of the underlying condition but on helping the directee develop her/his relationship with God even while living the condition. However, direction may include exploring possible causes of the seeming break in relationship with God in order to help the directee to consider possible appropriate responses.<sup>10</sup> Sin or lack of self care (including soul care), working conditions or personal life choices may all be present to some extent in all the following conditions. Professional diagnosis and treatment may be one of the options and can be enhanced if undertaken concurrently with spiritual direction.

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<sup>7</sup> O'Donnell, Kelly and Michele Lewis, article "Foxes Giants, and Wolves", Published in International Journal of Frontier Missions, Vol 12:4 Oct-Dec(1995)

<sup>8</sup> Laidig, Joan & Speakman, Danielle "The Role of Spirituality in Understanding and Coping with Traumatic Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers" Headington Institute (2010) 22

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* P37

<sup>10</sup> Pickering, Sue. *Spiritual Direction – a practical introduction*. Canterbury Press, Norwich (2008) 182

I summarise like conditions briefly:

Depression is an illness characterised by a persisting sad, anxious or empty mood state that significantly influences the person's every day life. Symptoms include, sleeping disturbances, fatigue, loss of energy, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, thoughts of suicide or death<sup>11</sup>, and a sense of being abandoned by God<sup>12</sup>

Dark Night is a deep and ongoing spiritual process that occurs when God removes much which had previously been relied on for spiritual life in order to bring about a fuller dependence on God.<sup>13</sup> Symptoms may include some sense of hopelessness, helplessness and emptiness along with changes in motivation, and self confidence<sup>14</sup> and lack of satisfaction in former ways of prayer.<sup>15</sup>

Compassion Fatigue is experienced by care-givers in whom exposure to the suffering of clients coupled with an inability to rescue them, results in feelings of depletion, anxiety, depression, resentment, and/or emotional withdrawal with consequent sense of distance from God.<sup>16</sup>

Accidie<sup>17</sup> was thought of by the desert fathers as succumbing to the temptation of "the noonday demon"<sup>18</sup> It is characterised by diminishing engagement in life as it is, in a search of a better way or place.<sup>19</sup> Accidie is characterised by sadness, apathy, dissatisfaction with colleagues and organisation or workplace, loss of energy, and a tendency to avoid commitment and seek change in search of the dreamed of experience (including spiritual experience).<sup>20</sup>

### ***Has spiritual direction a role to play in burnout?***

Dilenschneider<sup>21</sup> and others observe that lack of spiritual care is a root cause of burnout.<sup>22</sup> I myself have observed<sup>23</sup> a high level of disengagement with God and lack of participation in

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<sup>11</sup> Watson, Michael, "The Dark Night and Depression", Spiritual Growth Ministries Research Topic (2002)  
<http://www.sgm.org.nz/Research%20Papers/Dark%20Night%20&%20Depression/Dark%20Night%20&%20Depression%20%20Essay.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Woodman, Mary Ann, "Dark Nights" publ in PRESENCE, Vol 8, no.2 June( 2002)

<sup>13</sup> Watson, M, *The Dark Night and Depression*

<sup>14</sup> May, Gerald, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit: Psychiatric Dimensions of Spiritual Direction*, Harper & Row (1982) P90,

<sup>15</sup> Woodman, Mary Ann, *Dark Nights*

<sup>16</sup> Venart, Elizabeth, "Creating Counsellor Wellness, Hazards of Practice."  
[http://www.counselorwellness.com/hazards\\_of\\_practice.html](http://www.counselorwellness.com/hazards_of_practice.html)

<sup>17</sup> There are variants to the spelling - acedia, accidie, accidia eg.

<sup>18</sup> Ps 91:6

<sup>19</sup> Norris, Kathleen, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and A Writer's Life*, Riverhead Books, Penguin Group, New York (2008)  
"The word literally means not-caring, or being unable to care, and ultimately, being unable to care that one can't care"

<sup>20</sup> ibid and St John Cassian, *The Monastic Institutes: The Training of a Monk and the 8 Deadly Sins, Book X, The Spirit of Accidie*" [http://www.thenazareneway.com/Institutes%20of%20John%20Cassian/book\\_10\\_the%20spirit\\_of\\_accidie.htm](http://www.thenazareneway.com/Institutes%20of%20John%20Cassian/book_10_the%20spirit_of_accidie.htm)

<sup>21</sup> Dilenschneider, Anne, *Soul Care and the Roots of Clergy Burnout*;

<sup>22</sup> eg even a secular work by psychologists Joan Laidig PH. D. and Danielle Speakman PH.D. (teaching on "The Role of Spirituality in Understanding and Coping with Traumatic Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers" Headington Institute (2010) acknowledges that for an aid worker to cease to allow her/his spiritual life to drop is a recipe for burnout. They quote Ana-

spiritual disciplines in people with burnout and note that one of the first things to succumb to the ‘busy-ness’ of mission life is regular engagement with God in the disciplines of prayer, stillness, study (in order to know God – many study to know about God).

But burnout does not begin only with a neglect of spiritual health. Dodds identifies the qualities of self-giving sacrificial servanthood to which Christians are called as containing some of the very qualities that may lead to burnout.<sup>24</sup> The sheer scale of or type of ministry may work with someone’s history and personality and predispose her/him to burnout. Burnout, then, challenges a sufferer at the core of her/his being and beliefs about God and self and drain her/his energy to deal with it.<sup>25</sup>

Spiritual direction seeks to enable a directee to:

- “notice and attend to God’s personal communication in and through her/his lived experience;
- respond to this personally communicating God;
- grow in intimacy with this God;
- and
- live out the consequences of the relationship.”<sup>26</sup>

This seeking to notice God in the midst of the experience being lived seems to be a key to the role spiritual direction can have in helping a sufferer of burnout to regain perspective and reformulate her/his views of her/himself and of God in the light of a breakdown of previous ways of being.

I believe the exhaustion accompanying burnout would make it hard for a sufferer to seek to begin spiritual direction, though desperation to “do something” may drive her/him to try. A care worker, I think, could offer direction as part of the care-package. A director in an ongoing spiritual direction relationship with someone exhibiting signs of burnout is uniquely placed to offer the ways of “soul care” as an adjunct to other treatments.<sup>27</sup>

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Maria Rizzuto (1979) talking about how our conception of God no longer seems relevant in a transitional place – which life on the mission field surely is and how this contributes to a sense of deep and painful spiritual loneliness. P45 .

also see

Mike Bickle (“What Are You First: A Worker Or A lover? <http://www.secretplaceministries.org/pages/articles/bickle/christian-burnout.html> ) believes burnout is rooted in people’s launching into ministry before “they establish in themselves the foundation of being lovers of God.” He says burnout symptoms are inevitable if we do not fulfil our primary calling to be lovers.

Eenigenburg, S and Bliss, R., *Expectations and Burnout – Women Surviving the Great Commission*; William Carey Library, California (2010)

<sup>23</sup> as a member of a pastoral care team in a multicultural Christian Aid and Development Agency in South East Asia.

<sup>24</sup> Dodds, L.A. and Dodds, L.E., *Stressed From Core to Cosmos: Issues and needs arising from cross-cultural ministry*. quoted in Eenigenburg, S. and Bliss, R., *Expectations and Burnout: Women Surviving the Great Commission*. William Carey Library (2010) 179

<sup>25</sup> Laidig, Joan & Speakman, Danielle “The Role of Spirituality in Understanding and Coping with Traumatic Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers, 37, quoted above.

<sup>26</sup> Barry, William A. and Connolly, William A., *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* , San Francisco: Harper Collins (1982) quoted in Pickering, S., *Spiritual Direction – A Practical Introduction*; 27

<sup>27</sup> though I would not agree that a lack of attention to spiritual health is the sole cause of burnout. Surely perfect soul care could prevent burnout with the balance it would bring to life. Unfortunately we live imperfect lives in an imperfect world and the contributing factors to burnout are many and varied and not all able to be avoided.

### ***What characteristics of spiritual direction could help the soul in burnout?***<sup>28</sup>

At the beginning of my training I defined for myself that:

“Spiritual direction is a sacred covenant of friendship between two people who agree to meet together under the direction of the Holy Spirit to attend to the way God’s love is being revealed in the lived experience of the person seeking direction, and together to explore ways the person might respond to God’s invitation to growth and to intimacy.”<sup>29</sup>

To me, offering to walk with someone in burnout is perhaps the most loving and Christ-like offering that can be made. Other relationships, medical, pastoral, counselling, all have their place in the treatment of burnout but each of these, with their focus on making things better, has an implicit message to the client –“something has to change/ be other. Only in spiritual direction is the “helper” agreeing to stay with the lived experience of the ‘client’, not to judge it as a wrong experience to be changed, but to help the ‘client’ to fathom the Mystery while living through it.

Spiritual direction offers a safe place to explore God in the light of the directee’s current and past lived experience. Direction offers encouragement to continue when prayer dries up and God seems distant. Direction offers hope of a way through the tangled web of life. In the self absorption of burnout, direction is a place where gently but firmly the focus is always brought back to where God might be in the midst of the experience, to faith and to prayer.<sup>30</sup>

Characteristics of direction in general include:

‘Sitting patiently with’ - The spiritual director is a symbol of caring that is at the heart of God’s faithfulness. (S)he is a visible presence that testifies to the unfailing love and presence of God even in the lived sense of God’s absence.

Pointing to God – The director reminds the directee that it is the indwelling Holy Spirit who is the source of the directee’s decision to come to direction and the active force in the relationship. The person in burnout may not ‘feel’ that this is so for now, but in direction the directee is again and again redirected to “a God who is not necessarily safe, but is Good”<sup>31</sup>.

Reflecting – The director seeks to reflect to the directee where God’s presence may be being revealed in her/his lived experience as well as reflecting the directee’s own reactions to God’s revelation or seeming lack of revelation and invite a response. The director does not listen to

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<sup>28</sup> I based my characteristics mostly on Barry W.A. and Connelly W.J., *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, Seabury Press, Minnesota(1982) Ch 8 & 9 especially

<sup>29</sup> This is born of reading many definitions and particularly from Barry, William A. and Connolly, William A., *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*; Bakke, Jeanette: *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction* Baker Books Grand Rapids (2000); Benner, David G: *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* Intersivity Press Downers Grove ( 2002) ; Dougherty, Rose Mary SSND: *Group Spiritual Direction: community for discernment*, Paulist Press New Jersey (1995)

<sup>30</sup> Pickering, S. *Spiritual Direction – a practical introduction*. Ch1

<sup>31</sup> I read something like this on a web page but cannot find the link back to it to acknowledge its reference.

“fix” but to hear. The directee “owns” the process of receiving or not receiving the shared insights.

Discerning the movements of the Holy Spirit and of the forces within which resist the Spirit can help the directee to recognise the shades in all experiences; good as well as bad, right as well as wrong, and strengths as well as weaknesses and begin to discern a way through or at least some options.

Leech says that “direction involves listening, exposure, nakedness of spirit before the storm and the fire.”<sup>32</sup> Seeking together, encouragement to keep looking to God, sorrowing and celebrating together – these are characteristics of spiritual direction which may be a lifeline for the burnout sufferer.

***What particular practices or resources may be of value to a director who is directing a directee suffering from burnout?***

A person suffering from burnout is typically living an all encompassing exhaustion and sense of helplessness accompanied by a belief that no-one can help her/him. Burnout sufferers become intensely self-focussed; finding God or even believing in a God who wants to be found can seem impossible.<sup>33</sup> The sufferer can feel (s)he has nothing to bring to the work. For the person to even come for direction is a huge step of faith. Emotional detachment makes relationship with people and God difficult. Trust between directee and director develops only slowly.

Spiritual direction practices of value in burnout include:

Accompanying - being willing to be present with the directee on good days and bad, with what Barry and Connelly call “a surplus of warmth”<sup>34</sup> can help the person to hold the experience in the light of God’s faithful promises. The demeanour and interest of the director is a powerful tool for reflecting the love of God towards the directee in a time of self doubt though obviously issues of transference and dependence need to be watched for.<sup>35</sup>

Listening with dual attention to the directee’s story and to discern the presence of God and reflecting this to the directee. The listening also speaks of the director’s expectation that the directee will find God – a hope the directee may not yet have while in burnout.

Encouraging faith. The burnout sufferer will need encouragement to see Love in her/his story at all, and may need reminding that the work of transformation is not ours but a deeper work of the Holy Spirit that goes on even when we are exhausted and helpless.

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<sup>32</sup> Leech, Kenneth, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*; Pennsylvania: Morehouse(2001) 28

<sup>33</sup> O'Donnell, Kelly and Michele Lewis, article “*Foxes Giants, and Wolves*”, Published in International Journal of Frontier Missions, Vol 12:4 Oct-Dec(1995)

<sup>34</sup> Barry, W.A. and Connelly, W.J. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* 126

<sup>35</sup> In the perceived absence of God there could be a tendency for the Directee to transfer some of her/his trust and hope to the Director or to place blame for the lack of spiritual satisfaction on the Director's direction.

Challenging to see distortions in thinking of God or self or situation; which includes over-spiritualising of the situation,<sup>36</sup> denying God's desire or ability to help and distorted images of self, of God or the helplessness of the situation. Challenging is done gently to plant a seed; the Spirit is the One to confront and convict in the right time. The directee continues to own the process and choose what and how to respond.

Asking questions can uncover hidden factors, woundedness, griefs, angers and false patterns of thinking. Perceptive questions can lead to greater knowing of self and of God and enable the directee find hope in the truth of God's sovereignty and grace.

Reflecting back to the directee what (s)he is saying or not saying, reflecting where God may be working, reflecting anomalies and unspoken questions or beliefs. In burnout emotional detachment is prevalent and a sense of one's own lovability is lost. In the beginning, the director's reflecting back what (s)he is hearing is a powerful way of communicating to the directee that she/he is not only being heard but is also found to be worth listening to. As the relationship develops the directee may grow in ability to hear the director reflecting heard patterns of truths and lies and in identifying with the movements of God's grace discerned.

Advising may be required. In burnout the directee may feel an all encompassing helplessness to do anything her/himself about her/his condition. The director may need to suggest seeking medical or counselling help, or advise on basic self-care issues.<sup>37</sup>

Teaching new ways of being with God that take into account the directee's physical, emotional, spiritual exhaustion. The loss of focus in burnout can be profound and the director can help identify some simple routines of prayer, bible reading and reflection to anchor the directee's intention towards God even while passion is absent. This may include exploring some of the following:

- Repetitive prayers to still the mind and free the spirit, eg. using a phrase from scripture or the Jesus Prayer.
- The prayer of stillness and patient enduring may be aided by using an external focus eg. an icon or painting
- Internet/podcasts provide the opportunity to listen to daily prayer, lectionary readings etc. as listening can be a particularly beneficial way of attending to spiritual disciplines when the energy for reading or speaking is low.<sup>38</sup>
- Commitment to regular use of liturgy.

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<sup>36</sup> though the enemy undoubtedly fosters separation from God in the burnout sufferer, it is not helpful to see it all as a demonic attack. Commonsense dictates that proper attention to rest, diet, sleep, work practices and exercise is called for along with helpful spiritual practices. Equally it is wrong to assume that Satan will not use this time to foster wrong thinking and beliefs.

<sup>37</sup> eg. Proper attention to diet, sensible work hours, adequate rest, exercise. The burnout victim can feel a "victim of circumstances" and may need to be called to practical commonsense self-care.

<sup>38</sup> Sourced from "helpful suggestion from Andrew Pritchard, Convenor, Spiritual Growth Ministries, NZ

- Examen to actively seek to notice the movements of God; for the burnout sufferer, becoming aware of one small grace can speak of a God who is still present.
- Meditation on scripture.
- Being out in nature.
- Walking, listening to music, painting, drawing, modelling, or creating may be helpful both as an activity in which feelings may be safely expressed and as a reflective tool.
- Journalling.
- Handouts and books are helpful to some but may be better left until some energy has returned.
- Dreams or night-time fears in the wakefulness may be explored; though care must be taken to focus on God and not slip into counselling.

The most valuable practice spiritual direction offers is her/his faithful prayer for the directee and the greatest resource is the ongoing and loving internal work of the Holy Spirit.

***Conclusion:***

Burnout is a condition of long term exhaustion with a decreased ability to cope with every day life in a way that is conducive to physical, emotional and spiritual health. It is rooted in many and varied causes and affects people in many situations of life. It produces symptoms similar to other conditions of physical, emotional and spiritual stress. These conditions may be inter-related.

Sufferers of burnout experience a doubting of previously held beliefs about what works for them. They may well be questioning who they are, what value they have as a person and how that is best expressed. They may also be asking where is the God they have believed in or what this experience has to say about God. Burnout sufferers may lack the energy and motivation to manage their own spiritual well-being on their own.

A spiritual director can come alongside the sufferer where (s)he is, offering a warm relationship and acceptance of the person's lived experience without fault-finding. Direction constantly calls for the focus to be on God, and to look to the Holy Spirit as Director and the One who is directly involved in the person's "now". The Director's willingness to encourage and to challenge and her/his continued example of faith in the promises of God can be a constant as the sufferer works out new 'truths' in the light of her/his experience.

The practice of spiritual direction as taught by Spiritual Growth Ministries<sup>39</sup> could be a valuable tool in the prevention of burnout or in picking up the early warning signs that someone is heading for burnout. It could also be offered to burnout sufferers, though an excess of patience may be needed during the long recovery period as the sufferer struggles with lack of energy and motivation. Direction seeks to help the directee to find God in the

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<sup>39</sup> and rooted in the teaching of spiritual directors such as Connelly, Barry, Leech and Bakke – see bibliography below.

experience, to consider what response might be possible, and how it might be possible to grow in intimacy with this self-revealing God in the light of lived experience. Direction can offer new ways of prayer and of being 'with' God which may be tested.

The aim would always be to enable the sufferer to so live the experience of burnout that by the grace of God the time of burnout becomes a time of growing in relationship with God.

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