

I seem to have lost my edge. I can't concentrate for more than a minute. I'm edgy and tend to lose my temper more easily and more often than I used to. In the old days I felt at the top of my game. That's not me today. What's wrong with me? What can I do?

It probably won't come as much of a surprise, but what you have described is classic BURNOUT. You, like countless others, have most likely been putting in more hours trying to get more accomplished with few added resources and ongoing expectations of increasingly high quality. While this concept has been around for decades, changes in the nature of businesses combined with unexpected economic pressures are making it more prevalent and problematic. Burnout takes a toll on individuals, families, coworkers and even the operation (i.e., bottom-line) of your business itself. Often, by the time someone is willing to make a declaration of despair, the negative impact has started to infiltrate nearly all aspects of a person's life.

Once thought to be the bane of business executives caught in the pressure cooker of productivity and profits, now signs of burnout are seen in all areas of work throughout modern society. It is important to recognize that this state is the end result of a build up of stress over an extended period of time. Jennifer Senior wrote in *New York Magazine*, "In a culture where work can be a religion, burnout is its crisis of faith." While depression and anxiety are part of the picture, there is something added that touches on our values and sense of self-worth, as well as hope for our future.

Stress, created by ever-increasing financial pressures and combined with layoffs and restructuring, adds to the intensity of dealing with others in emotionally charged situations. Early research cited job-related factors as the root cause of burnout. However, there is mounting evidence that self-imposed expectations for perfection may be as important as external forces. Individuals may vary in their susceptibility to the deleterious effects of prolonged stress that may ultimately result in chronic medical and psychological problems.

This is an affliction of modern society, as we tend to face threats that linger. We cannot slay the attacking animal, nor can we run away from it. Our stressors remain and build on themselves. I have described some of our challenges as trying to dig through a cement wall with a plastic spoon. Attainment of a goal used to be cause for celebration, but now a new target is defined so quickly we barely have time to catch our collective breaths. Instant communication through PDA's and other technological marvels was first defined as a convenience. Now, we are expected to be connected at all times and to respond instantaneously. This new world is fertile ground for burnout. Hans Selye, in his 1974 ground breaking book, *Stress without Distress*, set forth the **General Alarm Syndrome (GAS)**. Selye stated that prolonged stress results in physical changes that could become irreversible if not addressed. The ultimate adverse outcome could be death. It was his contention that we need to realize how much we are prone to distress and help our primitive brain adapt to the sophisticated world we have created.

All is not hopeless, although those experiencing burnout may be ready to give up and act in ways that perpetuate malignant negativism. It takes a good while for the bad to build

up to the point that most aspects of life lose meaning. Thus, it is imperative to realize that there is no quick fix, but that recognition of the problem is the first and most important step. Also essential is that the companies for which we work must encourage such self-awareness and not condemn those experiencing the burden of prolonged stress as being weak.

Anyone who has read an article or attended a seminar on stress management should know the fundamentals of positive life change, such as good nutrition, exercise, adequate sleep, moderation and so on. These truths do not change. Many suffering from burnout have pursued these avenues with as much vigor as they pursue achievements at work, and yet they still remain miserable. What makes the difference is maintaining a clear perspective on your life course, taking into consideration goals and values so that your efforts have meaning.

To regain your drive, you must also look back and see where you began to go off track. As painful as it may be, you might start by asking your spouse, children, friends and coworkers when they began to notice you changing for the worse. It will be tempting to become defensive during the process, but this will only prolong the agony. The quest for joy can be an easy place to start.

By looking for small things to relish on a daily basis, you can alter your life and inoculate yourself from the infectious nature of stress. Start setting short-term goals, making lists and breaking big tasks into smaller challenges. It is also important to take time to celebrate even small accomplishments. Look for the pennies, and the dollars in life will come quickly. Your sense of emotional impoverishment will become a soothing rivulet and maybe someday a healing pond.