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Crucial Conversations

A Psychologist's Perspective on: Burnout in the Helping Profession

"Individuals engaged in professions that necessitate continuous contact with people are susceptible to burnout".

Maslach, 1978

It's Friday, the end of the workweek and the beginning of what often feels like what is the shortest break, the weekend. Somewhere around 3:00pm on Sunday afternoon, a leisure Sunday transforms into what I unaffectionally call, Smunday. What is Smunday, you say? It is a transition period where the end of the weekend is upon us and the realization that what feels like a never ending hamster wheel begins again. Smunday is easily identifiable as the feeling you get in the pit of your stomach of despair, disgust, frustration and the unavoidable, Monday. For the last couple of years I've found myself feeling this same sense of dread towards the end of the weekend. These feelings have often been accompanied by a sense of apathy, avoidance and a desire to do anything but face Monday morning.

The last 29-months have been some of the most trying times due to the impact and the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. I like many healthcare workers in the fields of social work, mental and behavioral health have often experienced a deep sense of fatigue particularly due to the lack of acknowledgment as frontline workers. Those of us in the field who have been carrying the mental health burden of the community have been required to push through while coping with our own personal, physical and mental stressors related to the pandemic. The pressure to continue performing at such a high level has contributed to compassion

fatigue, otherwise known as burnout. The complexities of burnout are peppered with feelings of guilt and shame. In the helping profession, we have been trained to be acutely aware of our countertransference and may cause you to lose sight of your own needs in favor of those you serve.

Is Burnout Affecting Me?

Individuals engaged in professions that necessitate continuous contact with people are susceptible to burnout (Maslach, 1978). Burnout is a serious issue that if not properly managed can lead to serious consequences. Let's operationalize what burnout actually looks like and then ask yourself if you fall into any one of these three (3) areas:

- ✦ Emotional exhaustion (feelings of being overextended and depleted of emotional and physical resources).
- ✦ Depersonalization, or cynicism (negatively or excessively detached responses to various aspects of the job).
- ✦ Diminished personal accomplishments (feelings of incompetence and lack of achievement at work).



Steps to Avoid Burnout

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- ✦ Take the first step by acknowledging when you are not operating at your best.
- ✦ Talk about it with someone you trust and seek professional help as needed. Consult your employer to identify corporate resources such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- ✦ Step away, take a break and use your accrued time off from work. After all, you've earned it.

Burnout doesn't have to be the end of the road but rather it can be a starting point to help examine our boundaries. We should have an honest conversation with ourselves about what self-care looks like and how we can more effectively manage the stressors associated with our work. I encourage you to become intentional in identifying the supports you need to fully embrace the weekend again.