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BURNT AROUND THE EDGES

A **Guide** to
Mastering Stress
and Surviving Burnout



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Fire Chief (ret)

Burnt Around the Edges

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and Surviving Burnout**

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CHAPTER 1:

Trial by Fire

“Far better to live your own path imperfectly, than to live another’s perfectly”
-Bhagavad Gita

My life changed for the better in July 2018 as I finally listened to the warning signs my body was screaming at me. I knew I was under a profound amount of stress at the time but never gave it the respect I should have. This time I was dealing with the care of my aging Dad, who was having health issues, and his living arrangements were not ideal for his safety. On top of that stress, I was also a new fire chief, hosting a hundred firefighters for our fire training weekend and day one of our fire department's extremely popular Fire Training Weekend, *Training in Paradise* on Salt Spring Island. This event has been going strong for over a decade and draws firefighters across North America to sunny Salt Spring Island to train and network. It was a hot summer morning, and my wife and I geared up for a “relaxing” morning group stretch before classes started. We got up early, brewed a nice big mug of coffee and went out the door.

But, after a not-so-relaxing stretch that more resembled an intense CrossFit sweat session, I found myself on the verge of blacking out. I felt weak, barely strong enough to sit up; I heard ringing in my ears, everything in my vision had a dreaming white look to it, profuse cold sweats, and I felt very dizzy. As I lay on the grassy hill, I recall looking up and seeing my fellow brothers and sisters attending to me with oxygen. At the time, everyone, including myself, thought I was experiencing a heart attack. As the fire chief, it was a surreal experience being the patient and being rushed off to the hospital on a stretcher.

At the hospital, I began to feel more myself, and after a battery of tests, they all came back ok, except for my Creatine Kinase (CK) protein levels. The Cardiac Muscle Enzymes report showed I had 20,000 when the normal range is 40-230. This was a massive concern as high

CK levels typically indicate a recent heart attack or heart muscle damage. Unfortunately, still to this day, I have had no clarification on why I had prolonged high levels of CK in my blood. After a few short hours in an emergency, the doctor said I had a Vasovagal episode and sent me home without realizing what had happened or even what a vasovagal syncope was.

This moment was the start of my awakening and realization that everything I was doing in life was overwhelming me and causing my body to shut down. As it was nerve-racking not knowing exactly why it was happening and when it would surprise me next, I look back on it as one of my life's greatest gifts. Every day since that fainting spell has been a step in the right direction and has inspired me to learn everything possible about our nervous system and how we react to stress in our bodies.

The lessons I learned that day changed my habits overnight. I decided to cut alcohol and replace it with copious amounts of good old water. I also decided that my stress needed to be taken seriously and that I had to take control of the situation and my health. From that point on, my journey to holistic health has been a daily habit.

Unfortunately, one month later, at a concert in the city with my wife and daughter, I had another vasovagal syncope and collapsed into a heap on the floor. Once again rushed off to the hospital and was discharged an hour later. It was eye-opening to experience this twice in two months and see the fear in my wife and daughter's eyes. I knew this had to change!

I have always been a hard-working, 100% all-in kind of person, from the most basic jobs to my career as a firefighter. This all-in attitude most definitely allowed me to excel in my career, but it may have also aided my burnout. During my recovery, I drank from the firehose of self-care and swallowed every drop in hopes of helping myself and others.

Most people, at some point in their lives, will have children of their own or through adoption. My wife and I chose to have our two kids close together in our early 20s. To this day, I would not trade that decision for holding off until we were older. It was perfect, but saying that, it came with long, long days. Honestly, my 20s were a blur and not for common 20-year-old reasons; it was just that our lives were overflowing and on the go 24/7. One of my early jobs was as a baker in a grocery store where my wife also worked. As my wife started her day, I would finish my night baking shift at 8 am to do an actual child handoff in the parking lot. Talk about no sleep for years; I am sure it took a toll on each of us and maybe dulled our memories of being young parents.

Being a caregiver can be one of the most challenging experiences one faces. My Mom passed away 23 days after being diagnosed with cancer. Her passing was sudden and struck my dad and me. My Mom, a vegetarian health nut who died at 65, was a hard pill to swallow.

From that point on, as an only child, the care for my dad rests solely on my wife and me. His grieving for the loss of my mom lasted years and drained all our energy levels to nothing. We were running on fumes trying to manage my life as the fire chief, a family

man and now full-time caregiver to my ageing Dad. From then on, my dad was in and out of the hospital with stress-induced illnesses and a fall that broke his fragile hip.

I never really knew the degree to which my dad suffered from World War II Post Traumatic Stress, commonly known as P.T.S.D. He lived in a rural area with tall Douglas Fir's towering over his house. Every windstorm, he would be triggered by the onslaught of fir cones hitting the metal roof, just like the WWII bomb shrapnel did so many years ago. During my care with him, it became evident that he needed help and a safe environment that did not trigger stress responses. His recovery has been long and tiring, but now he is safe and healthy, living on his own in an Assisted Living Complex. No traumatic triggers, not one since his move in 2019. Being a human giver can play a crucial role in burnout. Caring for others over our health can lead to complete soul exhaustion.

Successfully rising through the fire department ranks also comes with being in a high-pressure and very public position. I was honoured to reach that pinnacle position at such an early age (40); this is very uncommon. I wrote a viral column in Canadian Fire Fighter magazine titled "Too Young to Be a Fire Chief" I often wonder what value I brought to the fire chief's role versus coming in later in my age. What I know now, would that make me an even better leader? Was my young age an excellent example to others, or did my youth introduce a different vision for leadership and management?

One main factor that led to my organizational stress was the lack of resources to do a good job. When deadlines loom, expectations are high; tension builds up with no help and resources. Since I have perfectionism tendencies and extreme pride in my organization, it was frustrating to see jobs and projects not getting done due to a lack of resources. So, what did I do? I spent every evening working, every weekend, to do what I thought needed. Which I later found out resulted in overwhelm and burnout. This is an area many organizations around the world could improve on. To expect high productivity and professional work, you must supply your people with the necessary tools and support. Organizational burnout will continue to climb if this matter is not addressed. A lack of human resources was a major contributing factor to my stress leave.

There is no doubt in my mind that I suffered from repeated moral injuries. Unfortunately, I witnessed unethical behaviours that went against everything I cherished and stood for on several occasions. At the time, I did not know this was a moral injury issue. Stress is bound to fester and grow when something eats away at you that contradicts your values. I honestly believe this is one of the key factors to my emotional burnout.

Through professional counselling support, I believe my burnout results from my occupational setting and not so much traumatic injury from two decades of emergency responses. But I am sure that the massive exposure to traumatic emergencies burdens my health deep down. I am incredibly fortunate that the horrendous calls I have witnessed do not haunt me daily.

For years I felt as though the safety of everyone in my community and my fellow firefighters rested solely on my shoulders. This is an immense weight to carry daily and was not accurate to reality, but it was what my inner voice told me daily. This colossal responsibility comes with a high-calibre job, such as a fire chief, but I allowed it to weigh me down for far too long. This sense of duty was magnified ten-fold during the early days of the COVID-19 Pandemic. I not only told myself I needed to protect my family but our firefighters and their families and the entire community we lived in. This mindset is a very unrealistic perception to own, but that was what my inside voice told me.

It wasn't until my mid-forties did I stop caring so much about what others thought of me. Up until then, it was a significant part of who I was. I put so much pressure on myself to perform, to be what I thought was expected of me. Placing unneeded stress on oneself is a prevalent issue for so many that often changes with knowledge and maturity. I tell myself often that no one cares, do your job and feel good about the effort you put out there.

While writing this book, two years have passed since the first COVID-19 positive case was reported in Canada (2020). The Pandemic has placed many people in hardship and has induced massive mental health problems worldwide. I was fortunate enough to continue with my job, and so was my wife, so finances were not an issue, but the isolation and long decision-soaked days were a challenge. In the early days of COVID hitting our Province, my role as fire chief moved quickly into all things Pandemic. My mission was to ensure the safety of my staff and our community. With little knowledge and long days packed with meeting after meeting, we prepared our team for the worst-case scenario. The number of hours clocked in on my cell phone dwarfed my entire call length history for the past year. This was me on the verge of burnout, and the pandemic chaos only expedited it, as, by June 2020, I was off work on medical stress leave.

As a perfectionist and lifelong learner, I tend to take on lots of things from continuing education courses to an array of committees; you name it, if it was offered to me and I could help, I did it. I never let an opportunity go to waste, which led to several balls in the air. I thought I was managing it okay, but my stress plate was too high over time. As fire chief, I was wearing multiple hats, Fire Chief, Deputy Fire Chief and Emergency Operations Chief. On top of that, I often found myself holding other people's stress plates too.

At some point in our lives, we all will endure the loss of a loved one, and we grieve in our ways. No matter how resilient you are, these losses make an ever-lasting impact on your lives. I have said goodbye to family members, mentors, friends, and colleagues. It is life, but it adds to our catalogue of life stress.

I have a tradition that I would like to share that goes back to when my children were young. Every night, I set myself up for a good night's rest by saying a night prayer. I am not religious and do not pray like a traditional prayer. I say good night to each of my family members one at a time. I say, "good night, I love you and thank you for...." "This allows me

to fall asleep happy and feel gratitude and pride in my family and who they are. This ritual primes me to drift off in peace; it is a nightly ritual that I will do for the rest of my life.

I believe modern western medicine has its place in our health system, but at the same time, I also have a natural attraction to ancient eastern medicine and its long health history. During my recovery, I have tried and tested every modality I had access to, and many of them worked well.

We all live with stress; we often let it control our lives, compounding over time, but we pay little attention to its profound impact on our bodies, minds, and souls. Stressful events are near impossible to avoid entirely, so it is essential first to be aware and find daily practices to reduce and recharge your life batteries.