

Liz's story

Liz had always been one of those go-getter, motivated, industrious people. In college, she received straight A's, graduating with honors.

Right out of school, Liz received a job with a prestigious firm. Many of her friends congratulated her for landing such a highly sought-after position, and Liz felt truly blessed.

The first few months at her new job were wonderfully exciting. For the first time, she was able to use the knowledge she had worked so hard to gain in school, and she was learning new skills as she trained at the firm. Her colleagues were helpful, and seemed to appreciate her curiosity and intelligence. Her boss recognized her competence and ambition, and gave her increasingly challenging assignments.

After a little over a year, Liz was working an average of 75 hours each week. Sometimes the work day stretched so late into the night that it was just easier to sleep at the office. There was so much work to do, and just not enough time in the day. It seemed that everyone around her was on the same kind of schedule, and she didn't want to fall behind.

The irony was that the more hours she worked, the harder it was to concentrate and get things done. She felt so tired, and the joy she had for her job was all but gone. Sometimes she felt that her life was no more than checking things off of a never-ending "to do" list. She was often annoyed at her co-workers—who she used to like quite a bit—and found herself snapping at them several times each day.

Liz began to seriously contemplate quitting her job, and to fantasize about running away to an isolated island where she could spend days doing nothing more taxing than watching the waves roll in and out. She was exhausted, physically, emotionally ... and spiritually.

In athletics, there is a phenomenon called "hitting the wall." This happens when a person is intensely active for a prolonged period of time with no rest or time for renewal. A long-distance runner who doesn't drink water or take in the needed nutrients will eventually get to the place where running is no longer possible—he or she becomes physically incapable of moving forward. Sometimes the runner will collapse in a heap, and will require medical attention before they can stand on their own again.

That is a good metaphor for what happens in burnout. Our reserves of energy are depleted, our passion sapped, and our intellectual abilities diminished. Just getting the necessary things done can be a terrible struggle.

One burnout expert, Christina Maslach, explained the cause and effect of burnout. She wrote, "burnout is prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors... and is defined here by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and sense of inefficacy."¹

When we begin to experience burnout, we are at risk making mistakes, becoming callous, and losing our enthusiasm. If burnout isn't addressed, it can lead a person to just give up, and walk away from a situation that could be fixed.

It's important to note that burnout doesn't happen just on the job. It can happen at home, in relationships, at church. Anywhere we are giving more than we are receiving, where the need is constant and draining—those are areas we need to watch for signs of burnout.

Speaking from personal experience, pastor Wayne Cordeiro writes that once you have gone all the way to full burnout, it's very difficult to return to complete emotional health.¹ It's so important to address burnout before it reaches that point!

¹ Christina Maslach, "Job Burnout: New Directions in Research and Intervention" in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (October 2003, 12: 189-192).

² Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty: Refilling your Tank and Renewing your Passion* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009).