

Written evidence submitted by Sacred Space Foundation (WBR0091)

Burnout – more than stress.

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Abstract

Stress and burnout are frequently conflated as different degrees of the same problem. This report suggests that the picture is more diffuse than this. Burnout is related to stress, but according to the evidence cited and the experience of an organisation set up to help those in burnout, other factors are at work. These require more than stress relief strategies. Instead other skills and insights drawn from spiritual traditions, which will be defined, are needed to assist persons in burnout to heal and find new energy and directions in life. In this summary report, strategies are identified and research evidence demonstrated that supports their effectiveness, and suggests reasons why such approaches may be a useful add-on to existing ones.

Introduction

As I write, in the midst of a pandemic, yet another articleⁱ has appeared in the press telling of nurses burning out under the pressure of caring. There is no doubt that nurses like other healthcare practitioners (HCP's) have endured exceptional pressures as the effects of Covid19 have spread worldwide. The pandemic has both exacerbated and thrown into sharp focus a long-standing predicament of caring work – the stress that it causes, the causes and effects of that stress, and the connection with burnout.

The causes are invariably seen as circumstances beyond the control of carers – the patients' demands, the limitations of resources and inhospitable organisational cultures. This tends to reinforce the sense of victimhood – heroic key workers giving their all in the face of impossible odds. In this report (an edited version of a more detailed published commentary, available from the author) I explore whether this gives us the full picture of what is going on, whether or not this is the healthiest response to the joy-suffering dilemma of caring, and offer some different perspectives on and solutions to burnout.

What follows is an exploration of a dimension to burnout that seems to be little understood and accepted, yet it has been much explored in recent decades^{ii iii iv v vi} In a world locked into

particular perceptions of material reality, especially assumptions that human beings are mere psychobiological entities, to attribute burnout to anything other than simple cause-effect/resources-demands causes may seem somewhat beyond the fringe.

However, this exploration is rooted in over thirty years' experience of the Sacred Space Foundation [Appendix 1: a charitable trust in the UK initially created to help those suffering from the extremes of stress and burnout], reports from other organisations and individuals (cited in the references) who have sought to address burnout as more than a psychological phenomenon (such as the Society of Mary and Martha at its retreat house in Devon), and recent studies on the effects on HCP's when spiritual approaches are integrated into staff support programmes.

Stress and burnout are often described in the literature, especially the popular media, interchangeably; burnout being seen as an extreme version of stress. There is no doubt that stress is closely associated with burnout, but a different and less commonly identified perspective is that of the spiritual dimension. This report will explore a little of what that means and how it might be taken up among the measure. to relieve and prevent burnout.

Who burns out?

A great many evidence-based studies are available on stress, burnout and HCP's as well as others involved in caring work such as fire and police officers, teachers, social workers and clergy. It also affects lay people involved in caring situations, such as those supporting a disabled person at home, volunteers working for charities and international aid workers [Appendix 2 illustrates the broad range of some of these studies].

It is also noteworthy that caring work tends, internationally, to be downgraded in value and rewards, hence struggling to claim its fair share of resources. This sets up a dynamic between external factors and the inner motivations of the carer that can appear to lead to the unique experience that is burnout.

If our daily activities are heart-centred, involving giving of care to others or even caring attention to organisations and tasks (hence there is evidence of burnout occurring in commercial and industrial work), where we are invariably required to put other people first and give of our all, then there are higher risks of stress and burnout. While studies into stress and burnout and suggestions for a "cure" are many and have been reported and acted

upon to varying degrees, the scale of the problem has not diminished. This suggests that even if the circumstances that produce stress-burnout are righted, for example through improvements in workloads and other stress relief methods, then there may be factors other than work related stress producing burnout.

An Internet search for the word 'burnout', at the time of writing (October 2020), revealed over 94 million hits. And this time is one of pandemic of the Covid-19 virus. Alongside this tragedy has been the widespread acknowledgement of the stress upon "key workers" - health care staff, police, transport workers and many other front line workers who have kept essential services running. Burnout has found common expression in the general media affecting everyone it seems in caring/people-centred/front-line work^{vii viii}. One survey^{ix} found that half of all UK health workers are suffering from debilitating stress alongside deteriorating mental health during the pandemic. The figure rose to nearly three quarters among less experienced staff and with women being more severely affected than men. Similar evidence has been found among health care staff in the city of Wuhan, currently deemed the source of the outbreak^x.

Even before the pandemic, the evidence for high levels stress in the caring workplace was strong, along with the enormous financial costs to organisations. A report from the UK Health and Safety Executive^{xi} suggested that work-related stress, depression or anxiety continues to represent a significant ill health condition in the workforce of Great Britain. Work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounts for 44% of work-related ill health and 54% of working days lost, in 2018/19. The occupations and industries reporting the highest rates of work-related stress, depression or anxiety remain consistently in the health and public sectors of the economy. One account^{xii} of the personal effects of stress and burnout cites the impact upon medical staff in which it is noted that 85% of junior doctors experience mental health issues and 13% admit suicidal feelings, while young female doctors in UK are two and a half times more likely than other women to kill themselves.

Although the findings from these and many other reports can seem dramatic, time after time stress and burnout are not differentiated and the primary causes of both are invariably attributed to workload, lack of resources and managerial and structural support, and organisational change. What is going on inside the carer, other than being seen as the victim of impossible forces, barely gets a look in. Perhaps there is a hidden inclination not to do so

for fear that the carer will get the blame for personal weakness. If burnout is a product of stress, then QED the problem is solvable by removing the causes of that stress e.g. manageable workloads or humane managers. Such a simplistic paradigm does not encourage further options. Yet the evidence borne out in the continued and escalating levels of stress and burnout suggests that such measures where taken are not fully addressing the problem.

Spirituality?

Burnout may be related to stress in the workplace, but there are invariably deeper issues at work. If we see burnout as purely an extension of stress, then such stress should disappear once the causes are removed or the sufferer is removed from it. Thus, life may be tough at work, but we can feel much restored after a holiday or when the bullying boss is dismissed or when staffing levels improve. Under such circumstances such burnout-as-stress is resolved because the causes have been resolved.

However, when the stress is alleviated and the signs and symptoms of burnout remain, then it may be deduced that something else may be afoot. Here, the challenge of burnout is to treat it for what it is – a spiritual crisis. Work and caring pressures are factors it is true, but these are often the *agents provocateurs* rather than the root causes. Burnout in this context is the desperate cry of the very essence of who we are/the highest self/the soul to break free. It is symptomatic of a longing to be liberated, no longer defined by roles or who or what others say we are. It is the struggle to be in the world in which we find and give love and compassion; have work and relationships that have heart and meaning for us. It is the longing to be free of old wounds and other unconscious processes that limit our definitions and understanding of ourselves, our freedom to be in the world fully and authentically who we truly are. This struggle for truth and authenticity, when we are trapped in work and relationships that inhibit or edit us and which no longer nurture us, can lead to an experience of profound exhaustion. It is an exhaustion made worse by confusion if we can see no way out, or understand why we feel so bad, or try to help ourselves by injecting even more effort into getting things back to “normal”.

A conference held at Durham Castle and Cathedral in 1996, on the theme of spirituality and health, heard this cry from the heart of an occupational therapist: “How can I go back there when my *heart and soul* (my emphasis) are not welcome there?” Such words illuminate the

dilemma of burnout, that it is more than a stress/job related phenomena and, at least for some individuals, a deep personal crisis brought on by feeling like a square peg in a round hole, when what has heart and meaning for us no longer fits with the work and other circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Spirituality and its impact upon health has only relatively recently been given more attention. It inevitably gets caught up in reservations associated either with fluffy, touchy-feely therapy or hard-boiled religiosity. Such hesitation is borne out in studies among HCP's, yet awareness is expanding and demands are growing for increased education and research.^{xiii xiv xv xvi xvii xviii}

Spirituality is all about the way each person finds meaning, purpose and connection in the world – how we relate to ourselves, to each other and perhaps (for many people) to a transcendent Other, an Absolute, God, Ultimate Reality. Spirituality helps us to find our grounding in the world, our purpose for living, to seek and find the answers to questions such as “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” “Where am I going?” and “How do I get there?” Some people find the answers to questions like these in religion, others do not, although everyone seems to ask such questions at least at some point in life, if not always; that is part of the nature of what it is to be human. Thus on this basis everyone is spiritual but not everyone is religious. Spirituality as meaning, purpose and connection is given attention in authors who move away from the causes of burnout as purely psychological^{xix xx xxi xxii}.

A spiritual crisis such as burnout occurs when everything that we once thought of as normal or valuable or certain in our lives is thrown into turmoil. Psychotherapist and author Frances Vaughan writes^{xxiii}, “Anyone who has experienced burnout, a common occupational hazard among helping professionals, has probably had the feeling of being trapped in a web of necessity and impossible demands. Most recommended treatments for burnout consist of stress reduction or setting boundaries. They overlook the fact that burnout usually indicates a state of spiritual aridity, and the effective treatment may call for spiritual renewal or awakening the soul.”

Borysenko^{xxiv} further comments, “It is a spiritual crisis. The way I see it, when we're burned out, we've lost our way. Our sense of meaning and purpose has disappeared from view and we don't know which way to turn. One definition of the soul is “a quintessential human organ whose purpose is to create meaning.” In burnout, our meaning-making apparatus

goes awry”. While Patton^{xv} takes a similar perspective noting, “Burnout is a tell-tale malady of our times. It’s a state of physical, emotional, and spiritual depletion. It manifests in depression-like symptoms such as lost motivation, decreased productivity, and feelings of cynicism and hopelessness. It shows up in physical symptoms of extreme stress, including digestive shut-down, inflammation, adrenal fatigue, and a compromised immune system.”

This “spiritual aridity”, “tell-tale malady”, and “meaning gone awry” is burnout. It is what happens when the energy we are investing in trying to keep things “normal”, to keep control of our lives, to keep things the same becomes more and more demanding. As the effort increases, we become increasingly depleted, exhausted and heartsick. The greater the exhaustion the closer we get to an almost complete state of mental, physical, social and spiritual collapse. At some level one or more relationships is changing, or change is being demanded, perhaps with work, a primary personal relationship or with our deepest truth about ourselves and our beliefs. Often the process is an unconscious one as we call to ourselves challenge after challenge that brings us closer to the edge, even though consciously we may think we do not want these things to be happening. Things seem to fall apart despite our best efforts – one thing after another goes wrong. We may feel that the cause lies in something outside ourselves – a bullying boss, new demands on us at work but without the resources to meet them, a relationship at home that has grown cold, the demands of a loved one for care, a sudden trauma in life that throws all our cherished values into question. While these external factors are indeed happening, what is going on in the person, often unconsciously, is a deep unrequited desire to transform and live more authentically and meaningfully.

Responding to burnout.

From the experiences of organisations such as the Sacred Space Foundation and individuals such as Dina Glouberman working in this field, some approaches have found to be effective which have yet to find their way into mainstream staff support.

On balance, this is not seen as a time for action or trying to make solutions happen – the effort to do so can make the burnout worse; this is a time to come to stillness, to wait and see, to get out of the situation and find the space to allow the solutions that are waiting within to emerge. Thus:-

Retreat - There are lots of possibilities, but getting temporarily out of the unhealthy context and creating the space (the sacred space – where there is time for ourselves which allows

the new insights and healings to emerge) for the next steps is a priority. Thus when burnout strikes, an immediate requirement is to step back from ordinary life and take stock. It might be necessary to take 'sick leave' or move to the home of a friend or place of retreat where we feel safe and taken care of. A GP aware of burnout will be able to offer suggestions. He or she can help with authorising sickness leave to cover time off work if necessary and medication as a temporary aide (if, for example, depression is part of the struggle) so that we become more grounded and able to see more clearly what is going on and ways out of it.

Rest, Re-energise, Recuperate - looking after our physical wellbeing by eating, exercising and sleeping better are part of the process, coupled with time to reflect on what is going on with ourselves.

Reconnection - this problem cannot be solved alone, despite often very strong feelings otherwise. Disconnection in retreat is not the answer, reconnection is what is called for, and so the support of a wise counsellor who can guide us through the reflective process is essential. Birthing within us what needs to come forth is unsafe alone – we need a “spiritual midwife”, one or more, to accompany us through this phase.

Recollection, Reflection, Re-visioning - as we recollect what has gone on, we can start a process of re-visioning our lives. Using all kinds of reflective, insight and awareness building processes, such as guided meditation, the Enneagram, inspiring literature, prayer, spiritual direction and so on. Thus we can begin to return to that place in ourselves where we feel at home.

In essence the applications of spiritual practices are necessary if the unique spiritual crisis that is burnout is to be resolved. The Sacred Space Foundation has collaborated with many other organisations to apply and research these methods, and to develop programmes of awareness raising so that burnout is prevented.

For example, studies have found that setting up teaching programmes where staff can explore issues of identification with roles, self care and work based stress found that as a result staff were less stressed, had a greater sense of wellbeing, more positive team relationships, more able to be compassionate with patients and each other, less like to go off sick and less likely to leave^{xxvi xxvii xxviii} Other work at the Foundation has included setting up “time out” and retreat days for NHS staff (in this case some of these were sponsored by

the Diocese of Carlisle) in which staff were enabled to learn some simple stress management and self care skills, and gain deeper insight into their stresses at work and how to find healthier responses, and use assessment tools to measure the risk of burnout. Space here does not permit a full exploration of these options and tools, but further information is readily available from the Foundation (contact via the website www.sacredspace.org.uk) if wished.

Summary

Burnout for many people is much more than an extreme version of stress. Stress goes away when the source is removed or we remove ourselves from it. Burnout persists. As a defence, burnout disconnects us from unhealthy situations or deep unconscious drives (to succeed, fix others, be worthy etc.) that no longer serve us. It is a response from the depths of who we are that refuses to continue the status quo. It's as if our heart, our soul, our highest self is saying "right, I've had enough of this and you're not paying attention to me so I will stop you in your tracks until you listen to me and follow a completely different way of being in life".

In that sense burnout is also full of potential for personal transformation. Stress/psychological models are limited in their capacity to deal with burnout. Burnout is a complete breakdown of our understanding of who we are and why we are here, the very stuff of spirituality. A spiritual crisis demands spiritual solutions. Centres of retreat and recovery that have developed specialist help with burnout recognise the need for safe space to step back from the external and internal conflicts (the work based problems and our unhealthy part in the drama) and cultivate awareness.

Burnout is a summons to take stock of our lives, why we cling to things where our heart and soul are not welcome. That summons is a painful, frightening, chaotic, lonely place, but if nurtured through it healthily, it is pregnant with potential to move to new depth and authenticity in life, less doing, more being.

On balance, burnout is not a time for action or trying to make solutions happen – the effort to do these can make it worse; this is a time to come to stillness, to wait and see, to get out of the situation and find the space and support to allow the solutions that are waiting within to emerge. It is a time to retreat, rest, reenergise, refocus, reconnect, renew, reflect...

Some of the changes needed in life can take a lot of time to integrate, but starting small, first by tackling one or two achievable issues than can make a difference is a more realistic and healthy approach. The workplace culture that may have been one of the catalysts for burnout may need radical reappraisal as well, but that is often beyond the remit of the burned-out person...more enlightened employers avail themselves of the widely available guidance on building healthy workplaces.

Sadly, many others do not. If we respond to burnout in healthy ways, then great personal transformation is possible. The dynamic between the burned-out person, workplaces and inner/outer-relationships is a complex one. Stress models, organisational change and fix-it approaches alone are inadequate responses.

Burnout need not be a permanent condition. With work along the lines suggested we can find new, healthier and more joyful directions in life. Not does it necessarily mean that we have to leave our job, rather learn to be in it in a less attached and healthier way. Burning out does not mean that we cannot re-ignite.

Where burnout is purely seen as stress related, then relief of the stress alleviates the sense of burnout. It is right that these matters should receive the full attention of the NHS. However, because of the heart-centred nature of healthcare work, there is a likelihood that burnout among a significant number of HCP's has another, spiritual dimension, and it is these that require a very different mode of attention

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Appendix 1

The Sacred Space Foundation



The Sacred Space Foundation is a registered UK charity based in the Lake District National Park, Cumbria known for offering teaching in the healing arts, support for health care professionals (in the form of residential 'retreat' spaces in beautiful and nurturing surroundings with the accompaniment of on site guides with nursing and medical backgrounds) and retreat and spiritual direction opportunities. Telephone and virtual guidance is also available as well as opportunities for day visits. It was founded in 1988 by a group of health care professionals, mainly nurses and doctors, other supporters and with the help of the Pilkington Family Trust^{xxviii}.

Sacred Space offers visitors and spiritual seekers non-denominational spiritual guidance amidst the nurturing and natural beauty of the Lake District. Resident spiritual directors see visitors to the retreat one at a time, so that visitors may spend time in solitude to gain clarity and insights into themselves. The directors are also involved in facilitating retreats for seekers off-site as well as teaching programmes in NHS Trusts on compassion, healing and leadership^{xxviii xxviii}

History

The Foundation was established in 1988 and registered as a charitable trust (number 328449) with the Charity Commission^{xxviii} in 1989. Originally named the Didsbury Trust, from the location of the first meeting in Didsbury, Manchester, UK, the name was later changed to the Sacred Space Foundation in 1997.

The charity was set up with the initial support of the Pilkington Family Trust and brothers David Pilkington CBE, Canon Christopher Pilkington and Pat Pilkington MBE. The Bristol Cancer Help Centre, now known as Penny Brohn Cancer Care, was an early collaborator^{xxviii}. The Centre was one of the first in the UK in the 1970's to embrace complementary therapies in the treatment and support of patients with cancer^{xxviii xxviii}. Much controversy was generated by this approach in the early years, but many of the methods espoused have since been adopted by other healthcare charitable trusts and the mainstream National Health Service (NHS)^{xxviii}.

Jean Sayre-Adams, an American nurse who had trained in Therapeutic Touch (TT) with Dolores Krieger^{xxviii}, was invited by the Centre to teach this approach to healing in 1984. The interest generated led to more classes being set up around the UK. Subsequently, a group of health care practitioners, academics and managers met in Didsbury, Manchester, UK to explore ways to support and integrate the TT approach and it was from that meeting that the charity was established^{xxviii}.

Subsequently the Didsbury Trust developed and offered a large number of training programmes across the UK, Australia, the USA, Germany, Ireland and several other European countries, and sponsored many meetings and conferences, created the first research-based British text on Therapeutic Touch^{xxviii} and offered residential training through its sites in Conderton, Worcestershire and Litton, Somerset. Academic courses were also established at Universities and Schools of Nursing in Swansea, Norwich, Manchester and Carlisle. At the same time, the Trust's facilities were being used increasingly by health care staff in need of rest, recuperation and renewal amid increasing levels of stress and burnout^{xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii}. A growing body of evidence was also emerging from the late 1980's onwards of the connection between physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing^{xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii xxviii}.

A conference organised by the Trust at Durham Cathedral and Castle in 1997 brought together health care professionals from across the spectrum for what is believed to be the UK's first such event specifically dedicated to the theme of Spirituality and Health. The notion of sacred space^{xxviii} (both a physical place concerned with integration, healing and wholeness as well as expressing something of the unique qualities of healing relationships) emerged in more detail at this conference. The focus of the charity, having shifted over the years to embrace not only the teaching of the healing arts, but also the provision of those in need of healing for themselves (specifically the spiritual crisis that can emerge with illness and other life challenges^{xxviii xxviii xxviii}) led to the name change of the Trust to reflect this renewed focus in 1997.

Current Operations and Vision

In 1997, after a fundraising campaign, the Trust changed its name to the Sacred Space Foundation and purchased its own premises in the Lake District, Cumbria^{xxviii}. After several changes of address the charity eventually settled in its present location. The main house has two individual retreat spaces for those seeking rest and recuperation, one-to-one guidance and by request, spiritual direction, as well as housing for a resident counsellor and a spiritual director. The charity has access to another property nearby with further individual retreat spaces, larger facilities for groups as well as a small team of advisers, personal coaches and volunteer spiritual directors around the UK. It is accredited with the Retreat Association^{xxviii}.

The Sacred Space Foundation currently offers training programmes in the healing arts, compassion and insight approaches such as the Enneagram^{xxviii}, meditation^{xxviii}, labyrinth^{xxviii} walking and many others as well as space for individual retreats for those in crisis and/or seeking (non-denominational) spiritual guidance. Part of the work of the Foundation has been to take its methods out into healthcare settings and not just rely upon staff finding their way to the centres. Recent independent research vouches for the effectiveness of the Foundation's approach, not to say unique approach in integrating the psychological and the spiritual in assisting health care staff towards greater wellbeing^{xxviii xxviii xxviii}. Annual reports available on-line at the Charity Commissioners indicate that about 50% of users of the Foundation come from health care backgrounds, the rest now from all walks of life.

Appendix 2 – studies citing examples of burnout in many occupations.

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