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# The EAP Danger Zone: Conquering the EAP Burnout Monster

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The EAP Danger Zone: Conquering the Burnout Monster

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## **The EAP Danger Zone: Conquering the Burnout Monster**

In an article published in the previous edition of *EAP Digest*, the Burnout Monster was introduced. This foreboding creature physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, and spiritually terrorizes its prey through stressful employment or from being a caregiver. Employee assistance professionals are especially vulnerable due to the helping nature of our work, the changing economy, and legal decisions that jeopardize our job security. In spite of the danger, there is hope. The Burnout Monster is not indomitable; it can be avoided, and if attacked it is susceptible to offensive engagement.

This article will provide guidelines to effective and victorious combat with the Monster. Space does not allow for a thorough discussion of the strategies: each one merits its own article. Although EA professionals would find the information contained in this article neither new or innovative, a review of familiar information and strategies seems warranted given high levels of workplace stress and burnout. It never hurts to be reminded of important armaments of self-care that have collected dust.

### **Challenging the Burnout Monster**

For some people it may be too late to avoid the Burnout Monster, they've already been ambushed and attacked. Accordingly, people in this predicament must adopt an offensive strategy. Equipping oneself for battle is an active and purposeful choice. Few are naturally gifted with the necessary knowledge and armaments for combating the Burnout Monster. In fact, many people seem to be a magnetic for the Monster. This section will review some basic offensive strategies for freeing oneself from the Monster.

There are various ways to fight the Burnout Monster. Helping find those strategies that will work is our goal.

### **Finding the Resolve**

Over time, the Burnout Monster wears down and demoralizes its opponents. To challenge the Monster, we must muster the determination to fight even though we have nothing left. We must admit that we have become powerless over the Monster, and in spite of that, find the resolve to challenge it. We must believe that we can fight it and that we can win.

### **Find the Lessons**

Once you have resolved to escape, examine the circumstances, decisions, and actions of others that contributed to your defeat. Assess what led you into the Monster's terrain. Consider working with a counselor, personal coach, or a gifted friend who can help you evaluate your downward spiral. If your analysis results in blame, don't stay there. Being a perpetual victim of other people's actions or living with a sense of failure will only give the Monster more power. Regardless of the circumstances, blaming yourself or others will only do harm. The objective is to learn the lessons that come from being captured by the Monster and to find the gift hidden in this particular challenge.

### **Take Inventory**

The word *cope* comes from a Latin word that means to "engage in war." To battle the Burnout Monster, you must assess your coping strategies. Take note of all non-

defensive, direct coping strategies that can effectively engage the Monster in hand-to-hand combat. Useful direct coping methods include non-sarcastic humor, mediation, exercise, confession, and forgiveness. What do you have and what do you lack in your coping armament? If you need something in order to wage war with the Monster, it is your responsibility to get it.

### **Put on Your Uniform**

A soldier's military uniform protects him from some of the hazards of war. Likewise, challenging the Burnout Monster requires that we protect our exposed parts. Being burned out means that we have been harmed by hazardous conditions. Cover those exposed parts by making hard choices to extract yourself from the danger zone. Simplify your life. Though you know this principle, you may continue to justify activities even when they are killing you; you must decide what needs to go. In keeping with the Serenity Prayer, if you have control over it, make a new decision; if not, learn to cope with the circumstances.

### **Caging the Burnout Monster and Avoiding His Territory**

Recall the scenes from movies where the hero rescues someone in distress by killing the villain. We scream at the screen, "Don't turn your back on him...he's not really dead!" But the hero doesn't listen to us; the villain seemingly rises from the dead to attack the hero once again. Similarly, the Burnout Monster does not go away easily. Like Michael Myers from the infamous *Halloween* movies, it cannot be killed. Once the Monster has been overcome, it must be carefully monitored.

### **Steward of Self**

The most precious resource is the human soul; if you do not care for you, who will? I do not advocate self-preoccupation or self-indulgence. In fact, such an attitude ultimately sets one up for burnout. At the same time, learn to become a steward of self. Likely, you are familiar with the term “Messiah Complex.” While few of us would equate ourselves with God, we often act as if we are omnipresent (able to be everywhere), omnipotent (able to do everything), and omniscient (able to know it all). Guard your boundaries, but don’t be self-protective by insulating yourself. Leverage your resources, but don’t become self-indulgent. The Burnout Monster can gain control over someone whether indifferent to self or consumed with it.

In being a good steward of self, get sufficient rest and relaxation. You are most agile and can most skillfully escape the Monster’s grip when you are relaxed.

### **Develop a Healthy View of Life**

The Monster obtains power because a person’s unconscious map highlights the road to the Monster’s terrain. Of course, we use the map that is familiar to us; in fact, we might never have considered that another map exists, at least not for us.

A healthy map has several characteristics. First, a map provides a reference point. Perhaps you need to change your direction. Examine your purpose in life. You would be wise to aim your life in the direction that provides a reference point for life decisions, provides real meaning, and is stable in the press of life.

Second, a healthy life map has a proper orientation; it orients you to North, South, East, and West. Due North is gratitude. Unlike any other attitude, gratitude is an orientation that immobilizes the Burnout Monster. Melodie Beattie eloquently captures the essence of gratitude:

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion into clarity...It turns problems into gifts, failures into success, the unexpected into perfect timing, and mistakes into important events. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow. (famousquotes.com)

Practically speaking, your orientation can shift when you focus on aspects of work that are satisfying, harvest the positive, and focus on the blessings rather than the things you are lacking.

Another orienting attitude is humor. The physical and emotional value of humor is supported by many studies; indeed, learning to have fun is serious business. When I read Viktor Frankl's book (1963) *Man's search for meaning*, I was taken by the fact that he praised the virtues of humor in a concentration camp. If humor can help prisoners of war, it will do wonders for the EA professional, even if you are the EAP vendor for a concentration camp!

Third, a healthy map helps you to draw accurate borders and well-defined boundaries. Use your map to make sure that you do not make everything about you. People who annoy you do not necessarily intend to do so. Even if they do, remember that your "skin" is designed to protect your inner well-being. You can choose whether to allow others to "get under your skin." In our profession, we must also be careful not to make other people's pain our own. The axiom of being responsible *to* our clients and customers, not *for* them, is worthy of becoming our mantra.

Fourth, healthy maps are continually updated and corrected. Likewise, we need to frequently examine ourselves. Be sensitive to your personal reactions and willing to reflect on the underlying reasons for them. This ability to be introspective, to understand yourself, and to express your heart is critical to mature healthy living. Express your feelings verbally by journaling, speaking them into a recorder, or talking to a trusted colleague or friend.

Finally, realize that a map cannot predict any delays and detours you may encounter. I once got a card that had an artistic bowl of cherries on the front. The inside of the card read, "Life isn't." To live is to have trouble. The issue is not if we will have to face problems, but how.

### **Develop a Healthy View of Work**

Early in my career, I had the delusion that I must have my act together to be an effective counselor. After all, who wants to go to a counselor who cannot manage his own life? Maturity has taught me that effectiveness in a helping profession is not found in having my act together, but in accepting the fact that I'll never have my act totally together. Paradoxically, that perspective relieves us of the exhaustion and futility of trying to prove ourselves...it brings freedom and actually empowers us to help others. Someone has said that pursuing excellence is gratifying and healthy, but pursuing perfection is frustrating, neurotic, and a waste of time.

The famed slogan, "Working smarter not harder," is a principle that drips with millennial years of wisdom. Just as a military strategist devises the most effective and efficient ways of defeating the enemy, so also do you need to strategize how to attack



your work when it becomes vicious. Making changes in how you do your work can have profound implications for your general state of well-being.

### **Develop a Healthy View of Success**

How do you define success? Is success defined in helping an EAP client? Growing an EAP business? Being elected to offices in our professional organizations? Being a good husband and father? Being a person of virtue? Examine your real beliefs about what makes you successful. The best way to assess your view of success is to ask yourself where your passion lies, or in other words, what empowers or consumes you. Then, consider whether your view is conducive to healthy functioning.

### **Create Margin**

In his book *Margin* (1992), Dr. Richard Swenson frames the busyness of our time in terms of finances. In financial terms, margin means having enough money in savings to deal with an emergency without having to borrow. Unfortunately, most of us don't save, and when a financial need emerges we are without the resources to pay it. Wise financial planners know the value of having money in reserve to maintain cash flow. Similarly, Swenson argues, we need to save and maintain emotional energy in our internal bank in case a work or family crisis arises. We need to create room in our lives to breathe and to adapt to changing circumstances.

Consider a comment made by Lee Iacocca, the man credited with turning around the Chrysler Corporation. Undoubtedly he invested much time and energy into his work. Yet, he seemed to value margin:

I'm constantly amazed by the number of people who can't seem to control their own schedules. Over the years, I've had many executives come to me and say with pride: 'Boy, last year I worked so hard that I didn't take any vacation. ' It's nothing to be proud of. I always feel like responding: 'You dummy. You mean to tell me that you can take responsibility for an \$80 million project and you can't plan two weeks out of the year to go off with your family and have some fun?' (Famous Quotes, n.d.).

### **Develop and Maintain a Healthy Support System**

EA professionals understand the value of a healthy and supportive social network. Research shows that the psychological and physical benefits of social ties are far-reaching. That knowledge, however, is not always applied, and subsequently the benefits are never realized.

Keep in mind that all support systems are not created equal. In other words, your social support may not be adequately supportive. Find and cultivate healthy and caring relationships, beginning with your family. Tell people what you need, how they can help, and be willing to give in return.

### **Deal with the Work Environment**

As noted in the previous article, the Burnout Monster lurks in the work environment, but it flourishes when the working conditions feed it. Thus, the difficulty with trying to challenge or cage the Burnout Monster in the workplace is that all workers dwell in the shadow of its cave. When employees become stressed or burned out, employers typically blame the employee, and employees blame the employer. The Burnout Monster's power is best assuaged, however, when the employer joins forces with the employees. Employers can weaken the Monster by improving the organizational climate or better allocating workload. After all, we barter in a compassionate profession.

Job demands pose one of the greatest challenges to maintaining health. Given what we do, such demands may or may not be something that we can address. We can, however, consider whether the particular position, employer, or approach to work is the right one for us. It is possible we may never get well as long as we stay in our present circumstances. These are difficult issues to face and hard decisions to make, but doing so is critical to survival.

### **Solidify Your Spiritual Center**

Religion is not the food for the soul. We really crave God...someone who provides order for chaos, purpose for meaninglessness, peace for restlessness, passion for deadness, and pardon for guilt. While people's concept of God differs, at the most basic level God centers us. Research indicates that a healthy spirituality seems to counter burnout (Golden, 2002; Piatkowsk, 2006). The Burnout Monster ambushes and feeds off of people who are not whole or who veer from the path. Spirituality brings with it purpose (a sense of meaning), presence (connection with life and God), and power (ability to be resilient).

### **Conclusion**

Professionals know the importance of keeping their tools in good working order. Their reputation and livelihood depend upon it. In the EA profession, we ourselves are the tools. If we are not sharp or if we malfunction, we risk our clients' welfare and our own lives. EAPA's ethical code to maintain emotional and physical health is not just for

the sake of our clients and customers, but also for our own benefit. Burnout is a painful experience, but it can also be a transforming one.

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John C. Thomas is a contract Employee Assistance Consultant with DuPont and Chair of the Center of Counseling and Family Studies at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Prior to joining the faculty at Liberty, Dr. Thomas was an internal EAP consultant with DuPont for over 12 years. In addition, he owns and operates Source One Strategies (SOS), an organizational consulting business. Dr. Thomas holds a Ph.D. in Counseling and a Graduate Certificate in Alcohol and Drug Studies from the University of South Carolina, a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from Capella University, a MA and a BS from Liberty. Dr. Thomas is coauthor of a book on suffering to be released in June 2008 by Tyndale. He and his wife of 22 years conduct marriage enrichment retreats; they have two children Katie (20 years old) and Stephen (16 years old).