

*Center for Counseling and Family Studies*  
*Faculty Publications and Presentations*

---

Liberty University

Year 2007

---

The EAP Danger Zone: Respecting the  
Burnout Monster

John C. Thomas  
Liberty University, [jcthomas2@liberty.edu](mailto:jcthomas2@liberty.edu)

Running head: BURNOUT

The EAP Danger Zone: Respecting the Burnout Monster

By

John C. Thomas, Ph.D., Ph.D.

Chair, Center for Counseling and Family Studies

Associate Professor

Liberty University

1971 University Blvd.

Lynchburg, VA 24502

[jcthomas2@liberty.edu](mailto:jcthomas2@liberty.edu)

434-592-4047

## The EAP Danger Zone: Respecting the Burnout Monster

Rodney Dangerfield is known for saying that he gets no respect. Over the years, the concept of burnout has been trivialized to the point that it is typically referenced in jest; like Rodney Dangerfield it hasn't gotten the respect it deserves. In spite of it being trifled, the literature on burnout clearly portends its harmful effects. Consider the life of nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister Robert Murray McCheyne, who graduated from Edinburg University at the age of 14. Throughout his young life, he worked so feverishly that he died at the age of 29. Prior to his death he said, *"God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas, I have killed the horse and now I cannot deliver the message."* Burnout is deadly, to horse and man alike.

Unfortunately, avoiding all burnout risk factors is impossible. The simple act of going to work leads us into the danger zone. Our good intentions, our employer, and the environment in which we must care for others can make working in the employee assistance field hazardous. The signs that we are not holding up under the weight of our responsibilities will eventually evidence themselves, but we must decipher the clues. In honor of David Letterman's top 10 list, I want to offer my own top 10 list of clues that an EAP practitioner is burning out:

10. You cannot remember the number for 911.
9. You answer the phone, "You've got the EPA."
8. You think PDH refers to "Professionals Don't Help"
7. You think DOT means "Don't Offer Therapy"
6. You tell your clients, "You think you've got problems"

5. The client shares his problem and you burst into uncontrollable tears
4. The acronym SAP is a sad reminder that, “Sanity Almost Persevered”
3. Your supervisor refers you to the EPA
2. You become catatonic during EAPA workshops

And the number one clue that an EAP professional might be burning out: You are making a living but losing your life. In truth, burnout is no laughing matter.

Though no burnout research has been conducted on employee assistance practitioners, studies have found high burnout and poor mental well-being among mental health workers compared with other occupations. Interestingly, these same burned-out and mentally pitiable mental health workers also express high job satisfaction (cf. Prosser, Johnson, Kuipers, Smukler, Bebbington, & Thornicroft, 1996). In other words, we're masochists. We derive significant satisfaction in helping the hurting while concomitantly harming the helper. Apparently, no personal price is too high to pay if it meets the needs of others. I guess mental health workers would rather burnout than rust out. Many depleted EAP colleagues', including myself, have pulled up the proverbial bootstraps to serve clients and customers. No wonder, we become run-down, left with little energy at the end of the day for the relationships that truly matter. If we are going to survive in our chosen field, we must give burnout the respect it deserves.

This article is the first of a two-part article that highlights burnout. In this article, we will examine the seriousness of and contributors to burnout. In the next edition of the *EAP Digest* I will focus on intervention and prevention.

## **The Burnout Monster**

When my daughter was young, she believed monsters were under her bed or in the closet. In spite of my fatherly efforts, and no matter how logical my discourse, she could not grasp the fact that no monsters dwelt in the house. After many nights of endless anxious contention, I was finally struck by brilliance. I took my daughter's hand and led her to the closet to wait out the monsters. After our closet adventure, my daughter never again worried about monsters.

In our work, however, there really is a monster. It is not of flesh and blood nor is it a spiritual being. The monster that roams our professional domain lurks in toxic workplaces and jobs that require compassion giving. This monster will torture us, unmercifully, if it corners and captures us. To survive, we must know our enemy. We must understand what sustains it.

### *Monsterology*

#### **Who It Is**

The burnout monster is both descriptive and metaphorical. It conveys the serious physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual consequences of stressful employment or chronic care giving. Herbert Freudenberger (1975) coined the term to capture a state of physical and emotional depletion that he and his colleagues experienced while serving indigents in a free clinic. My favorite characterization of burnout is by Archabald Hart (???) , who says that burnout includes demoralization—belief you are no longer effective, depersonalization—treating yourself and others in an impersonal way, detachment—withdrawing from responsibilities, distancing—avoidance of social and

interpersonal contacts, and defeatism—a feeling of being beaten. The most widely used definition of burnout, however, is the result of the numerous studies by Christina Maslach. She and her colleagues operationalize burnout as including exhaustion and depletion, depersonalization—the negative and cynical attitudes and feelings about our clients, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment—the tendency to evaluate oneself and one’s work negatively (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

Though the focus in the literature is on what constitutes burnout, more alarming are those characteristics that the burnout monster steals: it steals people’s joy, peace, purpose, patience, and compassion to name a few. Joy is supplanted by sorrow, peace is displaced by anxiety, purpose is evicted by meaninglessness, patience is lost to impatience, compassion is displaced by cynicism, challenge is exiled by frustration, courage is usurped by fear, carelessness replaces caution, convention expels creativity, conviction is displaced by compromise, collaboration is replaced by disengagement, community is deported by depersonalization, control is forced out by liability, energy is ousted by exhaustion, enthusiasm is replaced by apathy, and competence is lost to ineffectiveness. The list could go on, but I think you get the point. Burnout is not so much a condition, but a statement of a soul-death; having our hearts sacrificed on the altar of caring. Real compassion, however, enlivens the giver too.

### **Where It Comes From**

The burnout monster emerges out of the interaction between a person and his or her environment. Space will not permit me to delineate all the personal, professional, and

organizational bait that tempts the monster out of hiding, but I will highlight a few that are especially enticing.

### *Personal Contributions*

People who enter the helping professions, like EAP, often have high needs for approval, affirmation, and achievement. We gladden the monster when those needs are unmet or are out of proportion with reality.

Certain traits can also lead to our ensnarement. The Academy of Family Physicians (1997) state that the higher a person's level of conscientiousness, the greater the likelihood of burning out. In addition, unassertiveness, idealism, rigidity, and resentment invigorate the monster. Of note is the fact, that resentment itself bears resemblance to the monster.

### *Professional Contributions*

A Discovery channel show brings attention to dirty jobs. The host visits with people who work in dirty environments and experiences the job in order to appreciate the fact that, yes, indeed, it is a dirty job. (I hope that pay him well for hosting that show!). Though he may never visit with an EAP provider, in its own right it is dirty work. It is messy business dealing with people's brokenness; we risk contamination in being empathic with another's pain (see Milburn, 1981). Yet, most of us chose the EAP field because we have compassion for those who suffer. It is our compassion that provides us with a deep awareness of another's suffering and the desire to offer relief (see Figley, 1995). When we want people to change more than they want to change, or when we

want people to experience freedom when bondage provides a safe familiarity, we hearten the burnout monster. Even if we help a number of clients, we are plagued by our disappointments. After all, our successes go away, but our failures come back to haunt us.

Our view of people is typically predicated on their responsiveness to us. Not surprisingly, research on mental health workers shows that we have a more negative view of the people we help than the general public does (????). In other words, we would prefer not to associate with the people we have chosen to help. Ultimately, helping hurting people can make you both cynical and compassionless.

The need to interact with hurting people is further complicated by the fact that many EA practitioners report being overloaded with work. Whether being overwhelmed is a professional, personal, or organizational contributor could be debated; likely all three play a part in the experience of overload. Nonetheless, many EAP jobs are intense (see Pines & Maslach, 1978 for information on job intensity).

A significant lure to the monster is the insecurity of the EAP field. Internal EAPs are becoming farther and fewer. Some companies are packaging “so-called” EAP services with managed care services and offering it for “free”, resulting in external providers’ losing market shares. Working in a demanding field, while standing on thin ice takes an emotional toll (see Ackerley et al, 1988; Cherniss & Egnatios, 1978; Farber, 1985; Farber & Heifetz, 1982; Raquepaw & Miller, 1989).

### *Organizational Contributions*

Research shows that people overestimate the importance of personal factors and underestimate the importance of situational factors. This is known as fundamental attributional error. People attribute blame to themselves for things they are not responsible for or they believe they have more control than they do. In application to burnout, employers often believe that it is the employee's fault for being captured by the burnout monster. They divest themselves of any responsibility in the employee's plight. Yet, according to Maslach (???), burnout says more about the job conditions than the person being burned out.

Consider the inestimable changes that have occurred in the workplace. As businesses seek to produce higher levels of quality, service, and product at lower costs the pressures are felt at every level of an organization. Not only is the pace of work accelerating leading to exhaustion and depletion, the boundaries between work and home have been abolished. Cell phones, email, and other technologies make leaving work impossible. Recently, I was on a vacation in Texas wanting nothing more than to abandon anything professional. Because I took my cell phone and laptop, for personal reasons, I was contacted almost every day for something to do with work. In the EAP field, when we are wanted we are wanted. Many of us are frequently on-call, if not continually. One time, I had 22 calls beginning at 5:15 pm and ending around 7:00 am the next morning. I never saw my bed, yet had to be at work by 8:00 am for my normal day appointments. The demands of organizations, beyond those of our clients are killing us slowly.

Other organizational issues that surface the burnout monster include poor supervision, co-worker issues (yes, even in the EAP field), unfairness, and poor employee recognition. Finally, studies have found that poor management practices are also associated with burnout (???)

Like the elephant in the alcoholic's living room, organizations often ignore the burnout monster that feeds on their employees. Whether the organization is blinded by the fear that people will want reduced workload; the fear of not being able to capture the monster; or are in denial, believing that it is the employee's fault the end result will be a well-fed monster.

### Conclusion

The burnout monster is a multidetermined creature that will not be easily trapped. Though the body is an amazing phenomenon, resilient in numerous ways, people still have fragile minds and bodies; after all, we die a little each day. Choosing the EAP profession does not carry a mandate to abuse oneself. If anything, our profession requires that we model healthy behavior. For that reason, EAPA's code of ethics calls for its members to monitor themselves. If you are aware of several risk factors it is your ethical responsibility to intervene with yourself (a concept that is not often addressed). Avoiding the burnout monster, and confronting him if necessary will be the focus of my follow-up article in the Spring edition of the *Digest*.

## References

- Ackerley, G. K., Burnell, J., Holder, D. C., & Kurdeck, L. A. (1988). Burnout among licensed psychologists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 19*(6), 624-631.
- American Academy of Family Physicians (1997). *Balancing act: Are you stressed out?* Retrieved February 17, 2005. Available at <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/970300fm/balance.html>
- Cherniss, C., & Egnatios, E. (1978). Is there job satisfaction in community mental health. *Community Mental Health Journal, 14*(4), 309-318.
- Farber, B. A. (1985). Clinical psychologists' perceptions of psychotherapeutic work. *The Clinical Psychologist, 38*, 10-13.
- Farber, B. A., & Heifetz, L. J. (1982). The process and dimensions of burnout in psychotherapists. *Professional Psychology, 13*(2), 293-301.
- Figley, C. R. (1995). Compassion fatigue: Toward a new understanding of the costs of caring. In B. H. Stamm (Ed), *Secondary traumatic stress: Self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators* (pp. 3-28). Lutherville, MD: Sidran Press.
- Freudenberger, H.J. (1975). The staff burnout syndrome in alternative institutions. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 12*(1), 73-82.
- Maslach, C. (1976). Burned-out. *Human Behavior, 16*-22.
- Maslach, C. (1993). Burnout: A multidimensional perspective. In W. B. Schaufeli, C. Maslach, & T. Marek (Eds.), *Professional burnout: Recent developments in theory and research* (pp.19-32). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The measurement of experienced burnout. *Journal of Occupational Behavior, 2*, 99-113.
- Maslach, C., Jackson, S., & Leiter, M. (1996). *Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Milburn, B. M (1981). Burnout *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 59*, 484.
- Pines, A., & Maslach, C. (1978). Characteristics of staff burn-out in mental health settings. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry, 29*, 233-237.
- Prosser, D., Johnson, S., Kuipers, E., Smukler, G., Bebbington, P., & Thornicroft, G. (1996). Mental health "burnout" and job satisfaction among hospital and community based mental health staff. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 170*, 134-138.

Raquepaw, J. W., & Miller, R. S. (1989). Psychotherapist burnout: A componential analysis. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 20(1), 32-36.

### About the Author

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 in Counseling and a BS in Missions from Liberty. He and his wife of 21 years conduct marriage enrichment retreats; they have two children Katie (20 years old) and Stephen (15 years old).