Caring for Carers: Missing Block in HIV/AIDS Care

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Health care workers are often described as being at the "frontline" of the battle against HIV/AIDS, because, on a daily basis, they deal directly with people who are ill or dying with the disease. Health care workers include doctors, nurses, paramedics, counselors and attendants. Burn out usually arises from excessive demands that are imposed (such as high expectation from yourself) or externally imposed (by family, job or society). It occurs when you are unable to meet demands, become frustrated, and deplete your energy through unrelenting stress. Knowing the signs of unmanaged stress and burn out can help reduce the risk of burn out.

Definition
A state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situation (Pines & Aronson).

The burden of HIV/AIDS and health care provider burn out
- Increasing number of patients is leading to more strain on health care resources
- Physical stress of over work
- Caring for patients with incurable disease is emotionally draining
- Limited resources to provide good treatment
- Lack of effective support system for health care provider

Ongoing stress can lead to "burn out" when one becomes physically and emotionally too exhausted to function properly. It is as important to take care of your well being as that of your patients and to monitor yourself for early signs of burn out.

Symptoms of burn out
- Irritability, hopelessness, helplessness
- Anxiety
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Feeling blue
- Changes in appetite, weight or both
- Changes in sleep pattern
- Getting sick more often
- Emotional & physical exhaustion

What is stress?
Stress is an individual's reaction to an event. In most cases, it is not the event that is stressful, but the response. What seems to one person may not be so to another. It is not possible to live a stress free life. In fact, some stress is necessary for survival. It gears us to achieve higher or face a situation.

How does stress become burn out?
Burn out is generally associated with unresolved stress. It results from excessive demands placed on one self. Burn out occurs when you are unable to meet these demands, become frustrated, and deplete your energy through relentless stress.

Stages of burn out
Burn out proceeds by stages that blend and merge into one another so smoothly that one is seldom able to recognize what is happening. The progression may vary from individual to individual.

- The Honeymoon- Everything in the work situation appears wonderful. You believe that your job will satisfy all your needs.
- The Awakening- As the Honeymoon period wanes, one realizes that expectations were unrealistic. Signs of burn out appear as disillusionment and disappointment grows and the person becomes confused, something is wrong, but can't figure it.
- Brown out - The early enthusiasm and energy give way to chronic fatigue, irritability and wide range of burn out symptoms
- Full-scale burn out- Unless
some one intervenes the brown out drifts remorselessly into full-scale burn out. Despair is the dominant feature of this final stage. Life seems pointless and there is paralyzing pessimism about future. You talk about “getting away and just quitting”. Exhausted on the verge of physical and mental breakdown.

- **Recovery** - You can overcome the symptoms of burn out, but it takes time.

**Help prevent burn out**

- Identify the causes of your burn out, whether there are changes in your work environment or in your own interests and values. Knowing what triggered your burn out can help you explore options that may alleviate your stress. For example, talk to supervisor, change job, change career.
- Improve your physical well being. Your body’s ongoing physiological response to stress plays havoc with your physical health. When some one is in a state of burn out, your first priority is to get a complete physical check up from your doctor. Get enough sleep, and develop eating habits and exercise.
- Monitor your emotional & mental health, some techniques that can reverse or prevent the psychological symptoms to burn out. Include
  - Healthy communication. Express your feelings to others who will listen, understand and not judge
  - Self-regulation skills. Some people intuitively know how to deal with intense feelings, especially negative ones. Techniques such as imagery can protect you from damaging effects of stress that can lead to burn out.
  - *Self Knowledge* - If you are people oriented, caring, a perfectionist and a low assertiveness or a strong need for approval, you are more prone to burn out. Understanding your personality type, its strengths & weaknesses can help you learn better ways of dealing with day-to-day stress.
  - Learn to organize your time. Effective time management is essential in helping you develop control over your work.
  - Plan your day
  - Prioritize your work
  - Delegate tasks
  - Take short breaks
  - Break large demands into small, manageable parts
  - Learn to say no without guilt
  - Work through tasks one by one
  - Set your goals. This will add direction, clarity and focus to your life.
  - Establish personally realistic and meaningful goals
  - Divide into short and long term, achievable segments
  - Establish a plan for attaining goals and setting new ones
  - Striving, learning and reaching for new accomplishments give you a real sense of purpose.
  - Seek balance in your life. This pursuit is an ongoing, evolving process. Balance represents different things for different people at different times. However, this seems to be on everyone’s wish list:
    - A supportive partner
    - Time spent alone, with family and friends
    - A way of life that reflects your own set of values & priorities
    - A change to engage in activities that are personally meaningful
  - Get support from others. We all need someone we can count on to be there for us. One of the most effective things we can do when we are stressed is to talk to a friendly listener who remains calm & listens in a way that will make feel understood.
  - Take a break. Try to take time every day to slow down and do something you enjoy, even if it is just for a few minutes.
  - Stop for several mini-breaks during your work day. Take 30 seconds to look out of the window or stretch.
  - Set aside some personal time, but limit time spent with negative people. Go for a walk. Listen to music. Socialize.
  - Start a hobby
  - Pray or meditate
  - Do yoga

**Summary**

To prevent or recover from burnout, learn to cultivate the methods of personal renewal, emotional self-awareness; connection with social support systems, sense of mastery and meaning in your work. Be fully present to the moment, the person, a task and competing demands common to non-workdays. To enjoy a healthy, sustainable life, let your spirit be continuously renewed.

**Reference:**