



Overcoming Burnout

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Enjoying God's Gifts of Work and Rest*

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A few years ago I crossed a line from being overbusy to something else. Honestly, I didn't even know there was a line to cross until I was so far over it, I became a different person . . . someone who thought, spoke, and acted far differently from the woman I wanted to be.

You've probably heard of the "perfect storm." A perfect storm occurs when all the meteorological conditions are ripe for something more than just a blizzard or hurricane. A variety of atmospheric conditions build up until they collide in devastation. These megastorms take on monumental proportions, earning titles such as "Snowmageddon" or "Snowpocalypse." They endanger lives, wreck property, and have lasting effects long beyond an average storm.

That's pretty much what happened to me. Only it wasn't a swift onslaught of events. That might have been easier to explain. If I'd dealt with a huge trauma and then another stressful event back-to-back, it might have been easier to prepare myself. Then I might have been aware of my potential for a meltdown and taken steps to care for myself.

Rather, what happened to me was a slow build up of one issue, one problem, one responsibility on top of another. And

because I always have an “I can do this!” attitude, I assumed I’d just soldier on and manage like always.

But this time was different.

And that line I crossed? It was from an overbusy life to a burned-out life. And burnout is a dangerous condition.

How wonderful is hindsight! Right? Now it’s crystal clear I was headed into danger. But back then, I was oblivious. I just knew I had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Only I should have stopped the plodding and asked for help.

But I didn’t. Because like most women, I didn’t think I *could* ask for help. After all, who would I ask? I’m the wife who needs to support her husband. I’m the mom who needs to take care of all her children’s needs. I’m the church volunteer who needs to be faithful and dependable. And I’m the employee who needs to prove herself trustworthy and capable, because everyone else is just as overloaded as me.

Can you visualize my superhero cape flapping in the wind? Yeah . . . me too.

The last thing I wanted to do was ask for help, and I supported that attitude by thinking there was no one to ask anyway.

What a messed-up line of thinking. As you can see, not only did the physical events in my life contribute to burnout, but my mind-set was the cracked foundation that couldn’t hold up under pressure.

Maybe if I share some of the conditions that collided in my life, it will help you identify some of your danger zones. And maybe, if you can identify the slow accumulation of issues in your life, you will avoid reaching that place where you do or say something you will regret.

Probably the biggest ongoing stress I underestimated was mothering my five children. It's not just that there were five of them, although that might have been enough to send me over the edge on some days. But two of my children, our daughters, were adopted from Liberia, Africa. And their needs were constant, demanding, and hard.

We adopted our girls in 2005, when Liberia was recovering in the aftermath of two civil wars. The country was decimated. That year they were having their first political election to attempt to put their country back together. But there was no power, no running water, and little support for the victims of war. So we took two little victims into our hearts and homes the fall of that year.

The girls were eight and ten and the size of four-year-olds. They'd never been to school, never even held a pencil. They'd not seen television nor water running from a faucet.

We had a few weeks of what I call the "honeymoon period." Then reality set in. The damage done to these little girls was deep and hidden, but it was seeping out.

We were certain that with enough love and stability, and with God's help, we could help our daughters heal. And there was definitely some healing. But their wounds were significantly more than we could manage. And as happens when someone is wounded, they wound others.

Due to our need to protect their privacy, there is much I won't share. Just know we sought professional help for years, and we did not try to handle their intense needs on our own. Even so, we faced the day-to-day struggles that come with helping children with multiple problems. Over the years, we dealt with cognitive, emotional, and spiritual

challenges. Their wounds were trauma-based. There was incredible deception. And mental illness was mixed into it all.

Even the professionals on every level struggled to understand the overlapping, complicated issues our daughters dealt with.

As their mother, I was their first line of protection and defense. But how do you protect and defend something you can't?

Every day, I felt stretched thin as I tried to maintain the fragile balance of our family. And even then, there were multiple episodes of implosion and explosion that fractured that balance.

Then, in addition to our girls, we had our three boys. They had needs as well, some created by the adoption. I desperately tried to counterbalance the attention we gave to the girls with extra effort on my part with my sons. After all, although they supported the adoption, they didn't sign up for the daily pain we all experienced.

When you live with something that demanding, you just get used to the pressure. There are no options but to deal with what God knew He was giving you. Those years brought me to the end of myself and to a new level of dependence on God. But that "good" wasn't without a cost.

Within a few months of the adoption, I knew I had to step back from responsibilities. I stopped speaking publicly and cut back on church duties. Every time I left the house, something bad happened. The worry and stress weren't worth whatever it was I wanted to do.

On top of all that, I still had to work. Since I work from home, I was able to work around my family's needs. Plus, I had a great assistant who helped carry the responsibilities

in my department. But then one day she resigned, with little warning.

And because I work remotely—two thousand miles from my home office—finding a replacement wasn't easy. Plus, the job was editing, and editing a style that had taken us years to develop. So we couldn't bring just anyone in to the position. The ideal candidate needed to know us, our style, our goals, etc. Without an assistant, I took on an additional twenty hours a week.

This lasted for over four months. And all that time I never whispered a word to anyone else about how overwhelmed I was.

After all, who could help? No one could come in to my home and care for my children. There was no respite care. There was no one who could help me at work either.

As day melted into day, I found myself defeated. Exhausted. Unable to focus. And really not even caring anymore about my work.

I was so tired of the deadlines. So annoyed with the demands. So frustrated when others just didn't do their work as efficiently as I thought they should or came back to me with questions.

Rather than seeing my work as my calling, and finding joy and purpose in it, I was ready to abandon it all.

Then someone at work crossed a line. At least that's how I saw it. She made a decision in an area that was my responsibility.

I happened to be out of town, on one of the few trips I agreed to, when I learned of this decision. And I was furious.

How could she make a decision that was mine to make? Without even talking to me?

Normally, I would choose to think the best of her. After all, we'd been friends and coworkers for years. I knew her heart, and if I'd been in a healthier place, I would have assumed there'd been a misunderstanding. Maybe I'd forgotten something or missed an email where she'd asked if she could try something.

But rather than thinking kind and gracious thoughts, this little thought grew in my mind: *How dare she.*

Consciously, my thoughts focused on the professional part of the offense. How dare she do something without running it by me. That was my department, my responsibility. Why didn't she respect my position enough to talk to me and get my permission?

Subconsciously, my thoughts focused on the personal part of the offense. How dare she make my life more difficult than it is. Didn't she know how hard I was working? Didn't she care that I was starting early and working late every day to just get by? Why didn't she respect me as her friend?

I happened to be with another coworker (I'll call her Jane—not her real name), who got an earful. And I didn't hold back. I didn't talk about just the *situation*, I talked about the *person*. Every unkind and judgmental thought poured forth.

Normally, I would have made the decision to not gossip about another. In a healthier state of mind, I would have guardedly asked Jane for advice and processed my offense, without mentioning specifics. I would have honored my other coworker by thinking the best. But I didn't.

And I didn't let this issue end after the poisonous conversation with Jane. I crafted an angry email, letting my other

coworker know how upset I was about her decision. My “how dare she” attitude was evident in every word.

Normally, I would have let this email sit for a while, let my emotions settle. Maybe I would have gone back in and softened my language, wrapped my hard comments with some positive ones. Asking questions rather than declaring motives. But I didn't.

I copied a few people on it, including high-level people in the organization, and hit send.

And that's when “Snowmageddon” hit.

My email absolutely devastated this person, who felt blindsided by my reaction. Her questions were valid.

What hadn't I picked up the phone and called her?

Why hadn't I let her explain?

Why hadn't I thought the best?

Why had I dishonored her before others?

She was 100 percent right. Even now tears fall as I think about how much I hurt this precious friend of mine.

Immediately I was repentant. And shocked by my actions. They were so out of character for who I wanted to be. They were impulsive. Why hadn't I handled things differently?

There was no immediate answer, because I was still on extreme overload. We worked it through, thankfully, but I was shocked and surprised by what I had done.

I'm not typically reactive, nor do I tend to think the worst of people. In fact, I'm very thick-skinned and not easily offended. What happened to me? Why had I overreacted in such an unloving way?

It took time to process the situation, but the Lord didn't let it go. Over and over I thought about how I should have

done something different. One day in the car, out of the blue, the idea of being burned out came to me.

Was that it? Could I have been burned out?

I knew I'd been working more than ever, and my family needs were demanding. But I thought I was handling things well ... until this.

Back at home, I sat at my computer, typed “burnout” in the search bar, and brought up list after list describing my heart:

- Cynical or critical of others
- Irritable or impatient
- Feelings of detachment or apathy
- Lack of interest in things that used to interest you
- Lack of energy to be productive

Burnout had built up in me until it exploded on a friend. Looking back, I'd definitely seen the signs, but I hadn't put them together and given them a name. Once I did, I was able to immediately make changes.

After my meltdown, I began to study burnout—its causes, symptoms, and effects. I also researched how to avoid it and what to do if it would happen again.

Burnout isn't unusual among high achievers. Quietly building up over time, it hits a powerful punch for those of us who are passionate about what we do. However, burnout doesn't just hit those who are wired to produce. Caregivers can experience burnout as well.

Anyone who works long hours, with high demands and an expectation on themselves to excel, can experience burnout.

It's also common for burnout to present in a sneak attack. That's because there's a range of responses when faced with high demands, and the line between stress and burnout

isn't always clear. Stress feels circumstantial; burnout feels pervasive.

There are symptoms, however, that indicate when we're moving across that blurry line. In an online article in *Psychology Today*,¹ author Sherrie Bourg Carter lists three major categories of symptoms, each with subsymptoms:

Physical and emotional exhaustion

- Chronic fatigue
- Insomnia
- Forgetfulness/impaired concentration
- Physical symptoms
- Increased illness
- Loss of appetite
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Anger

Cynicism and detachment

- Loss of enjoyment
- Pessimism
- Isolation
- Detachment

Ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment

- Feelings of apathy and hopelessness
- Increased irritability
- Lack of productivity/poor performance

1. Sherrie Bourg Carter, "The Tell Tale Signs of Burnout . . . Do You Have Them?," *Psychology Today*, November 26, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201311/the-tell-tale-signs-burnout-do-you-have-them>.

Other symptoms not on this list include substance abuse, weight gain, serious illness, and vulnerability to minor illness.

Looking at this list, most overbusy women would have no trouble checking off a handful of these symptoms. Who hasn't gone through a rough season and been exhausted or anxious or detached?

But there are differences, and for those who've experienced burnout, the differences are significant. For me, the most alarming symptom was emotional—the passion for my work was gone. And while I still felt love for others, my empathy tank was empty.

How Does Burnout Happen?

Burnout happens when there's an extended combination of physical, mental, and emotional demands, with no relief. But it's not always the amount of work we do that can cause burnout. Sometimes it's what we can't do.

For many, feelings of helplessness can cause burnout. If you are in a job where you have responsibility without authority, you can experience burnout.

If you work for a demanding employer who assigns tasks with little direction and you always feel confused, you can experience burnout.

If you are a caregiver with no ability to control your day or choices, you can experience burnout.

If you are a mother of little ones, and the monotony of daily tasks offers no relief, you can experience burnout.

In hindsight, feelings of helplessness were a significant cause of my burnout. As a woman who prided herself on

being a problem-solver extraordinaire, I was presented with two little girls whose deep emotional needs I couldn't meet.

Every day I felt helpless. I couldn't love away their pain. I couldn't find the right experts to unlock their complex issues. I couldn't provide enough of my presence to get them to trust me fully. I couldn't protect my other children from the spillover. I couldn't leave my house without someone having a meltdown. I couldn't fully trust my girls with other children.

Until the writing of this chapter, I hadn't fully understood the impact those ten years of intense child-rearing had on me. And I'm still trying to unpack it. It's hard to describe the complexity and long-term confusion of dealing with this level of woundedness.

People who know the hard years we've been through have asked the question, "Would you adopt again?"

I don't hesitate in my answer: "Absolutely yes!"

God called us to adopt, and I know that in every fiber of my being. But would I do things differently? Yes. I would have gotten help for myself (and my husband) sooner.

It took my blowup at work for me to get serious about self-care and to teach me the importance of speaking up before things got worse.

Protecting Yourself from Burnout

I realize some of you reading this are having an *aha* moment. You checked off most of the symptoms of burnout listed earlier, and in some odd way are experiencing a sense of relief. That's how I felt to have a name for what I was feeling.

If you are in a state of burnout now, please know how much I understand and care. Your feelings of despair and

helplessness matter to me, and they matter to God. You are neither alone nor are you overlooked.

The good news is there are steps you can take to reclaim your life. Even though you might not be able to change your circumstances, there are changes you can implement today that will make a difference.

However, if you can change your circumstances, then I encourage you to consider what you can take off your plate. For more on regaining control of your schedule, check out my *Doing Busy Better* book.

Some of you might be heading toward burnout. You've sensed the feelings mentioned earlier and you know something isn't right. Thankfully you can make changes now to avoid your own "perfect storm."

Here are three of the ways I was able to recover from my burnout:

1. Reconnecting with God

There is no better way to meet the deep needs of my heart except to turn to the One who made my heart.

Nothing replaces the power of God to speak truth to my confusion, bring peace to my anxiousness, and provide rest for my exhaustion.

Yet, in the midst of the crazy demands, I had neglected daily prayer and Bible reading. Well, I should clarify the prayer comment. I prayed daily, but it was more "help me," one-direction prayers than anything else.

I wasn't sitting in God's presence, allowing Him to care for me. I wasn't reading His Word, allowing it to minister to my heart.

So I purchased a little spiral notebook (because of course a productive woman always needs a new notebook) where I could record my daily reading and write a few prayers. Having a record of my time with the Lord helped me feel better.

My time with God reminded me that although there was much out of my control, nothing was out of His. Nor had He forgotten me in my time of need. He was just waiting for me to come to Him for help.

2. Speaking up

I had to confess to my coworkers that I couldn't handle the workload. And I was on such overload that I couldn't even manage to find a replacement assistant. I needed help.

Rather than judgment, I received mercy. They didn't know how I had managed as long as I had, and they were happy to help. Within one month we were able to find a replacement—someone who had been serving in a volunteer position. That same person has since moved from my part-time assistant to full-time manager within my department.

I also spoke up to my husband. He certainly knew the home-life stress, but he hadn't fully understood my workplace stress. We realized we needed to invest in our relationship, so we made plans for a date night every few weeks. In fact, my husband knows I love music and the arts, so he researched local plays and musical performances.

We got out our calendars, reserved the nights, picked a few events, and penciled in dates for the next six months. Just knowing those dates were on the calendar helped.

3. Allowing my heart to sing again

After my meltdown, I had a rare day to myself. It was Good Friday, and at work we had the choice of taking Friday or Monday off. The only thing was, neither my husband nor any of my children had time off. Normally, I might have chosen to just keep working. But I didn't.

I wanted to set that day apart and remember Christ's sacrifice. I also decided to just relax and enjoy some things I don't typically do—without anyone expecting anything of me.

After an extended time of reading my Bible and praying, I decided to spend time on Pinterest and add some images to my boards. So I started looking at decorating sites and pictures of English cottages. Daydreaming! I had so much fun.

Then I decided to take some pictures of the lovely spring flowers in my yard. The orange hibiscus was beautiful, my roses were in full bloom, and poppies carpeted the flower bed.

I made a cup of coffee and watched a bit of a Hallmark movie I'd recorded. I knew the ending would be the same as many of these movies (the girl would realize the "perfect" guy isn't the one for her, and she really loves the guy next door), but I adore them anyway.

Then my doggies looked at me so sweetly that I grabbed the leashes and set out for the green belt behind our house. There was no one out when we got there, so I took the leashes off the dogs and we ambled down into the ravine. A cool breeze blew and the dogs lifted their faces to the sun as they bounded through the tall grass. So happy and free.

And that's when my heart started to sing.

It took me by surprise, and I laughed aloud with the pure joy of the moment. It was the sweetest combination of unstructured time and simple pleasures, and it unlocked

something deep in me. Something that was there but, like a child stuck inside on a rainy day, hadn't been allowed to come outside and play.

My day continued with pleasurable things: lunch with a friend and some shopping for Easter basket gifts for my children. And by the time I got back home, I felt like a new woman.

The entire weekend was different. And my family received the benefit of a wife and mom whose heart sang.

I realized I needed to make more time for that to happen. I need to make time for things *I* want to do. To press pause on my busy day to refuel my heart. To reconnect with things I love and that make me happy.

I love being productive, but sometimes the most productive thing I can do is not on my schedule or to-do list. Sometimes I need to close my calendar and just spend time being me.

That time of burnout taught me many things. One thing I learned is that burnout can happen to anyone. I thought myself immune to burnout, but I'm not. Sometimes the best lessons learned are also the most humbling.

The Lord loves those who are humble, because it's in that condition He can do His best work in our lives. First Peter 5:6-7 says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

What a beautiful promise for those of us running on empty. His tender care is never more evident than when we are at our weakest.

The 23rd Psalm is one that every woman whose heart is empty needs to read as a reminder that there is a Good Shepherd who cares for her:

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

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