

Overcoming Burnout: A Group Counseling Plan for
'Helping Professionals' Struggling With Burnout

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Since the 1970's, research into the phenomenon known as “burnout” has snowballed. According to Jackson, Schwab, and Schuler (1986), the term “burn-out” was first “coined by Herbert Freudenberger” in 1974. Study into burnout no doubt pre-dates the term. It is generally agreed upon that burnout occurs more frequently in individuals who work closely with people in need (Jackson, et al.). Burnout can be a chronic or an acute condition (Hart, 2008). Helping professionals (including counselors, doctors, social workers, psychologists, ministers, nurses, and other professionals working in roles designed to help others overcome individual problems) often face burnout within their work. This burnout is often severe enough to lead the helping professional to consider a new working environment. Usually, this does not end burnout, but only gives the individual a short break from burnout, after which burnout is experienced even more severely. This is true because the habits which lead one to become burned out must be changed if an individual is going to overcome burnout.

A counseling group focused on assisting helping professionals in overcoming burnout is therefore a relevant and worthy effort. The purpose of such a group would be to increase knowledge about burnout (symptoms, causes, and effects) as well as to teach and help members implement coping mechanisms and changes to decrease the experience of burnout. In the follow pages, a group counseling plan is presented for a structured ten session group focused on overcoming burnout. A brief description of the content for each of the ten sessions follows, along with the purpose of focusing on these sub-topics.

Member Selection

Member solicitation for this group will vary in different ways based upon the setting in which it will be implemented. The group could be applied to the staff of one organization (counseling agency, hospital) or to members of a community at large through mass media. Regardless of how members are invited to participate, a pre-group individual session with the group leader should take place. Within this session the individual should be administered the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). This will establish a baseline score of burnout to compare to at outcome, as well as ensure that the individual is facing burnout. Additionally, through other testing or individual interview, other mental health traits should be ruled out if they will interfere with the group process.

Session One: Beginning to Overcome

In the initial session, many things need to be accomplished. The group leader needs to spend some time explaining the purpose and plan of the group. Some of these things may have been explained in screening and in pre-group mailings, however this information should be reviewed. Corey and Corey (2006) state that in an initial meeting, members need to be informed of the ground rules, group process, and procedures.

Within this initial meeting members should also be encouraged to share personal feelings. Members should discuss what they as an individual hope to gain from participating in the group process. They should also be welcomed to share any fears they have about the group process or their fellow members. Members should be encouraged to discuss these goals and fears with one another.

The final point of discussion for this first session will revolve around the emotions members feel due to being burned out, initiated by the question, "How does being burned out

feel to you?” The main purpose of this session is to orient the members to the group counseling process, as well as pique their interest so that they realize the group can be beneficial for them.

Session Two: Precursors

The second session should begin with a brief review of what occurred in the last session. The leader should then guide members in reviewing their individual goals for the group process and their fears related to the group. Members should be told that since it has been a week, and they have had additional time to reflect, it is possible they have thought of new goals/fears that they had not revealed in the last session.

After beginning the session with this review and building upon the first session, the group should spend the bulk of their time discussing what has led each member to the level of burnout they currently experience and endure. Each member should be given time to discuss things which have led them to experience burnout. Members should be encouraged to respond to one another and to discuss the precursors they have in common. This discussion should lead to an explanation of the core components of burnout, “emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and cognitive weariness” (Melamed, Shirom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2006). Members of the group should spend time discussing how the items they had previously mentioned lead to these components. The main purpose of the work in the second session is to help members understand the burnout they endure, and the burnout endured by their fellow group members.

Session Three: Our Work

In the third session members should focus upon their work situations. Members should explain to one another the jobs that they work in. Members should be encouraged to allow their passion for their job to come through, to explain how important their job is, and how much benefit their role can be to people in need.

Members should then turn to how they view their job during burnout. They should be encouraged to share feelings of wanting to leave their jobs (when such exists), dissatisfaction they have with their job, and what has kept them in their job up to that point. Characteristics of a job can allow burnout to occur. For example, dissatisfaction with salary is correlated with a higher rate of burnout (Jenaro, Flores, & Arias, 2007). Members should therefore be encouraged to consider what in their job relates to their burnout, but should then be led to discuss their experience with burnout in previous jobs. Many members will already realize or come to realize that they have switched jobs one or more times due to previously being burned out. The purpose of these discussions is to help members see that their burnout is related to their job, but is also related to how they handle and relate to their job.

Session Four: Problematic Results of Burnout

Within this next session, members will be guided in discussing the different negative results they have experienced due to burnout. Most members will most easily notice their work and social problems that have resulted from burnout. Members should discuss with one another these problematic results, but also be encouraged to dig deeper. Members should be guided to dig down and explore the damage that burnout has caused to them as an individual. These problematic results include depressed feelings and feelings of worthlessness, but also include the irrational thought behaviors that they have grown to accept (such as, “I need to spend every minute possible helping someone” or “I shouldn’t be enjoying myself in this hobby right now, while my client is experiencing such pain”). Members of the group should then discuss what health problems could grow from burnout, including “an increased risk of CVD [cardiovascular-disease] and cardiovascular-related events” (Melamed, et al., 2006). The purpose of this discussion is to help members consider the problems they experience as a result of burnout. This

is to help motivate the members to change their irrational thoughts and behaviors in order to bring about a change in results. To further meet this purpose the session can end with a discussion of whether or not the members are willing to continue life continuously experiencing not only burnout, but also the myriad of problematic results of burnout they uncovered within the session.

Session Five: Sources of Support

The fifth session should help members focus on the many sources of support available to them as individuals. Members should first discuss with one another different sources of support, including their family, co-workers, friends, spiritual leaders, and others who help provide support to them. Members should again be encouraged to dig beyond the surface and consider how different members of their support network assist them in dealing with burnout. The leader may desire to point out the six functions of social support developed by Pines and Aronson which help to buffer one from experiencing burnout (Pines, Ben-Ari, Utasi, & Larson, 2002). These six functions (reported in Pines, et al.) are:

- Listening – without giving criticism or advice.
- Technical support – appreciation/advice related to one's work (or school work).
- Technical challenge – criticism/suggestions for improving one's performance.
- Emotional support – someone who is there for you no matter what.
- Emotional challenge – someone who challenges you to look at yourself honestly.
- Sharing social reality – someone who sees things the way you do.

Members should discuss with one another how their sources of support meet or fail to meet these functions. The purpose of this session is to help members understand the assistance

they can receive from others in overcoming burnout. Additionally, some members may discover that part of the cause of their burnout is an absence of true social support.

Session Six: Prioritizing

Grenz points out that many individuals struggle with burnout due to being overworked and overloading their schedules (1999). Grenz also points out the need for leisure to fit into our priorities, and that we should make time for leisure. Within this session, members should be encouraged to discuss with one another where their priorities in life are. Members should be challenged to reveal not only what they state are priorities, but what their behavior reveals to be true priorities. Members should be encouraged to consider how their work behaviors are affecting their ability to truly prioritize their lives, and how their work responsibilities interfere with items that they want to be priorities in life. Members should also discuss their need to enforce their priorities in scheduling.

Another aspect of prioritizing that should be discussed in this session is prioritizing in the workplace. Many members may struggle with properly prioritizing while at work, and may be causing burnout to become worse by wasting time, agreeing to take on extra responsibilities, or even volunteering for extra tasks. The purpose of the discussion in this session, therefore, is to help members evaluate what their priorities are, and enable them to enforce these priorities in their jobs and personal lives.

Session Seven: Maintaining Boundaries

Another common mistake which can cause burnout to endure is failing to set boundaries. Many helping professionals allow their work to overlap into their personal life, though the majority of these professionals would readily state the need to separate the two. This failure to set and maintain boundaries causes burnout to begin and continue. Within this session, members

should discuss with one another the boundaries that should be in place for their profession, and how to maintain these boundaries. Members should discuss with one another the idea of ‘leaving work at work.’ The purpose of this session is to help members evaluate their boundaries, and be encouraged to set and maintain appropriate boundaries to help them overcome burnout.

Session Eight: Implementing Change

Within this session, members should focus on the changes they are deciding to make to enable them to overcome burnout. These changes may include developing a stronger social support system, prioritizing in life and work, and setting boundaries to keep work at work. As members discuss the changes they want to make and are willing to make, they should discuss not only the positive results of these changes, but also negative results which could follow any changes. Members should be realistic in recognizing that some negative results could potentially occur, such as losing their job due to drastic changes, family irritability due to schedule changes or income changes, or even self frustration as they view themselves as ‘unproductive’ compared with their former burned out life. Members should discuss these potential positive and negative results and consider how to handle these results. Members should be aware that their irrational thoughts must also be considered and overcome, or burnout will reoccur. The purpose of this session is to help members see how much better their situations can be if changes are implemented, but also to consider what negatives could potentially occur when they make these changes.

Session Nine: Moving Towards Change

Within this session the discussion should revolve around the changes being made in members’ lives to help them overcome burnout. Members should discuss with each other what changes they are struggling with, what changes have come easily for them, and what changes

they have chosen not to make at this time. Both positive and negative results of change should be openly discussed. Members should be assisted in considering what changes can be made over time, and which changes will come more immediately. The purpose of this session is to help members as they work towards change to have the group as part of their initial social support.

Session Ten: Closing Reinforcement

Within this session, the leader should bring the group to a close. This will involve many things, just as the initial session involved many parts. Members should discuss what they can do if they begin experiencing a high level of burnout again. Discussion should also take place on how to make their changes permanent, instead of temporary. Members should then utilize the Maslach Burnout Inventory and compare their scores to those indicated at the beginning of the group process. Discussion should take place about what the differences in scores may indicate, including that their changes have been successful, that they have made changes but still feel burned out (probably due to irrational thinking), or that they have failed to make changes and have become even more burned out. Corey and Corey suggest other topics which should also be discussed as the group comes to a close (2006). These topics include helping members “realize that the group is a means to an end,” “realize that change may be slow and subtle,” warning “do not expect one group alone to change your life,” and encouraging members to “decide what to do with what you have learned” (p. 277-278). Members should of course be given referrals if they need to follow up the group process on an individual basis.

Conclusion

Burnout is a phenomenon experienced by a multitude of individuals in helping professions. These helping professionals facing burnout need to be given opportunities to explore the causes of burnout, the ways they enable burnout, and the changes required to

overcome burnout. Within a ten sessions group counseling process, these goals could be addressed.

References

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