

Six Easy Ways to Burn Yourself Out*

Burnout: you've heard of it. You've seen people walk away from activism because they just couldn't stand doing it anymore. What you may not have heard is how to burn yourself out. Here, perhaps for the first time in print, is a "How To" guide to burnout!

1. Over ride your need for rest, adequate income, nurturing relationships, physical activity, fun, laughter, sex, walks in nature, and/or a week on the beach or some other form of vacation. If you do feel these needs tugging at your heart, you should feel ashamed of yourself for not living up to the selfless standard you have put out for yourself.
2. Be an asshole and push everyone away from you. You don't need support. All that relief you would get from venting your feelings and getting empathy would only make you less dedicated and less focused on the cause. Instead of reaching out for support or supporting others, why not put your energy into infighting? Finding someone on the inside of the movement to blame and scapegoat is a great way to reduce your stress. It will also help get the incompetent people out of the movement.
3. Set your standards unrealistically high so that no matter how hard you work or how hard you drive yourself, you will never meet them. Carry the weight of the world on your shoulders and don't let yourself rest until all the problems of the world have been solved. You can recharge your batteries when all the world's problems are solved, or you die. Don't let other people take a break either. Remind them that nothing happens without a great deal of personal sacrifice. This will of course repel some weaklings from the movement, but hey, who wants to be around a bunch of slackers.
4. Operate in URGENT mode. Everything has to get done and it has to get done NOW. If you are not stressed about getting things done yesterday, you probably need to revisit your priorities. When people try to tell you to pace yourself because changing the world is a marathon not a sprint, remind them that the clock is ticking and get back in the race. Remember, when you live in high stress mode, your body releases adrenaline and gives you a burst of energy. In order to keep that adrenaline high going, you have to keep pushing yourself harder and harder. If you give yourself time off to recuperate, you won't slide into burnout and you will have missed the point.
5. Do everything yourself. Remind yourself that if you don't do it, it won't get done, or at least it won't get done right. If you do let someone else do something, micromanage them to make sure they actually do it and do it right.

6. Don't take time to reflect on the gains that have been made or the influence the movement has had. Don't look at how far we've come, the rights we've gained or the political battles we've won. Focus only on how far we are from where you'd like us to be. While you're at it, every time we don't achieve a goal or we lose a battle, beat yourself up for not doing enough.

Burnout is a slow and gradual process. You know you've hit paydirt if you have the following symptoms:

- You have a sense that activism is taking over your life.
- You find it difficult to make decisions.
- You can't seem to stay focused on things.
- You have insomnia or at least have difficulty sleeping or getting enough sleep.
- You find yourself thinking more and more negatively about everything.
- You feel overcome by pervasive feelings of hopelessness.
- You have a loss of purpose and energy.
- You feel tense all the time. Headaches and/or backaches and/or exhaustion are the rule rather than the exception in your life.
- You've lost your passion and notice that you're doing your activism out of obligation or habit.
- You have a general sense that you are running on empty and even things like eating and hanging out with friends that used to be pleasurable now just seem like yet more work.
- You find yourself having temper tantrums about trivial matters, have trouble motivating yourself to get out of bed in the morning or notice that you are accident prone.
- You've stopped caring about your work and about those whom you are supposed to be helping.
- You find yourself looking for any excuse to quit.

Of course, if you don't want to become crispy, exhausted and miserable, you might try to avoid burnout by slowing down and taking care of yourself. Breathe. Take a yoga class. Go for walks in the park. Play with pets. Eat good food at a table so that you are actually aware of what you are eating. If you are broke, consider finding a way to get paid so that you get the essentials of your life taken care of. Making money does not make you a sellout. It gives you spare change you can donate if you'd like. Remind yourself that you are not the movement. There is much more to you than your activism and what you do or don't accomplish. Let the other parts of yourself shine through. And most importantly, laugh – a lot.

*According to Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson – Career Burnout Causes and Cures: Burnout is “a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding. The emotional demands are often caused by a combination of very high expectations and chronic situational

stresses.... In its extreme form, burnout represents a breaking point beyond which the ability to cope with the environment is severely hampered.”

To ask Regina a question, check out upcoming workshops, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com . This column originally appeared in Outlook: Everything is Political.