STRESS IN EMS

Presented By:
Steven Jones, NREMT-P
DEFINITIONS

• **Stress:** stress is anything that causes individuals to feel out of control.

• **Examples of stress:** work problems, financial problems, relationship problems, personal illness, family crisis, parenting problems, bad weather, difficulties with coworkers, and much more.

• **Job burnout:** an emotional state that develops when one’s work efforts lead to a depressed feeling. This feeling arises because expected rewards are not forthcoming.
BURNOUT

Job burnout creates the feeling that one’s good intentions are literally “going up in smoke.” When EMS personnel find ways to empower themselves both at work and at home, their lives become more harmonious. It’s exciting to feel more of a congruency between one’s career and one’s personal life. Individuals can find control measures for establishing this harmony when they discover that it really is their small decisions that produce healthy change. When we push small “buttons” for positive change, burnout will become less intense. Over time, it should become reversible.
BURNOUT

Research shows that the average emergency responder will experience feelings of job burnout within three to five years after beginning work as a street medic. When care providers move into management, most will experience burnout in direct correlation to how much they struggle with “workplace politics.” Some work settings have more problems than others. However, most EMS management personnel designate that they, too, experience some feelings of burnout within three to five years.
BURNOUT

Job burnout causes many of the same feelings as general depression. You may be headed for burnout, or already be in full-scale burnout, if you are experiencing any of the following:
BURNOUT

• You don’t feel rewarded by your work efforts. The future looks bleak because you don’t see that those rewards will be forthcoming.
• You feel alone and trapped with your stress issues. You may have trouble articulating what’s really wrong.
• It takes more and more energy to accomplish the same amount of work.
• You feel sad, hopeless, and discouraged.
CASE STUDY

“It’s easy to feel dissatisfied with your job when EMS turns out to be a career of service,” says an EMT we’ll refer to as Sharon. Sharon began her career six years ago.

She summarizes the feelings of many responders this way: “We all can feel let down when EMS turns out to be less exciting than we anticipated. When you’re not running the ’glory calls’ that you envisioned in your training, the rewards of the job may seem few or non-existent.”

Sharon says, “I feel very burned out, but I can’t decide how to change things. There’s no job I’d prefer to this. However, I do have the feeling that something is missing in my life. Sometimes, I think it’s my personal life that needs work. At other times, I feel it’s lack of career direction that bogs me down. At any rate, I’m depressed. My energy is low. I’m worried about my ability to cope.”
CAUSES OF BURNOUT

Keep in mind that working a single incident will seldom lead to job burnout. It’s the daily accumulation of stress—both on the job and in one’s personal life—that will leave you singing the burnout blues. Those psychologists I’ve interviewed on stress in EMS personnel say that job burnout is caused by stress building on top of stress, without relief.
CAUSES OF BURNOUT

Research on EMS stress reveals that many factors lead to job burnout. Let’s reflect on a few factors that you may be facing:
CAUSES OF BURNOUT

• You feel your efforts are not appreciated. For example, you may believe that you respond to too many false calls or your service lacks community support.
• The job is boring. You may feel that most of your calls are too routine, not involving emergencies.
• You are not happy in your personal life. This may cause you to falsely rely on your job for most of your emotional satisfaction.
• You are neglecting self-care. Your diet may be unhealthy or you skip your exercise program often. As you neglect yourself, your debt to yourself grows larger and larger. This “debt” will start to erode positive feelings about your job.
EFFECTS OF BURNOUT

The effects of burnout can result in self-defeating behaviors. For example, you may:

• Treat yourself as a robot. You try to function on autopilot to conserve mental energy.

• Treat other people as robots. You learn to tune out the needs of friends, family, and patients as you struggle to function.

• Do the absolute minimum to get by. Since burnout is similar to depression, you don’t feel like giving more of yourself, so naturally, you look for ways to do less. After a time, this “sloughing off” cuts deeply into your self-esteem. You don’t feel you’re performing your job or family role at your optimum potential.
EFFECTS OF BURNOUT

- Sometimes work excessive hours to cover the pain. Some individuals do the opposite of escaping work. Instead, they use work itself as an escape measure. For example, they may begin several major projects at once, throwing themselves into overload. Why would they do this? It helps them to ignore the stress of their real problem—feeling burned out, used up, fed up, hopeless—which they consider to be “unfixable.” They focus on their “new” stress in order to avoid dealing with their “old” stress.
EFFECTS OF BURNOUT

• Abuse drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and food. Any of us, if we’re in enough discomfort, will turn to some kind of alternative stimulant for relief. One more beer, one more cigarette, one more cup of coffee will keep us going. However, when we regain control of our lives, it’s easier to resist alcohol, cigarettes, and high-calorie desserts after dinner.
So, how do you find more balance and back away from burnout? There are specific steps you can take—all of which should have the cumulative effect of helping you feel slightly more enthusiasm for the job and for life itself. As you continue to plan and implement healthy changes, you should begin to feel empowered. Some of the old excitement you once felt for work should return.
There are some key concepts that will help you formulate a plan for yourself to avoid or back away from burnout:
A job description cannot make you happy. That's because your job is comprised of the daily tasks you do—not its title. For example, many EMT’s were happier before they got promoted to a management position.
Ask yourself: What tasks do I love doing? Could I speak with my supervisor about dropping one or two tasks I don’t enjoy and adding responsibilities that I would enjoy? Or, if you’re especially unhappy in your work role, ask yourself, “Should I eventually switch from working as a street medic to a management position? How can I take those steps?” Or, if you’re tired of management, ask yourself, “Should I go back to running calls?”
• Expecting too much from a single job will guarantee disappointment. No job is so thrilling that you can derive wonderful satisfaction from it all the time. Putting all of your eggs into that basket may backfire. Your goal should be to plan a balanced life with rewards coming from several areas—not just your work role.
Ask yourself: How can I enlarge my perception of who I am? How can I feel more connected to my community, my family, my long-term goals, without continually over-focusing on my present job? For example, could a volunteer job one afternoon per week—such as working in a hospital setting or police station—open new doors for learning marketable skills or connecting with interesting people?
• Job burnout escalates when you don’t feel balance in your personal life. For example, if you have friends outside of EMS and a few hobbies, you won’t become too obsessed with work. Having interests and activities in other areas is more healthy over the long run.
Ask yourself: What areas of my personal life need changes? Do I need to reconnect more often with my siblings? Should I take a class? Join a hiking club? Or, do I need to get a negative friend out of my life who pulls me down? How can I do something differently to increase my chances of fixing what I don’t like about my life? For instance, should you and your spouse find a good marriage counselor? Or, should the two of you watch videos on how to create a better relationship?
Self-care is vital for cooling burnout. When you consistently do a few small things for your health and well-being, you won’t feel quite so stressed. Choose just one or two simple things—for example, taking a 15 minute walk each day or eating a healthy lunch—as a starting point. Add more whenever possible.
Ask yourself: What do I need most? How could I meet a small part of that need? How could I work some of my needs into my daily routine, so that my emotional bank account receives a boost? Think of this as nurturing yourself in ways that deposit “coins,” or good feelings, into your emotional bank account. For example, buying yourself a paperback novel every two weeks or trying a new restaurant once a month are simple ways to make yourself feel cared for and emotionally supported.
• You must back away from burnout slowly. Burnout does not happen overnight, and it will not go away overnight. You must reverse it in stages. Take time to slow down, think about what might help and devise a plan for making a few minor changes each week. Small changes do add up over time.
Taking control of job burnout involves looking at your life as a whole. Job burnout is easier to reverse when you make productive changes in all major areas of your life. It’s really impossible to separate your personal and professional lives. They flow together.
To help you begin to back away from burnout you must:

- Identify your PERSONAL needs
- Identify your PROFESSIONAL needs

Getting in touch with your needs is self-support of the highest order.
WHAT IS A NEED?

It’s simply something that makes you happy or brings a personal sense of fulfillment. For instance, in order to feel good about yourself, you may need to have a neat environment. Or, you may need to connect with interesting leaders in your community.
NEEDS

• Navigate all of your planning by reviewing these needs.

Use them as your guideposts. Once you figure out what those needs are, refer to them in making plans for positive change. Keep in mind that burnout usually involves feelings of frustration. Losing touch with your needs intensifies burnout, while honoring those needs helps to reverse burnout.
NEEDS

• Start by making the smallest changes you can possibly think of.

For example, if you need to find a more fulfilling career direction, sit down and begin writing a career plan. Write down your long term goals and your short term goals. Write a short description of your ideal life. Then choose one small goal to work on this week. For the next six weeks, do something positive every week to move toward a long-term career goal.
Once you see how powerful a good change is—however simple it is—you will see how much control you do have. When you start to feel empowered, you will be motivated to try more.
Political situations can arise in instances such as the following examples. Individuals resort to creating drama when:

• They can’t find control buttons. When they lose control over choices—either at home or at work—they tend to act out their frustrations in strange ways. Sometimes, they’re simply trying to protect themselves. They don’t necessarily mean any harm to others, but they feel they must “guard” their territory.

• They need to ask for help, but they must disguise it. Sometimes, people act out their emotions as a subconscious way of soliciting help. Political game-playing can simply be a way to force coworkers and management to pay attention to what’s really going on.
DRAMA

Workplace drama can serve as:

• A survival tactic. Two individuals may start criticizing each other because both desire the same promotion.
• Personal retaliation. Some employees will act out in bitterness when they fail to receive a promotion or pay raise.
• A way to gain needed information. Individuals may start rumors so management will either correct them or confirm them.
• A way to create false power. Employees can spotlight a set of minor problems because management continues to ignore a major problem in the work setting.
• An avenue for venting personal problems. An individual may feel powerless to manage conflict at home, so he or she creates problems for others at work.
PLANNING AHEAD

If you are now a supervisor, or will be one day, it helps to reflect on concepts that benefit each individual employee. The following strategies can help to lower workplace politics:
• Every individual should have a personal career track. Ideally, supervisors assist employees in this type of planning. If your supervisor does not, try to find mentors to help you. When you focus on your own success, you will not spend so much time reacting to everything around you.

• Write down goals you’d like to achieve and skills you want to acquire. Even if you plan to remain an EMT for 30 years, ask: How can I become the best EMT? How can I develop my full potential by polishing my medical skills, communication skills, and people skills?
Tip for Supervisors:

• When employees and volunteers are actively focused on self-improvement, this self-focus lowers the tension among workers. It lowers some of the unhealthy competition in a department, too. For example, workers can subconsciously compete for attention from supervisors by criticizing each other’s call sheets or pointing out each other’s shortcomings. Unhealthy competition arises when personnel don’t feel empowered to reach their full potential. This competition is borne out of boredom and frustration. Career tracks should be carefully planned and very individualized, so that personnel will take pride in managing their own career development.
• Team work should be encouraged continually. The importance of creating teams—to study everything from EMS-related computer software to vehicle purchases—is to value the talents of the newest hires as well as the expertise of 30-year veterans. Ideally, everyone on a team has an equal voice.

• Developing various teams and committees—and then disbanding them once their goals have been reached—keeps the workplace exciting. Teams are a great place to develop leadership skills and business skills, too.
Tip for Supervisors:

- Many departments are moving from a hierarchy to teamwork. This allows everyone to continually serve in new, interesting capacities. It also helps to curtail political games, because employees and volunteers are constantly focused on participating in running the organization. Employees feel less need to play political games when they feel empowered and enjoy their roles.
A department should take surveys occasionally. If your department doesn’t conduct surveys, you might want to suggest this idea to your supervisor. Employees feel less stress and more control when they have a voice in what transpires in their work environment. Surveys can be a good place to let those voices be heard.
Tip for Supervisors:

• Don’t guess at what’s causing employee tension. Ask them, “What problems bother you most?” Provide them with a list of general topics, but create room for them to write in their opinions. Ask them to define a problem without embarrassing or identifying other individuals by name. For instance, ask them to state: “I feel certain employees lack training in specific areas.” Then instruct them to name the skills that need attention—for example, intubation skills or critical triage—not the individuals involved.
• Peer support should be firmly in place. A department without a good peer support program in place will experience higher levels of tension in the workplace. When personnel have no outlet for expressing their concerns and frustrations, they will tend to act them out in negative ways.
Tip for Supervisors:

• Ideally, employees who serve as peer “supporters” should receive formal training on how to actively listen and offer good feedback. Employees should know that they have someone to talk with every week about problems. As a supervisor, try to become a role model for others in how to offer support. For example, say, “I’m here to listen. I might not have any advice, but I’m a good listening post.”
Communication Skills Lower Tension

Workplace politics often involves gossip, personal attacks on others (sometimes covertly disguised within conversations), open clashes and, in a worst-case scenario, even dangerous, vengeful behaviors. Sometimes, the tension and “verbal ammunition” comes directly from an individual’s personality.
All of the negotiating skills in the world won’t fix a personality problem. Some people can’t be made to “see the light.” They can’t comprehend how to create mutually satisfying relationships. When you deal with difficult personality types or people who are upset, it helps to use the following verbal skills:
• Use the “you think—I feel” method: For example, let’s say that your boss is accusing you of making a mistake at a scene. You know that you are innocent of wrongdoing. To lower the tension, first acknowledge what he or she thinks. This makes more room for you to be heard.
  – Try this: “I know you think I made some serious mistakes. And I can understand how you’re viewing this. However, I feel that I followed correct protocols. I can fully explain what transpired. Please hear me out.”

• Let’s say that one of your coworkers, whom we’ll refer to as Julie, is making medical mistakes on the job. Everyone is talking about her behind her back.
  – When the gossip is delivered to you, try this: “Let’s be kind here. We need to gently confront Julie. She may or may not be guilty of all these charges. But if she needs additional training, we all need to offer help. There’s nothing to be gained by just talking about this. Would any of you be willing to join me in talking with her?”
• Find something to agree on, before you disagree with others. This helps to lower tension, even if the other person is rocking the boat in an angry or disrespectful way.

  – For example, let’s say that several people are angry with your immediate supervisor. They point out five unkind things he has said to specific personnel. They’d like to see him fired immediately.

• Try this: “Yes, this is a bad situation. There certainly is a lot to think about here. The boss has made a lot of negative comments. However, we need to take control of our part in fixing this. We could meet with him and offer support. Maybe we could ask him to give us a list of specific things we can do to help him do his job.”
SUMMARY

When all employees and supervisory personnel work together to curtail stress issues, job burnout and politics will not dominate that particular work setting. Positive changes should ideally be suggested by workers themselves. When management supports this input from employees and volunteers, workers feel more ownership of the work environment. This empowerment of individuals helps each person feel that a job in EMS is more than a job. Their work contribution becomes a respected career.