

A photograph of two women from behind, embracing each other in a supportive hug. They are standing outdoors in a natural, hilly environment with green vegetation. The woman on the left has blonde hair tied in a bun and is wearing a light blue t-shirt. The woman on the right has brown hair and is wearing a dark top. A semi-transparent dark grey banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title text.

AVOIDING BURNOUT IN CAMP MINISTRY

Recognizing and responding to the signs

I sat alone in a small chapel at 2 a.m., staring silently at a rough-hewn wooden cross mounted to the wall at the front of the room. It was November 2021, and after 13 years of full-time youth ministry split between summer camp and higher education, I had reached a point I never expected — I was completely out of ideas and energy. Just as absent was any hope that something would, or even could, change. ►

Photo courtesy of Camp Eagle

Looking back, the signs had been there for months. I'd catch myself staring at the wall for extended periods during the workday, and despite bone-deep exhaustion, I couldn't sleep. Most troubling, I felt myself getting worse at my job rather than better, watching my effectiveness decline while my cynicism grew.

Hopefully, you can't relate. But if you can, you probably already know that burnout doesn't begin as an extreme; it doesn't need years to develop, and an awareness of its symptoms is different than identifying and responding to its root causes. If the first step to recovery is admitting the problem, the first step to admitting the problem is being able to describe it.

Burning Out vs. Melting Down

I grew up hearing stories in the church foyer about the guy who woke up one day, drained his savings account to buy a new Mazda Miata, and then sped away from his entire life with the top down. "Oh my!" someone would gasp. "Sounds like he was starting to burn out!"

Let's pause here to clarify something important: There's a difference between burning out and melting down (my term). Burnout is a gradual process, like bread slowly becoming toast. Meltdown results from burnout going unaddressed for so long — like bread in a toaster stuck in the "on" position — that a person begins actively self-sabotaging as a means of escape.

When the reliable staff member suddenly quits mid-season, the seasoned assistant director has an emotional breakdown during a staff meeting and the normally bubbly office assistant hangs up on a parent, they aren't burning out — they're melting down. And by the time you see meltdowns, you've missed multiple opportunities to address burnout. The goal in learning about burnout is to proactively spot and respond to it early rather than wait until it catches something on fire.

What Burnout Is (and Isn't)

Let's take a few more things off the table when defining burnout. Burnout isn't a proxy term for laziness, it isn't about lacking commitment and it's not a sign of spiritual weakness or personal failure. It's something else.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as a three-dimensional syndrome characterized by sustained exhaustion, increasing cynicism and decreasing effectiveness from chronic workplace stress. In 2019, the WHO included a definition for burnout when it released the 11th edition of its *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-11), not because burnout itself is a medical condition but because it was proving to be a well-worn path that can lead to various medical conditions.

But in camp terms, burnout is when your star counselor, who usually solves problems before they reach your office, starts letting things slide. It's when your enthusiastic program director becomes notably cynical about new initiatives. It's when your most capable staff member just can't seem to handle situations they used to manage with ease.

But why do people burn out? Let's consider three key principles:

1. **Burnout is a response.** Think about making toast: Is the bread or the toaster most responsible for the outcome? The bread becomes toast *in response* to heat. Similarly, people experience burnout *in response* to environments of unrelenting pressures or stress.
2. **Burnout is an equation** — outbound energy versus inbound energy over time. The greater the imbalance, the quicker burnout occurs. Think of each person as having an energy bucket that's either being filled or depleted through daily interactions and responsibilities.
3. **Burnout is fundamentally systems-based.** While individual stress management matters, the most impactful and lasting solutions must address the systems causing chronic stress. This means looking at workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values within your organization. ►

You don't have to have all the answers, nor will you.

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meltdowns, you've missed
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address burnout.



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

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Your Star Staff Will Burn out First

Here's a hard truth: Burnout typically hits your best staff first. Why? Because they're the ones everyone relies on. They're the ones who know where everything is, who can handle the difficult campers and parents and who other staff come to first with problems and complaints. They say, "I'll just do it myself because it's easier than explaining it to someone else."

It's hard to burn out if you don't care to begin with. Burnout is most likely to originate in the staff with the *deepest* commitment to your organization, and when they fall, it can create a domino effect. Safety protocols get sloppy, customer experience suffers and negativity spreads. Staff retention drops and word-of-mouth reports turn negative, making it more challenging to recruit new staff.

Practical Steps for Supporting Your Staff

The most powerful tools in fighting burnout are curiosity and empathy. Curiosity means asking, "What is it like to be you right now?" Empathy means remaining open and present throughout the answer, with these mindsets as your foundation:

1. **Create regular check-ins.** Use tools like the *Camp Experience Wheel* to help staff evaluate and process specific aspects of their camp experience, from how confident they feel in their role to how well they relate with campers and how deeply they sense they belong in the camp community. The key is consistency and follow-through. Don't ask for feedback if you're not prepared to respond to it. (Learn about the *Camp Experience Wheel* at www.ccca.org/go/wheel.)
2. **Evaluate your systems.** Look at your schedules, facility layout and communication patterns. Are you inadvertently creating situations where staff must consistently go above and beyond just to meet basic expectations?
3. **Build in recovery time.** Camp runs on discretionary energy — all those little extra things staff do that aren't in any job description. That energy is finite. Create systems that allow for genuine rest and recovery.
4. **Foster community care.** The cure for burnout isn't self-care alone; it's us caring for each other. Create a culture with intentional communal habits where staff look out for one another and feel safe asking for help. Ensure your strongest leaders receive the same standard of care they are asked to give to others. ►



Photo courtesy of Camp Eagle

Understanding the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

Quantifying your burnout levels

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the gold standard for measuring burnout and is used by professionals worldwide. This self-administered survey measures burnout's three key dimensions:

- Exhaustion: Physical and emotional energy depletion.
- Cynicism: Mental distance from work and colleagues.
- Professional Efficacy: Reduced performance and impact.

The MBI's power lies in its ability to quantify burnout, turning a nebulous feeling into measurable data. This is particularly valuable when advocating for systematic changes. Instead of just saying, "I'm burning out," you can point to specific scores and patterns.

For full-time camp professionals, the MBI can help clarify what parts of the role are most draining and suggest actions or resources for restoring health. It's especially useful for giving more nuance to the conversation by evaluating an experience across three different dimensions. Check out more information about the MBI at www.ccca.org/go/mbi.



Photo courtesy of Barefoot Republic

Your staff's dedication and your own commitment to the ministry are precious resources that need to be stewarded wisely.

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Recognizing Burnout in Yourself

As camp leaders, we must monitor our own warning signs:

- Inability to feel rested even after sufficient sleep.
- Increasing cynicism about your organization or ministry.
- Decreased effectiveness at tasks you used to handle easily.
- Loss of curiosity about others' experiences or empathy for their struggles.

Your burnout contributes to the systemic conditions that, in turn, increase the strain on those around you. The *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) can help measure your own burnout levels and provide concrete data when advocating for systematic organizational changes aimed at improving your own experience and well-being.

Moving Forward

Consider the experience of the prophet Elijah in the Bible. When he burned out, God didn't chastise him for lacking faith. Instead, God provided immediate rest and recovery, met with him and then implemented systematic changes to his role in ministry moving forward. For me, reversing burnout also began with changing roles, surrounded by different systems and new cultural norms, but an effective response doesn't always require sweeping changes, especially when caught early.

The ministry bills get paid with one of two currencies: dollars and cents or blood, sweat and tears. Too often, we treat the latter currency as an infinite resource. It's not. Your staff's dedication and your own commitment to the ministry are precious resources that need to be stewarded wisely.

Not all staff behavioral issues are burnout. You'll still meet with a host of other issues that accompany the inexperience and immaturity of youth or the ups and downs of hiring people in general. But learning how to spot burnout is the first step toward designing systems where people — campers, staff *and* you — can go beyond surviving, and instead, thrive. ■



Donnie Keele, III is a learning and development professional and certified coach who specializes in helping others discover and share what makes them unique and gives them purpose. Equipped with degrees in mass communication and campus chaplaincy as well as over 15 years of experience split between summer camp administration and university student affairs and development, he now produces digital media and learning engagements for UltraCamp in Niles, Michigan. His current focus is helping camp professionals make sense of complex and shifting demands so they can continue growing as exceptional leaders who provide transformational experiences for campers and staff alike.