

Understanding Burnout

in Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors



Acknowledgement & Disclaimer

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Meet Your Presenter!



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Learning Objectives



The training is intended for counselors, other professionals, and administrators in State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to provide an overview of counselor burnout and methods to respond or identify burnout in counseling professionals. **This training will address the following areas:**

- ✓ Understand the concept of burnout as it applies to counseling professionals.
- ✓ Identify symptoms of burnout in counselors for individuals to better support themselves and their colleagues.
- ✓ Apply self-care strategies to assist or prevent counselor burnout.

Outline



- Define Burnout
- Signs and Symptoms
- Self-Care Strategies
- How to Recover from Burnout

What is Burnout?



We've All Likely Heard the Term...

Or even have had an intuitive sense of the meaning...

First coined a technical term in 1975 by Herbert Freudenberger and most researchers prefer to define burnout by three components:

- **Emotional exhaustion**
- **Depersonalization**
- **Decreased sense of accomplishment (Morse et al., 2012)**

Despite the familiarity of the term, the impact is often misunderstood.



...Really Though, What Is It?



The American Counseling Association uses the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition:

burn·out | \ 'bɜrn-,aʊt \

- “exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration”
- “a state of mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion brought on by accumulated stress”

Counselor burnout happens when counselors (or other professionals) face stressor after stressor without relief.

FUN FACT – Burnout is highly prevalent with some fields experiencing more than 54% burnout rates.



But Everyone Feels Stress

There is a difference between **stress** and **stressors**.

- **Stress** – the neurological and physiological shift that occurs when encountering threats.
- **Stressors** – activate a stress response in the body.
 - Internal
 - External

Burnout is an extended period of stress.



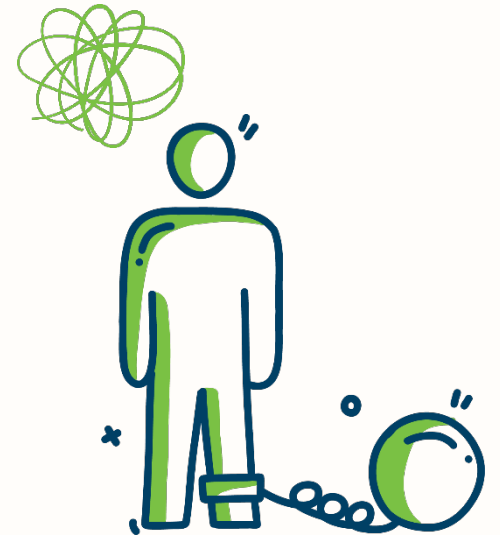
Stress Response

- An evolutionary and adaptive response.
 - Think about what it would take for your body to respond to being chased by a lion.
- Your ENTIRE body and mind change in response to a threat.
- But what happens once you've dealt with the problem (or stressor)?
- That doesn't mean you've dealt with the stress itself!



Shouldn't It Be As Simple As Telling Myself "I'm Safe"?

- Short answer – **no**.
- **Stress is a response to the environment** and there are many factors that lead this **feeling of "being stuck"**.
- Reasons that a person might feel stuck.
 - Chronic stressor becomes chronic stress
 - Social Appropriateness
 - It's safer



Fight – Flight - Freeze

These are examples of the acute stress response.

Fight

Facing any perceived threat aggressively or responding conquering the threat.



Flight

Running away from the threat, your brain decides that you are more likely to survive by running away.



Freeze

Unable to move or act against the threat, brain decides you are too small to fight or slow to run, best hope is to “play dead”.



AND

Fawn

Immediately reacting in a pleasing capacity to avoid conflict.



Fight

When you feel in danger and believe you can overpower the threat, you are in fight mode. Your brain sends signals throughout your body to rapidly prepare for the physical demands of fighting.

- Most signs to tell you are in fight response include:
- Tight jaw or grinding of the teeth
- Urge to punch someone or something
- Feeling intense anger or killing someone, even yourself
- Desire to stomp or kick
- Crying
- Glaring at people, conserving angrily
- Upset stomach, feels like knots or burning
- Attacking the source of the danger



Flight

This is believing you can defeat the danger by running away. In some cases, running away is the best decision. Take a burning building as an example. Unless you are a firefighter, it is best to get out of there as fast as you can.

These emotional and physical responses signify you are in flight mode:

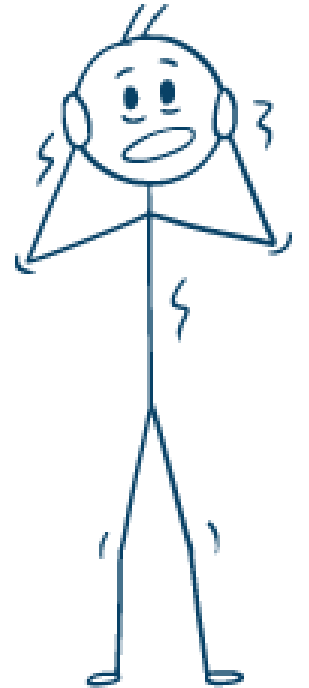
- Excessively exercising
- Feeling fidgety or tense or trapped
- Constantly moving legs, feet, and arms
- Restless body that will not stop moving
- Sensation of numbness in extremities
- Dilated eyes, darting eyes



Freeze

When one feels neither like fighting nor flighting, freezing is an option. This list of responses let you know you are in freeze mode:

- Pale skin
- Sense of dread
- Feeling stiff, heavy, cold, numb
- Loud, pounding heart
- Decreasing of heart rate
- Sensing tolerated stress



Fawn

Your response to trauma can go beyond fight, flight, or freeze.

The fawn response, a term coined by therapist Pete Walker, describes (often unconscious) behavior that aims to please, appease, and pacify the threat to keep yourself safe from further harm.

You might:

- Agree to whatever your partner (boss, co-worker, friend) asks of you, even if you'd rather not.
- Constantly praise a manager in hope of avoiding criticism or negative feedback.
- Feel as if you know very little about what you like or enjoy.
- Avoid sharing your own thoughts or feelings in close relationships for fear of making others angry.
- Have few, if any, boundaries around your own needs.



Presentation of Burnout in Counseling



Understanding Trauma

Vicarious Trauma refers to the permanent changes in the way a person views or makes sense of the world.

Secondary Trauma is experienced indirectly through hearing details or witnessing the aftermath of a trauma experienced by another person.

Compassion Fatigue is often a consequence of secondary traumatic stress and is characterized by physical and mental exhaustion, and a loss of empathy – often as a result of high demands to be empathetic and helpful to those who are suffering.



Compassion Fatigue



- Concept first introduced in 1992 in nursing literature (Stebnicki, 2000).
- A condition in which someone becomes numb to the suffering of others, feels less able to display empathy toward them, or loses hope in their ability to help.
- Often a result of prolonged exposure to other people's trauma.
- One of the core skills in counseling is empathy.
- Not quite the same as burnout – similar symptoms.
- Research suggests that compassion fatigue among professionals is identical to secondary traumatic stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Burnout in Counseling

- Even before COVID-19 research found high levels of burnout in the counseling profession.
 - COVID exacerbated the need for mental health support or other forms of counseling; however, there was no support to address that need.
- Can be difficult to say, “I need some time to myself” or high expectations of “having it all figured out” (Bray, 2018).
 - High level of focus on the wellness of clients, but counselors often neglect their needs.
- Presents with potential ethical concerns.
- Conflicting expectations or experiences.
 - Demonstration of empathy is fundamental skill when developing a strong therapeutic alliance.
 - Presents with a potential increased risk of burnout (if proper boundaries are not developed).



So, We Know What Burnout Is –
But How Do We Recognize It?



Signs and Symptoms

This is not an exhaustive list:

- Cancelling appointments or showing up late.
- Dreading work.
- Daydreaming or feeling distracted during appointments.
- Feeling emotionally drained.
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Experiencing a decline in empathy.
- Self-medicating or numbing out with alcohol or other behaviors like scrolling on social media or shopping.
- Feeling mentally distant from one's job.
- Increased feelings of negativity, cynicism, or loss of purpose related to job.
- Reduced professional efficacy.
- Depression
- Sleep issues, worry or anxiety.



Stages of Burnout

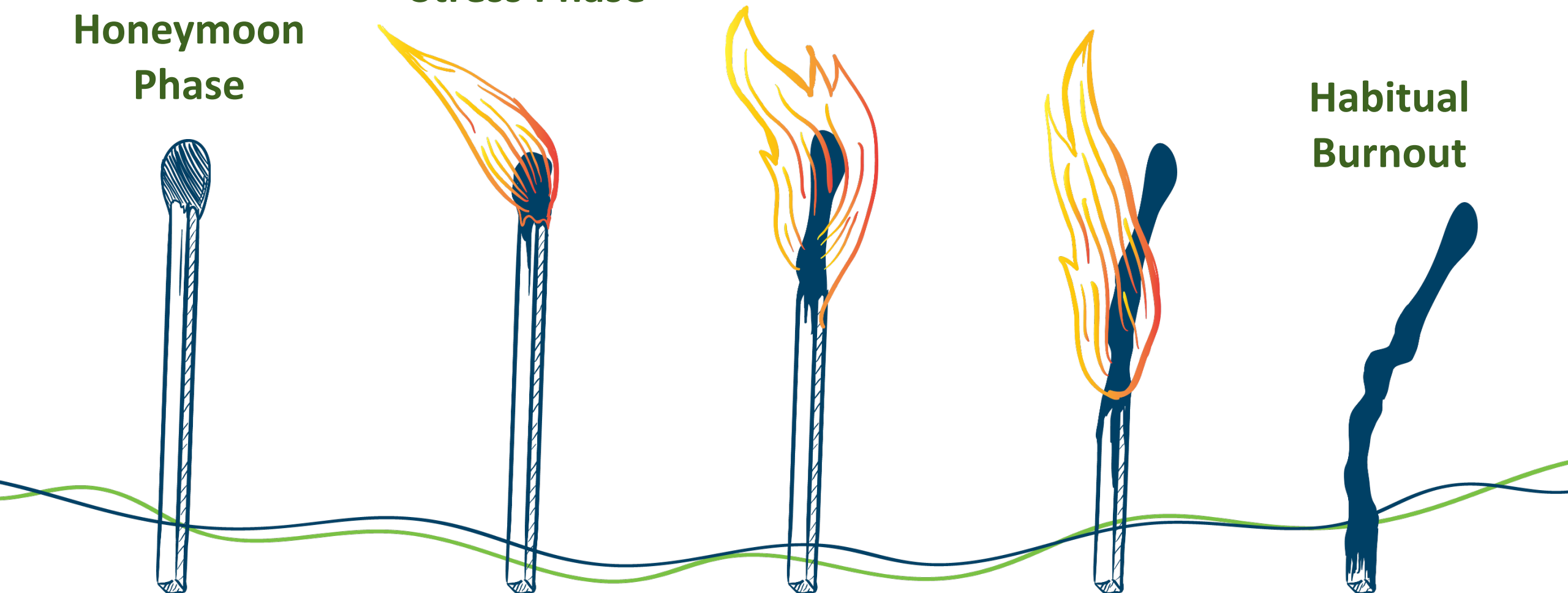
Honeymoon
Phase

Onset of
Stress Phase

Chronic Stress
Phase

Burnout

Habitual
Burnout



Aside From the Signs and Symptoms...

- It's also important to recognize the potential causes of burnout.
- Research suggests that rehabilitation professionals experience unique demands:
 - Devoting increased time to larger case loads.
 - Increased job demands.
 - Regular interaction with high-risk clients.
 - Regularly work under time sensitive tasks.
 - Possible low wages and changing environments.
 - Required to be knowledgeable in different areas.





If I'm Experiencing Burnout, Then How Do I Fix It?

Addressing Burnout Does Not Happen Overnight

- Brickham et al., 2021 acknowledge the responsibility of counselors to engage in self-care.
 - CACREP standards
 - CRCC Codes of Professional Ethics
- But... I'm busy, or I have constraints, or there's not enough time...insert phrase here...
 - You're not expected to up-end your entire work routine.
 - Where can you find times to take "self-reflective moments"?
 - What are my stress-related coping skills?



There Is More to It Than Simply Self-Care

- As counselors we often hear about self-care or learn to encourage clients to engage in self-care.
- Self-care isn't just about bubble baths, manicures, or engagement in other luxury services.
- **It is about taking care of YOURSELF!**



Breaking the Cycle

- Your body has a language.
- “Physical activity is the single most efficient strategy for completing the cycle”.

But it's not the only way

- Breathing – taking deep and slow breaths downregulate stress response.
- Positive social interaction
- Laughter
- Affection
- Creative expression



Learn How to Prevent Burnout

- 1) Identify what is bothering you
 - 2) Learn about stress
 - 3) Remember that your body doesn't know the difference between real and imagined threats
 - 4) Just Breathe
 - 5) Deal with the stress before you deal with the stressor
 - 6) Find stress management tools that work for you
 - 7) Use daily relaxation reminders
 - 8) Multi-task your stress relief
 - 9) Get realistic with time management
 - 10) Determine your non-negotiables
 - 11) Re-define success to include wellness
- **Burnout doesn't only happen in the workplace**



Let's Practice



[Play YouTube Video > Practice Box Breathing from Conscious Works](#)

Here Is Another...



[Play YouTube Video > **How to do Progressive Muscle Relaxation**](#)

Great Activities for Practice

Background noise: The use of background noise or “white noise” can be helpful in reducing stress and tension. Certain frequencies of sound can target different emotions or experiences such as fear or conflict.

[Play YouTube Video > Super Low Frequency Music - Release Stress and Tension - Let It All Go and Relax](#)

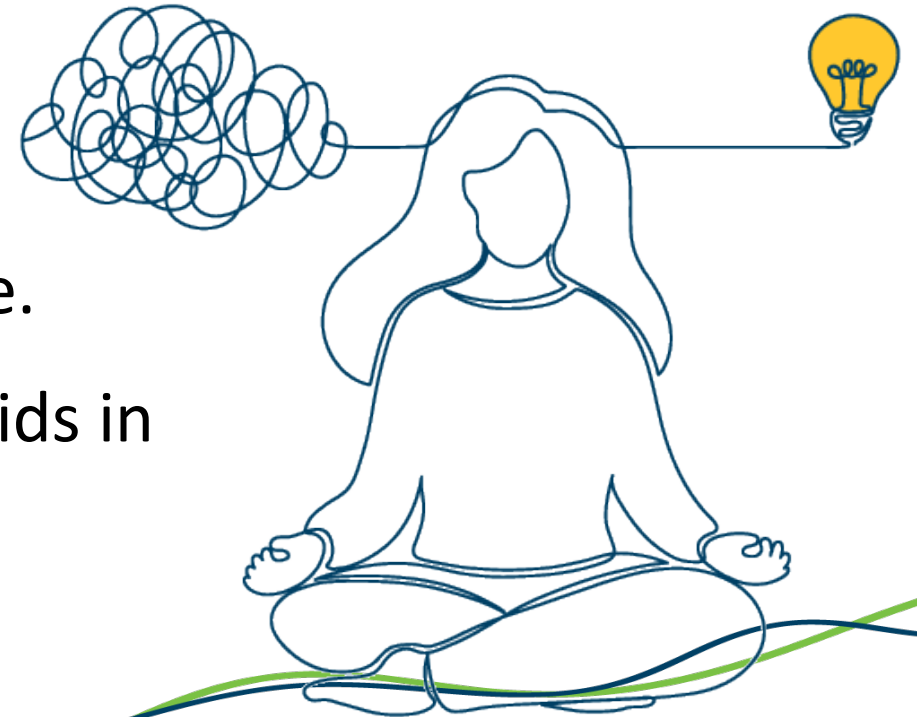
Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A tingling sensation or response that begins on the scalp and moves down the neck to the upper spine. Specific audio and visual stimuli provide a "low-grade euphoria" characterized by "a combination of positive feelings and a distinct static-like tingling sensation on the skin."

[Play YouTube Video > The Perfect ASMR Video](#)



Take Aways!

- Burnout doesn't only come from a work environment.
- It can be “reversed”.
- Understanding stress can aid in the reduction of stressors or stress responses.
- Break the cycle!
- Burnout can be normalized – you are not alone.
- Incorporating mindfulness-based techniques aids in stress reduction.



YOU ARE
AWESOME !

Thank You!

Contact Information



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Resources

- **Burnout:** The secret to unlocking the stress cycle by: Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski
- [Psychology Today - Burnout](#)
- [Choosing Therapy - Therapist Burnout: Signs, Causes & 17 Self Care Strategies](#)
- [Counseling Today - The battle against burnout](#)
- [Counseling Today - A counselor's journey back from burnout](#)
- [Society for the Advancement of Psychotherapy - Distress, Therapist Burnout, Self-Care, and the Promotion of Wellness for Psychotherapists and Trainees](#)
- [The New York Times - Your Body Knows You're Burned Out](#)
- [Very Well Mind - How to Recognize Burnout Symptoms](#)
- [Indeed - Major Causes of Burnout \(And How To Manage It at Work\)](#)
- [Simply Psychology - Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn: What This Response Means](#)
- [Psychology Today - Understanding Fight, Flight, Freeze and the Fawn Response](#)
- [Very Well Mind - How Your Stress Response Is Triggered](#)
- [Harvard Health - Understanding the stress response](#)

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Developing innovative methods to train VR personnel in their work at State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to deliver services to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

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