

Burnout

What to Do When You're At the End of Your Rope

By Susan M. Chambré

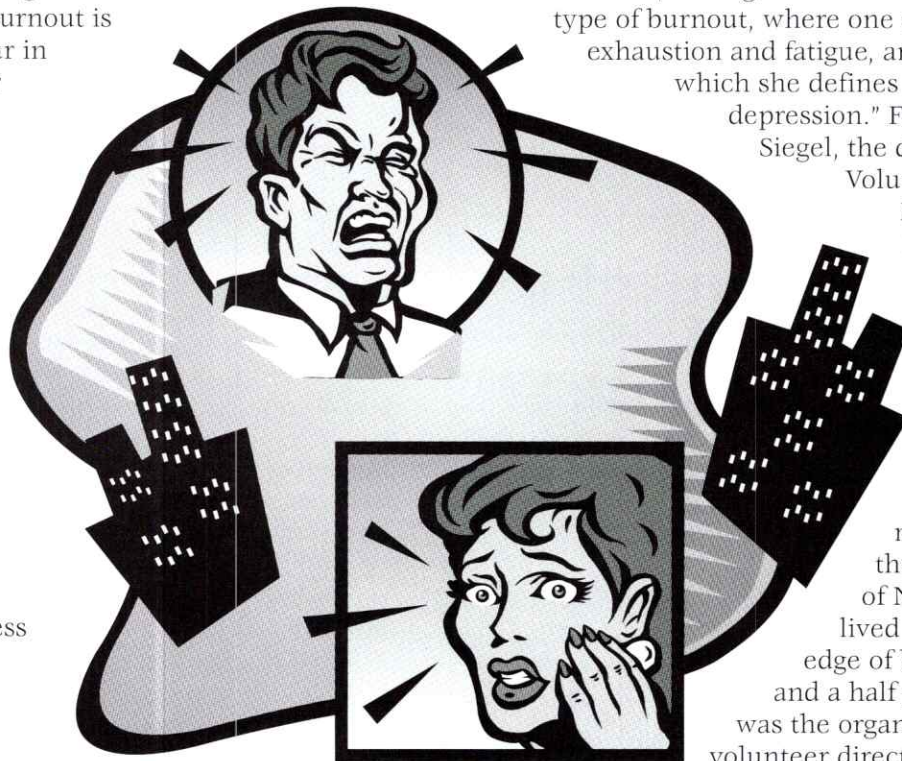
How common is burnout among volunteer directors? Why does it occur? How do volunteer directors prevent or cope with burnout? I posed these questions to experienced volunteer directors. Once used to describe an emotional state mainly found among human service professionals, burnout is now recognized to occur in many types of jobs. For volunteer managers, burnout has some distinctive qualities because of the nature of the work. Various aspects of volunteer management are closely linked to the coping strategies people have used.

Psychologists define "burnout" as disengagement from work, emotional and physical fatigue or exhaustion, "helplessness and hopelessness," or cynicism. Originally thought to occur because of people's inability to cope with job stress, researchers also focus on the key role organizational factors play in fostering burnout.

Virtually everyone I spoke to had experienced career burnout. David Meacham, the director of Volunteer Services at the Gay Men's Health Crisis in

New York, thinks of it as "feeling completely overwhelmed with administrative tasks ... and [a sense of] alienation from the work itself ... which is recruiting and training volunteers." Rhoda White, the Director of Volunteer Services of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, distinguished between the traditional type of burnout, where one experiences exhaustion and fatigue, and a lower level which she defines as "post-partum depression." For Jane Hedall-Siegel, the director of

Volunteer Resources at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, the feelings need to last for at least seven days or over a weekend. Sarah Christian, the manager of museum services at the Denver Museum of Natural History lived "on the virtual edge of burnout" for two and a half years when she was the organization's first paid volunteer director and her job was poorly understood.



Getting By

Some coping strategies can help volunteers with burnout:

■ **Effectively communicate the nature of the job.** Many volunteer directors find it necessary to "market" their volunteer programs and clarify their role on an ongoing basis. There is widespread agreement that the job of the volunteer administrator is often poorly understood. Sometimes colleagues see it as "easy work" because they think that volunteers have limited

Susan M. Chambré is a professor of Sociology at Baruch College, City University of New York. Her work on volunteerism and nonprofit management focuses on older persons, HIV/AIDS policies and philanthropy in the Jewish community.

abilities, are unreliable and don't work hard. Connie Pirtle, a consultant and former vice president at the American Symphony Orchestra League in Washington, D.C., thinks volunteer administration is a "juggling act" where a person needs to "connect the institution and the volunteers ... and marry the priorities of both." Continually needing to be clear about one's responsibilities is indeed a distinctive and stressful part of the job but taking action and enlisting the support of colleagues is, itself, a way to become empowered and to prevent or to cope with burnout.

■ **Connect to the clients and the mission.**

Committed volunteer directors believe in the merits of volunteerism and the missions of their organizations. When volunteer directors become involved in administrative work, including supervision of their own staff, they can experience burnout because they lack direct contact with volunteers. At these times, some volunteer directors cope with burnout by interacting with volunteers: attending meetings, conducting interviews and recruiting new volunteers. The sentiments of many in the field are captured by Katie Campbell, the executive director of the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA), when she pointed out that volunteers are "the source of

energy and inspiration and motivation that keeps us going."

■ **Nurture oneself and maintain realism and balance.** People overcome burnout by taking care of themselves: time off, going on a vacation, slowing down and trying to handle stress and uncertainty more effectively. Sometimes the recognition of rising stress levels serves as a signal that a person needs to reorder priorities and to reexamine expectations. The need for volunteer administrators to be available in the evenings and over weekends creates significant role conflict because most volunteer directors are women and many have significant family responsibilities.

■ **Connect to colleagues and grow as a professional.** Most volunteer directors work in small departments and a large number work completely by themselves. To trainer and consultant Jarene Frances Lee, that means the volunteer director "shoulders the sole responsibility for moving the volunteer program ahead." Networking can reduce this sense of isolation. Sloan-Kettering's Hedal-Siegel seeks advice from past and present colleagues and maintains a file of memorable articles on volunteer management. Involvement in national groups like the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) or in local networks provide opportunities to meet with colleagues. Lee and others point out that going through the AVA certification process is a way to gain a vision of oneself as a professional and become less focused on the day-to-day events in one's job.

■ **Say no and promote "load shedding."**

Because their role is often poorly understood, volunteer directors are sometimes asked to add responsibilities that are tangentially related to their work. Highly committed to their organizations, many find it difficult to say no, a stance that may in the long run be counterproductive. AVA's Campbell encourages volunteer directors to clarify and set limits on their responsibilities. Another strategy was suggested by Christian who has worked with staff in her organization to help them engage in "load shedding" by defining new positions and training volunteers to take on significant responsibilities.

Last Resort

While many instances of burnout can be prevented or overcome, there are cases when this is not realistic. How does one know this? What can one do?

■ **Ride the wave and grow.** You can continue to work and somehow overcome or even ignore the toxic features of a job if the sources of stress or the job itself are time-limited. One volunteer director was hired to coordinate volunteers for a large international athletic contest. The organization lasted two years but the volunteer director was hired six months before the

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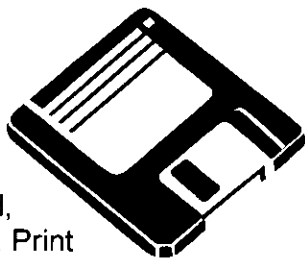
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Burnout

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event, too late to play a role in its overall design. Because the volunteer component was grafted onto the organizational structure, her job involved "running around putting fingers in dikes" much of the time. She was able to survive this experience and look back at it as her "biggest growth experience" because it was time-limited, the mission was important and many aspects of the work were satisfying.

■ Make room for new blood.

Burnout is often accompanied by the inability to be creative or innovative. Christian points out that for many, it is time to leave a position when the job doesn't "feed" a person any more and one's immediate response to any new idea is: "We've always done it this way and it's worked." While such low-level burnout may not be accompanied by sleepless nights or low energy levels, it is nonetheless a signal that ought not be ignored. Volunteer administrators point out that financial rewards are less important than other types of job satisfaction. According to Melissa Eystad, a consultant and former chief of Volunteer Services for the Minnesota Department of Human Services, it is time to move on when a person can no longer "tap into that reason that what they do is important despite what's going on around them."

White notes that when the work stops being a calling and becomes a job, it is not possible to cope with burnout. This is sometimes quite difficult. One person I spoke to only realized that she had burned out when a colleague gave her a newspaper advertisement for her current job. ■



Make A Difference Day

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and staff of the housing authority to volunteer throughout the city. The \$2,000 award will fuel a city-wide volunteer program for residents.

■ **Jacksonville and Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.** "When civilians and Marines come together there are no limits," said Jacksonville teacher Kerri Helsel. She and fellow teacher Debra Bryant linked civilian and military elementary school families in a collection drive. They raised everything from clothes for a women's shelter to blood for the American Red Cross. The \$2,000 award will benefit the Onslow Community Ministries and the Onslow Women's Center.

■ **Blissfield, Michigan.** Four teenage girls touched the lives of residents of one of Ohio's largest homeless shelters with paint, wallpaper and commitment. The girls, led by 13-year-old Christi Stoker, organized 475 volunteers to make The Family House in Toledo a little more like home. Extra money was then spent helping a new friend, "a teen living with her mom at the shelter," settle into an apartment. The \$2,000 donation will send Family House shelter kids to sports camps.

■ **Altoona, Pennsylvania.** Leukemia patient Mindy Elvey, 15, and her family stayed at the Ronald McDonald House in Pittsburgh while Mindy underwent chemotherapy and radiation at a nearby hospital. The treatment left her

immune system so weak that she was confined to the house's bedroom—which had no TV. For Make A Difference Day, Mindy raised money and bought TVs for 10 bedrooms at the house. She donated her \$2,000 award to the Pittsburgh Ronald McDonald House.

■ **Laredo, Texas.** Jackie Salas said her fellow teachers just wanted to "instill a sense of service," in the students of Finley Elementary School. They ended up donating 2,000 new and used clothing items to immigrant families of Kennedy-Zapata Elementary School in El Cenizo, Texas. The \$2,000 award will launch a drive to purchase new shoes for every student at Kennedy-Zapata. ■

Want to Know More?

The next Make A Difference Day is Saturday, Oct. 24. Organizers are encouraged to plan early. For the first time, grants are available to help nonprofits plan projects. Wal-Mart, the retail supporter of Make A Difference Day, has authorized the managers of 2,348 stores to donate \$1,000 each to Make A Difference Day efforts in their areas. See your Wal-Mart store manager.

In addition, the rewards that will be distributed at next year's awards event are larger than ever. The top 10 honorees will receive \$10,000 each from Paul Newman and Newman's Own. And thanks to Wal-Mart, two awards of \$2,000 will be given to participants in each of the 50 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

Make A Difference Day was created in 1992 by USA WEEKEND in partnership with The Points of Light Foundation. For more information call 1-800-416-3824 or e-mail diffday@usaweekend.com.

—Miranda Walker

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