



Burnout is prevalent among employees in the healthcare and service industries, which comprise most jobs in our economy. And, it's responsible for plenty of staff turnover, diminished productivity, mental health claims, accidents, and increased risk of self-harm or suicide, prompting organizational leaders to search for solutions.

Folks suffering burnout exhibit three primary symptoms: (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) feeling oddly estranged or detached from one's self, often called "depersonalization," and (3) a sense of personal inadequacy. Those so afflicted often say, "I'm running on empty." While often attributed to chronic stress, burnout is its own animal. For example, while stress often ramps up emotional reactions (anxiety, anger, frustration, etc.), burnout blunts them, leaving the person feeling mentally exhausted and emotionally vacuous.

Many self-care and treatment approaches attempt to address burnout. These include meditation, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), relaxation training, exercise, therapeutic massage, and many others. Fundamentally, most of these approaches pursue a common goal — improving the individual's capacity to feel positive emotions. That's because folks suffering burnout display a strong "negative cognitive bias," meaning they mentally scan for bad happenings in their environment, and ignore positive inputs.

A recent study from Duke University shows promise in treating burnout by employing a surprisingly simple and time efficient method that shifts a person's cognitive bias from negative to positive. One of the study's principle authors stated that, "Burnout is the impaired ability to experience positive emotions." So, as you might expect, their approach involved retraining the brain to do just that.

The researchers called their technique "Three Good Things," and it is similar to gratitude journaling, but with a twist. Subjects in the study took a few minutes just before bedtime to write down three positive happenings that occurred during their day, and then, from a list of ten choices, labeled each event with the

applicable feeling it elicited. The list of positive emotions included: joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love.

In as little as two weeks, the subjects showed statistically significant reductions in burnout symptoms compared to their baseline measures (taken at the beginning). And, these changes persisted up to a year after the conclusion of the study, even when participants discontinued the Three Good Things practice.

Although not addressed by the research, I suspect engaging in this practice just before sleep proved significant in creating these positive results. Intentional thoughts or activities immediately prior to sleep often “drop down” into the subconscious mind where they undergo additional mental processing and engagement during the night. Some studies suggest our brains are more active when we are asleep than while awake, and many attest to the value of “sleeping on it” when making decisions or determining how to address a life challenge.

Regardless, in many instances, burnout is treatable, and the Three Good Things approach offers a self-care method requiring little time and considerable benefit.