

UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Working with Others

- Building & maintaining relationships
- Supporting others/mentoring
- Empathy & compassion

Reflection

- Contemplation
 - Self-awareness
 - Professional/personal development
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Under normal circumstances individuals can experience burnout. Is it possible the current pandemic, social unrest, political climate, and demands of working from home are leading us to “burnout” on steroids? Yes, I believe that it can be.

Doing simple things like turning off the television and not watching the news might be helpful to minimize external pressures, but what about the impact of internal pressures on home visitors? That is the focus of this article. One might think working from home, not having to drive to and from work every day, and having our children near us would be less stressful in many ways. As I learned recently from a home visiting program manager the opposite is more likely the case. Not only are our home visitors tasked with serving vulnerable families in the community from home, they also have the responsibility of “home schooling” and caring for their own children at home, as well as taking care of all the household chores. Our home visitors, like millions of people in our country, have husbands, wives, and partners that have lost jobs and are struggling to stay afloat, which is also adding to those internal stressors.

Considering all of the demands on our home visitors, one might see how they might lead to burnout. It behooves the home visiting community to do everything in its power to recognize the stressors our home visitors are experiencing and provide much needed support.

What should support look like? First, it is important to help home visitors understand and recognize symptoms of burnout. The following is a definition of burnout along with its symptoms and stages:

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion by excessive and prolonged stress. The general symptoms include lower resistance to illness, pessimistic outlook on work or life, physical and mental exhaustion, time away from work, demotivation and detachment from your work, depleted energy levels, detachment in personal relationships, and lower productivity (Smith, Segal, Robinson, 2019).

Five Stages of burnout:

1. **Honeymoon Stage:** This phase is usually at the beginning and characterized by satisfaction, commitment, energy, and high creativity levels. The key idea of this stage is to develop good coping strategies to continue at this stage.
2. **Onset of Stress Stage:** It begins with the awareness some days are more difficult than others. You might perceive your optimism is waning and common stress symptoms are affecting you physically, mentally or emotionally.
3. **Chronic Stress Stage:** This is a marked change in your stress level such that you experience stress on a frequent basis.
4. **Burnout Stage:** Symptoms become critical. Continuing as normal is often not possible and it's key that you seek intervention.
5. **Habitual Stress Stage:** The symptoms of burnout are imbedded in your life and you are likely to experience significant physical or emotional problems, as opposed to occasionally experiencing stress (Smith, Segal, Robinson, 2019).

Secondly, we need to acknowledge and recognize no one is immune to experiencing burnout. It can happen to anyone including administrators, mid-management, support staff, as well as home visitors. It is important to create and maintain an environment where everyone can feel safe, comfortable, and confident to speak out when things are not working out.

It is critically important for each of us within the New Mexico Home Visiting Program to understand and recognize “we are in this together.” We need to acknowledge the parallel process and how each of us, and our well-being, impacts the system.

Without home visitors there is no home visiting program and without leaders there is no home visiting program. As committed and invested individuals we need to value, honor and respect each other's roles and responsibilities in support of our collective charge: the vulnerable children and families of New Mexico.

Finally, although you may not be experiencing burnout now, you can be proactive by practicing self-care strategies and building your resilience.

These are some of the strategies that can be practiced individually to prevent burnout:

- Recognizing the symptoms of burnout
- Recognizing the stages of burnout
- Practicing self-care, including mindfulness, self-compassion, meditation, exercising, etc.
- Participating in ongoing reflective supervision
- Receiving counseling/therapy
- Finding the courage to speak out
- Practicing kindness towards others

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- Can you remember a time when you experienced burnout and what was it like?
- What are some of the things you do to prevent burnout? What are some areas of growth you can explore to prevent burnout?
- How might the parallel process be important to reflect on when we think about burnout?

Reference

Smith, M., Segal, J., and Robinson, L. (2019). Help Guide. *Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes*. Retrieved from <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm>