

**The Pandemic Wall**

Have you hit the 'pandemic wall' yet? I first saw this term in a twitter feed recently and immediately resonated with it as did many others.

If one of the stock phrases in the first lockdown in 2020 was "in these unprecedented times", then the one I hear most often in this third lockdown and say myself is, "it's so much harder this time". In the first lockdown, when the crisis hit we responded with heroic energy: throwing ourselves into coping and adapting; learning how to 'Zoom' and work from home; home-schooling; volunteering to help others; setting up more foodbanks as the need grew; clapping the NHS, frontline workers and carers; live-streaming church services; setting up pastoral care networks; connecting with friends and family online with games and quizzes!

**Surge Capacity**

All amazing stuff – but I simply don't have the energy this time round. My 'surge capacity'<sup>1</sup> is depleted and I'm feeling exhausted and struggling to regulate the low-level thrum of anxiety beneath the outwardly coping exterior. The 'body keeps the score', as the trauma researcher and author, Bessel Van Der Kolk writes<sup>2</sup> and so, for the first time ever, my skin has developed eczema!

Surge capacity, or heroic energy, is incredibly important in the face of a one-off shock event or disaster – gearing us up through the release of the stress hormones (cortisol and adrenalin) to keep ourselves safe or to leap into action to help others. It's only meant to be for a short period though, even if recovery and restoration takes longer. But this pandemic is stretching out interminably; it's the trauma that keeps giving as the long-term impacts will keep on unfolding for months and probably years to come.

Professor Ann Masten<sup>3</sup>, who coined the term 'surge capacity', says, "This (pandemic) is an unprecedented disaster for most of us that is profound in its impact on our daily lives..... I think we maybe underestimate how severe the adversity is and that people may be experiencing a normal reaction to a pretty severe and ongoing, unfolding, cascading disaster."

A normal reaction to abnormal circumstances – so I can cut myself a bit of slack and be a bit kinder to myself. It's not me being abnormal, inadequate; it really is 'normal', understandable that I should be feeling like this. Masten continues, "It's important to recognize that it's normal in a situation of great uncertainty and chronic stress to get exhausted and to feel ups and downs, to feel like you're depleted or experience periods of burnout."<sup>4</sup>

**Development of understanding Burnout**

One of the early American researchers in the 1970's into the experience that came to be known as burnout<sup>5</sup> was working as a psychoanalyst at a substance abuse clinic where the term 'burnout' was a slang term for extreme substance abuse. Freudenberg realised that both he and many of the caregivers there were exhausted and drained by their work with addicted clients and adopted the term 'burnout' for their experience too. In a sense, the experience of the care-givers was

<sup>1</sup> <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c> (accessed 04.02.21)

<sup>2</sup> Van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York, Viking, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> <https://icd.umn.edu/people/amasten/> (accessed 06.02.21)

<sup>4</sup> <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c> (accessed 04.02.21)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/fascinating-history-burnout-arianna-huffington> (accessed 06.02.21)

mirroring that of the addicts in over-doing it; “they were overworked, perhaps overly idealistic, and certainly overly committed” and “like substance abuse, burnout is an illness of immoderation”.<sup>6</sup>

Freudenberger also used the vivid illustration of a burnt-out building to describe the impact of emotional and psychological burnout. Under the strain of living and working with complex demands in society and in our churches, exacerbated by the added pressures of coping in a time of pandemic, he describes how our “inner resources are consumed as if by fire, leaving a great emptiness inside, although (our) outer shells may be more or less unchanged.... Only if you venture inside will you be struck by the full force of desolation”.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of burnout has been all too vividly portrayed for us on our television screens during this third lockdown with the cumulative impact on doctors and nurses of dealing with the trauma of patients dying of Covid 19, exacerbated by having to stand in for families at the point of death. James Lawrence, Director of CPAS, reports from his recent engagement with clergy in Anglican dioceses that two thirds describe themselves as just “hanging on” or “struggling” and that the four words most used to describe their feelings are “fatigued, frustrated, fed up and fragile”.<sup>8</sup>

### **What is burnout?**

Burnout happens when we’ve pushed ourselves above and beyond our resources to cope. This can be for worthy reasons to meet the enormous need that confronts us, or perhaps because we’ve tried to live up to our own or others’ expectations of us. Often we will have ignored the warning signs in our bodies and emotions trying to get our attention, until we suddenly crash and burn. It is often characterised by:

- exhaustion; - I simply can’t do my job anymore
- inability to concentrate, read or pray as you would normally do
- cynicism – a negative view of life, “what’s the point?”
- low feelings of self-worth – “I’m useless, I can’t do this, what have I got to give?”
- inability to be creative, to imagine the future.

### **Is this different from compassion fatigue & vicarious trauma?**

Compassion fatigue can perhaps be seen as a precursor to burnout. It often afflicts caregivers and church ministers in coping with the weight of pastoral need and suffering that confronts us. If, as a hospice chaplain a few years back, I had recognised my reluctance to visit another patient as the onset of compassion fatigue, I may have stopped sooner to attend to what was going on for me, rather than pushing on and eventually crashing with burnout. Vicarious trauma is very similar to compassion fatigue and can happen in response to dealing with the constant ‘drip, drip’ of desperate suffering and trauma of others. A powerful example of this was seen in the BBC news clip of the Baptist and Anglican ministers breaking down in tears as they struggled to respond to overwhelming emotional and physical need and the social injustice before them.<sup>9</sup>

### **What can I do in the response to compassion fatigue and burnout?**

**Self-care is vital.** We ignore this at our peril, even though we often find it hard to make space for it. It’s also difficult when the usual things we would do to look after our emotional and physical well-being are denied to us in lockdown. We need to look for simple and accessible ways of taking care of ourselves and connecting ourselves back to resource through things such as:

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/fascinating-history-burnout-arianna-huffingto> (accessed 06.02.21)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/fascinating-history-burnout-arianna-huffingto> (accessed 06.02.21)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cpas.org.uk/browse-everything/leading-future-1> (accessed 05.02.21)

<sup>9</sup> <https://youtu.be/FwRcibp4sJ4> (accessed 05.02.21)

- rest: connecting with your body's needs and learning to listen to them. A Tedx talk on Seven Types of Rest<sup>10</sup> includes passive and active rest such as physical exercise and breathing practices
- retreat: exploring sabbath rest and simply being still with God; allowing others to hold you in prayer when you find it hard to pray
- relationships: connecting with supportive and loving others in whatever way you can; allowing yourself to be on the receiving end of love and care
- re-creation: connecting with the natural world, slowing down to notice and wonder at creation and the surprising places where God comes to meet you
- reducing stressors and expectations: giving ourselves permission just to be - it's okay not to be functioning at the same levels we normally do. Let others know that you need time out.

### **Wiser Living...**

Writing this in lockdown in February with the snow falling, I am reminded of an interview with Katherine May on "How 'Wintering' Replenishes" from the 'On Being' podcast<sup>11</sup>. It is a lyrical and moving interview that reminds us of the need to hunker down sometimes and allow our bodies and souls to replenish. It's no wonder we're tired in the context of where we are in the flow of this pandemic, finding ourselves in the foothills of exhaustion and possibly burnout.

The term 'Wiser living' denotes the final stage on the chart of Phases of Collective Trauma Response<sup>12</sup>. It is seen as the fruit of coming through traumatic events maybe with wounds and scars but with a much deeper understanding of and grace towards our bodies, our souls, our relationships, our work and our faith. Wiser living says, I wouldn't have chosen for this awful thing to have happened but I have learnt so much through it, I am stronger now.

Katherine May speaks of knowing in her body, her gut instinct, that she was struggling almost a year before she was officially signed off work with exhaustion and burnout. She speaks now of learning to trust her ability to know what she needs and to listen to it. Perhaps you may not be at the stage of burnout yet, but knowing you are exhausted, depleted, in need of rest and replenishment. Be kind to yourself, listen to your body, your soul, to God within you and allow yourself time to 'Winter'.

**Hilary Ison 12.02.21**

<sup>10</sup> <https://ideas.ted.com/the-7-types-of-rest-that-every-person-needs/> (accessed 29.01.21)

<sup>11</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/katherine-may-how-wintering-replenishes/> (accessed 07.02.21)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ictg.org/phases-of-disaster-response.html>

## A Blessing For One Who Is Exhausted

by John O'Donohue

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,  
Time takes on the strain until it breaks;  
Then all the unattended stress falls in  
On the mind like an endless, increasing weight,

The light in the mind becomes dim.  
Things you could take in your stride before  
Now become laboursome events of will.

Weariness invades your spirit.  
Gravity begins falling inside you,  
Dragging down every bone.

The tide you never valued has gone out.  
And you are marooned on unsure ground.  
Something within you has closed down;  
And you cannot push yourself back to life.

You have been forced to enter empty time.  
The desire that drove you has relinquished.  
There is nothing else to do now but rest  
And patiently learn to receive the self  
You have forsaken for the race of days.

At first your thinking will darken  
And sadness take over like listless weather.  
The flow of unwept tears will frighten you.

You have travelled too fast over false ground;  
Now your soul has come to take you back.

Take refuge in your senses, open up  
To all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of rain  
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,  
Taking time to open the well of colour  
That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone  
Until its calmness can claim you.  
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.  
Learn to linger around someone of ease  
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,  
Having learned a new respect for your heart  
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

*To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* by John O'Donohue, published in the U.K. as *Benedictus*. Convergent Books (1 Jan. 2008)