Understanding and Managing Burnout - Tips for a Balanced Life

Air Date: September 29, 2024

Guest: Don Drew, David Lowry

Resources:

David Lowry: 0:29
Hello, everyone. Welcome to peaceful Life Radio. I'm David Lowry, and of course, Don Drew is with us today.

Don Drew: 0:36
Hello everyone!.

David Lowry: 0:38
Don, I'm excited about our program and I know it's something that you spent a lot of time with when you were teaching organizational management. What's our topic about?

Don Drew: 0:47
Our topic today David is burnout and it's something that we've all had to deal with at some part in our life whether at work or in our personal life.

David Lowry: 0:56
It is a timely topic. I'm hearing so much about this in the news today. People returning back to work after working at home and suddenly discovering that. I really don't like what I'm doing, coming in every day. The grind is getting to me. Or maybe like so many of us, you've done a job so long you could do it in your sleep, and it's like, is there something better for me out there than this? This, is a timely topic.

Don Drew: 1:21
We're still hearing a lot about COVID and its impact and of course that did have a tremendous impact but burnout has been around a very long time. I think, the COVID experience has created a heightened sensitivity, if you will in many cases, but nonetheless, it's not the cause, it, is a contributing factor.

David Lowry: 1:38
Well, what is burnout, Don?

Don Drew: 1:41

Burnout can be defined a number of different ways, but really is a state of emotional, physical and or mental exhaustion caused by prolonged or excessive stress. And whether it comes from our work or our personal choices we've made or a combination of the two it is going to be different than just regular stress. It's not just about having too much to do, but more about feeling overwhelmed by a job or by life situation and being unable to cope.

David Lowry: 2:08
I've met people who are telling me they really dread coming to work on Monday morning. It's like, Oh no, here we go again. And I don't know about you. I've been so blessed to have a job that when I put my feet down on the floor in the morning that I said, I'm ready to do this. I really want to be there. I know the difference. I've had it both ways. When you really dread the job you're going to, or the people around you, you feel overwhelmed, it's like, how am I going to get through this day? What are some of the factors that play into all of this?

Don Drew: 2:42
Again, it's not all about the job, but there are some common signs of burnout, feeling drained and depleted of energy, both physically and emotionally. Being consistently negative, for instance, about your work or losing interest and motivation in your work. Feeling like you can't perform well and experiencing decreased productivity. You may experience concentration problems, but burnout is not just something that only occurs at work. It can happen in any area of life. If you think you might be experiencing burnout, it's important to take some steps to address it.

David Lowry: 3:13
Don, there's some things that are the things we love to hate. Come on now, we all want to talk about our jobs sometimes, and those crazy people who are in charge of everything. Or maybe we want to talk about our city government, or our relationships with other people in private moments or so. What's the difference between things we love to hate and has some negativity and burnout?

Don Drew: 3:35
I guess we all have feelings of dissatisfaction for a number of different reasons. And really what makes stress, stress is the fact that these conditions are sustained. And then in the case of burnout, they're like hyper sustained. They've become endemic to both the job and your psyche and your way of feeling and being, and it leads to tremendous stress and feelings of frustration. So it can be pretty devastating when we're experiencing burnout.

David Lowry: 4:02

One of our people that we like to read and study is a guy by the name of Parker Palmer. He talks about something called the tragic gap. I have seen this and I think everybody will relate to this. There are times when you look and say, if only we would just do this. This one little thing would make all the difference in the world on the job situation, our churches or our relationships or so forth. But for some reason, it seems to be impossible to get people to do. It's could be something as simple as eliminating a couple of steps in a process so that you could streamline your workflow or maybe allowing people a little more flexibility in the way that they do things, and it doesn't happen. Don, what got you thinking about burnout as we were preparing for this program?

Don Drew: 4:47

There's a couple of things that have happened. I'll start with my own life, a little bit of what I experienced in terms of burnout. And then I'd like to talk a little bit about some work that I've done with physicians and medical professionals. So, late in my academic career, , I realized that I was experiencing burnout and twice requested a sabbatical. This is after 23 years of teaching. I felt like I needed some time to refresh myself so I could keep going. But I was denied that opportunity. And so I decided to retire from active teaching. Now it's important to understand my response. Choosing to retire was more about learning how to cope effectively with burnout. I saw it as a positive move, not as a reaction to. I started being exposed to and working with a significant number of medical professionals who were dealing with burnout in their lives back in 2019 prior to COVID. And they taught me a lot about what is possible when experiencing burnout. We'll talk more about that in a bit, but I know you know, something about this as well. Is there anything you want to share with your experiences?

David Lowry: 5:48

I've felt burnout several times in my career. Like Don, I had a long academic career. I had a great job, I taught at a prestigious university, I advanced through all the ranks. I had the beautiful office overlooking the campus with a scenic view, all the things that go with being successful in your career. But I had done those things for 20 years, and I could do them in my sleep. And as you said, there were systemic problems that were so aggravating and wouldn't go away. And I found myself not enjoying my work so much. So that ,was one time where I felt burnout. I decided that I would change up my career a bit and move the focus of my work. And then after doing the next stage of my career for a while, You get to feeling the same thing. There are some jobs that you have where everybody knows your next dance move. It's not that the work isn't challenging or worthy. It's just that it's repetitive. And sometimes organizations aren't up for changing it up or anything. We understand they need us to do what we're doing, but it can become deadening and we don't feel the zest for what we're doing.

Don Drew: 7:04
Repetitive work is not motivational. It really isn't. We're people who are designed to want to use what we can to use our abilities, our skills. Once we are repeating the same kind of work time and time again, without any kind of a change in impact or anything new in it. That, becomes unmotivational for us.

David Lowry: 7:23
Let's go through some of those factors of those main categories that contribute to burnout, Don.

Don Drew: 7:29
Most social scientists break it into two main categories or factors that contribute to burnout. Those are work related stress and then various lifestyle factors. And we'll talk about them separately. Work related stress comes from a variety of different sources. A heavy workload and long hours or having too much to do in too little time can be a major drain on our energy and motivation. Also, feeling like we don't have anything to say in how we do our work or that our efforts don't matter is also demotivating. This can include things like being micromanaged. We've probably all been there at some point. Or having unclear expectations or not having the resources you need to do your job effectively. Then there's not feeling appreciated for your work, making it feel pointless and leading to a decline in motivation as well. And of course, some of us work in a toxic environment with bad relationships and constant conflict, making the workday incredibly stressful.

David Lowry: 8:26
You've gone over several things here. I'm just going to list them again. Not having a say in how you do your work, feeling like your efforts don't matter, being micromanaged, working for someone with unclear expectations, and not having resources. Wow, that's five things right there. Of those, Don, which are the ones that are the most soul crushing to you?

Don Drew: 8:50
It's the last one that you didn't mention, which is the toxic environment, frankly. Toxic environment actually is one that probably includes all of those things. And it makes it so that we feel like. our work is a miserable experience.

David Lowry: 9:02
We do know that it would be unreasonable, for us to expect that there will be always the resources we need. I don't know if anybody who has unlimited resources. In our podcast here we can't go get all the newest things. And sometimes We're not even clear in our

mind about where we're going or how we're going to do it. So, we want to be kind to people. And yet at the same time all of that together can be very trying on our physiology, our mental health, even our spiritual wellbeing. And so when we talk about a peaceful life, we really are trying to encourage people to separate that which is reasonable to expect of a job and to be charitable and even compassionate when we have to live with those things versus one that has become so toxic it's like if you don't like it, go somewhere else.

Don Drew: 9:54
Many factors are common stressors and they create irritations with us. Not everything that's going to happen in our lives or in our work is going to be, happy. There's going to be frustrations. That's normal and most of us are pretty good at dealing with those kinds of things. The difference between normal stress and frustrations and burnout is that burnout actually is a mental state. It's a dark cloud where we go when we perceive that the stress, frustrations, and our inability to control the situation is overwhelming. That's a key point to make.

David Lowry: 10:26
Beyond work, there are some other things like lifestyle factors, aren't there?

Don Drew: 10:30
Yes. For instance, not taking enough time for relaxation and activities you enjoy outside of work because you're so busy. Those things can leave you constantly depleted or not having strong relationships or friends or family because you're just too busy or not enough time to actually have any kind of a social relationship with your colleagues. All these make it more difficult to cope with stress. In some cases physical conditions such as not getting enough sleep, eating unhealthy foods and not exercising regularly can, contribute to this. So there's both mental and physical elements to all of this.

David Lowry: 11:04
Many jobs these days act as though you need to be on call 24/7. We want your phone number, we want you to pick up if we call you. We don't care if we call you at 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock in the evening. We don't care if it's outside of your work hours. We expect you to respond. We're going to be sending emails. I expect an answer as soon as I wake up in the morning, that sort of thing. Those things create this burnout that you're talking about.

Don Drew: 11:33

Yeah. And these things aren't hypothetical. Okay. I had a boss about, 30 years ago and he would send emails at two o'clock in the morning and he would arrive at work at six o'clock and anticipate you having an answer to that email by the time he got into work. That was the expectation. And as you can imagine, it was bit of a train wreck.

David Lowry: 11:53
Exactly. And we all know people who are suffering physically because they don't have time to exercise, eat well, or prepare good food at home because, frankly, when they get off their job, they're spent and exhausted. So they buy food that's not very healthy for them. They don't exercise as they should. And it affects us in negative ways physically, doesn't it?

Don Drew: 12:14
I'm sure most of our listeners will relate to at least one of these work or lifestyle factors we've talked about because it's impacting them right now. But the reality for most of us is we often find ourselves experiencing multiple factors at the same time.

David Lowry: 12:28
Don, I think our listeners really understand this concept of burnout and we've commiserated with them on it, but we need to talk about how we can better cope with those feelings of burnout.

Don Drew: 12:39
Let's take a closer look at one particular profession that is experiencing record numbers of burnout and that's the medical profession. And that's going to tell us a lot about how this works against us. Last year, the Center for Disease Control published a study reflecting that in 2018, burnout rates were reported at 32%, while by 2022, that percentage had grown to 46%. Last year, the National Institute of Health published its own study reporting burnout in 2023 to be at 49. 9% among a collection of all types of medical professionals. Now it's tempting to write a lot of this off to COVID as we said, but the reality is far more complex.

David Lowry: 13:19
I think we all can point the finger at one thing or another, but it seems to me like a lot of organizations are becoming indifferent to the environments they have created for their workers. It's sort of like, you're lucky to have a job with us. And if you don't like it, just go somewhere else. Perhaps that's just me. But I have this feeling of organizations not caring about people much anymore. It's like they've stopped trying.

Don Drew: 13:46

It's easy to blame organizations for all of this, but a lot of it is systemic. And I think that's what we're seeing in the case of medicine. It's difficult to pinpoint a single leading cause of burnout among medical professionals because it's caused by a complex interplay of factors. However, research suggests that work related systems are a major driver. So not just the organization, but the systems that are in place. For instance, many medical professionals work long shifts and deal with heavy patient loads leading to exhaustion. Now, there's a lot of reasons why this occurs. Partly it's because we have a shortage of medical professionals. These professionals may desire to spend more time on a patient who clearly needs more attention, but doing so means others might go untreated in the process.

David Lowry: 14:30

Don, I took my wife to the doctor one time and she was suffering from a very painful condition. And. she was sitting on the examining table and I was leaning against the cabinet and I couldn't help but notice the clipboard that he had set down. We were his first patient of the day. When I looked at that clipboard, he had a list of 45 patients that were coming in that day. We were number one, and there were 44 others after us that were going to come in. Honestly, I don't see how anybody does that.

Don Drew: 15:01

I've noticed when I visit my doctor he and his nurse ask a lot of questions, but then they spend most of their time entering data into a computer and not really talking to me. I'm not being critical of them, but I think we need to face a reality here. I have a physician friend who sees this interface with the computer as one of the main causes for her burnout. She's required to keep up these electronic health records, and as you mentioned in that one particular case, 40 some odd people that day. And of course, then she has other administrative tasks, which eat up significant time. So electronic health records and what's required to keep those up demand extensive data entry and documentation, which takes away from valuable time with the patient. And then there's dealing with insurance companies and prior authorizations, which adds another layer of stress and you can see where that's going.

David Lowry: 15:48

I can, and it's very hard. And they're not the only ones. I'm going to talk for a moment about our favorite profession education. They're really having a bad time of it. They juggle responsibilities like lesson planning, grading, administrative tasks, really large classroom sizes, behavioral problems that nobody will do anything about. Classroom teaching responsibilities, and of course, they all have very limited time available to them. And they get paid maybe some of the lowest of anybody in the nation for what they do. And many

of them are expected to have advanced degrees, be fully up on all the things that they're doing and in their profession. It's really unreasonable. For instance, the cost of their education they can't even pay their bills with their salary that they're making to pay off all of that. And people are saying, well, they shouldn't go into teaching. Well, if no one goes into teaching, then we're going to have a big problem in our country. And this is a factor leading to burnout.

Don Drew: 16:49
I think it's interesting that the Oklahoma School Boards Association has reported that 35% of new public school teachers leave their job after their first year. That is indicative of a pretty serious problem. You've mentioned several issues, classroom disruptions, behavioral problems and in some cases even violence are making it difficult to create a positive learning environment and drains teachers emotional energy. There is pressure in addition to all that to meet standardized test scores and hold students to high stakes assessments. It all p iles up and it's this piling up that is, driving such high levels of burnout.

David Lowry: 17:28
How do we handle these feelings that we have, this frustration, that turns into anger or depression?

Don Drew: 17:35
I think it's important to recognize that none of us are without inner resources. Burnout, or feelings of being burned out, are just that, they're feelings. They are not the only reality, and so we do have options. I have found that people who find a successful path through burnout choose one of three options. One, they change their situation. Two, they change their view about how they think about their situation. This often means taking specific actions to counter feelings of burnout, or three, they come to peace with their situation and find new ways of getting what they need from it. But as we've discussed in previous episodes, it's easier to think about what we don't want and see ourselves as victims of our circumstances than to focus on what we do want and see ourselves as masters and creators of our own lives. The path to peace in this instance is to equip yourself with an ability to decide for yourself.

David Lowry: 18:28
We talked on this program about the Dreaded Drama Triangle, which is, of course, having to see yourself as a victim or feeling like you're persecuted and things like this. And the only way out of those things is to become a creator and work from there. And I love the three things you've talked about. One, change your situation. You may think I can't

change my situation. I'm in my fifties. Who's going to hire me? But you might be surprised at what's out there. Start looking. The very act of putting your name out there or looking around can do wonders for you. The second one you came up with was really good. You can learn to change how you view the situation. There have been times in my career where I do my work. I don't say nothing to nobody because I don't want to be a part of the negativity that goes on in the office and that sort of thing. I keep my head down and I make the things I love about my job, the focus of my job. That's changing the way that you look at. The third one, of course, coming to peace, finding new ways of getting what you need sometimes you may find yourself in a situation, and I've been fortunate in the educational world, to be able to try a new thing, maybe to focus on a new course I want to develop, or to put my attention on students in a new way. Try new ways of doing my job. Sometimes there is flexibility and maybe we've not been willing to explore all of that. But those three things can do wonders to creating a more peaceful life for you.

Don Drew: 20:01
With work related burnout hovering in various studies, somewhere between 50 and 75%. The impact to our personal, relational, and business concerns has to be significant. Let's explore in our remaining time, some practical ways to approach burnout. Burnout often sneaks up on people, leaving them feeling exhausted and depleted.

David Lowry: 20:20
Exactly. It can happen before you know it.

Don Drew: 20:24
And so the first thing to remember is that self care is king.

David Lowry: 20:28
Yes, getting some sleep would be a good idea.

Don Drew: 20:31
Somewhere between seven and nine hours a night is really required for people to keep their energy levels up. We can do with less sleep than that, but we pay a pretty serious toll for it.

David Lowry: 20:41
I know, and it's so tempting, Don, to sit in front of your laptop or whatever and scroll your social media before you go to bed, but you really need to have a windup routine of some sort.

Don Drew: 20:53

Yeah, absolutely. And the food that we take into our body has a big effect on us. So how often is it that we're at work, we're in a stressful situation, we get our lunch break and we sit at our computer and we eat some pretzels or crackers or something like that, or drink a soda and we're on the computer our lunch break is over, we just go right back to our work. We're not taking into our body those things that we need that helps us relax. It's both the food and the experience of slowing down and enjoying a meal.

David Lowry: 21:25
Last year, I did something I hadn't done for a very long time. I started taking my lunch to work. But it wasn't just any lunch, Don. I thought about it. I thought about the kind of foods that I wanted to eat. They were healthy foods and that's all I took. I brought my lunch to work and it made a great difference. I was looking forward to what I was eating, was more mindful of it. And it didn't take all that much more time. And it eliminated that temptation to eat the bad foods out of the vending machines or to go out with friends and eat at places that were nearby that weren't so good.

Don Drew: 21:59
There's a physical aspect as well that helps us like getting enough exercise or finding practices that help us with deep breathing or muscle relaxation or those practical things we can do to help us relieve stress. Because at its heart, burnout really is stress. It's just an amplified form of stress and it's stress that is, has become overwhelming. Anything that we can do that helps relieve stress in general actually helps us to more effectively learn how to deal with burnout.

David Lowry: 22:29
Don, in another show I want to have a entire program dedicated to, meditation and contemplation, which is one of the ways that I wind up the day and the way I start every day. We've talked about all those sorts of healthy things we can do, but there's some things that create space in your brain as well and create a better attitude and give you a little more emotional boost. And those are having good hobbies and activities you enjoy outside of work.

Don Drew: 22:54
Sometimes we get to a situation or a place in life where we need to get some outside help and it could be that a good therapist could help as well.

David Lowry: 23:01
Sometimes the problems are just too big for us and we need other ideas. We need to somebody feed us ideas to give us a way out.

Don Drew: 23:10
If you're a regular listener we emphasize these self care solutions a lot. And there's a reason why, , they really do work. They really do matter. They really are essential to peace. They're a great place to start but if you're experiencing professional or work related burnout, you've got some additional actions to consider.

David Lowry: 23:26
One of the things that we encourage is to communicate with people that could make a difference in your life, such as your manager, the people you work with, and you might have a conversation that says, listen, I want to be a good worker. I want to give you a hundred percent when I'm on the job here, but I can't do that if I'm constantly depleted or worn out. I've got to make some changes in my life. I need some ways of recharging. I need to change my work habits a bit. I need some help on this. Start having that conversation, not doing it in an accusatory mean-spirited or demanding way, but get people to understand what's happening to you.

Don Drew: 24:06
At this point, David, some of our listeners are probably saying to themselves things like talking with their manager, changing workplace culture and enforcing boundaries are impossible in their given situation. Recovering from burnout takes time and self compassion. So, people need to be patient with themselves. They need to give themselves some time and distance to consider this situation and a new way ahead.

David Lowry: 24:30
The important thing here is that to determine that you will not allow yourself to be victimized any longer. And we've given you the three things that you may have to do, but one of them is you may have to make a change. And the common denominator to all of the three major things we talked about is you do have to change something. It's either change a new job, change the way you look at something, find new meaning in something, but those three things require you to change something. And, there's an old saying, if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got.

Don Drew: 25:06
Let me go back to just one thought here about medical professionals that I've been working with over the years. And I want, I'm thinking of a particular case where a woman who I know was suffering from burnout in her medical career. And she decided to go on a resilience retreat in which she was asking the question, what do I do? Do I kind of reframe my head around the job that I have? Am I going to keep going? What's going to happen? And I just had a joyful conversation with her a few days ago. She has sold her practice and

is now opening a theater. And I've never seen her so excited. And, so many of us seem to be suffering from burnout right now but being attentive to that, taking action on it, making good decisions, we can find a way through.

David Lowry: 25:54
Don, today, we looked at the prevalence of burnout in modern American life and some of the devastating effects it can have on us, but we also found hope in seeing ourselves not as victims of our personal and work circumstances, but as empowered people capable of making decisions about our lives and what must be changed, whether through our thinking or circumstances.

Don Drew: 26:17
As always, the answer includes some level of self care, but it also demands thoughtfulness and reflection followed by positive action. Thanks for listening to Peaceful Life Radio. We'll look forward to talking with you again next week.