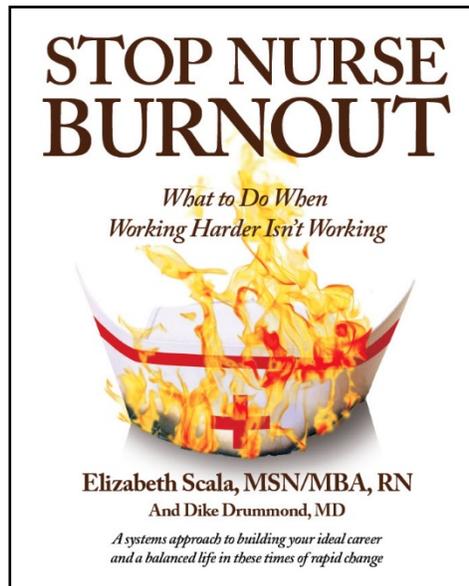


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HEAD TRASH #2: REALIZE BURNOUT IS NOT A PROBLEM

Burnout is a challenge to be sure. It is not a problem, though. Here’s what I mean.

PROBLEMS HAVE SOLUTIONS.

When you apply the solution to a problem, what happens? The problem disappears, right?

Problem + Solution = No Problem

Example:

Here is the purest example of a problem I can think of for a professional nurse: an empty IV bag.

What happens as our patient's IV bag reaches near empty? You got it . . . we hang a new bag. In the world of a nurse, an IV bag is something we check on frequently.

There is no finer example of a one-step solution than the hanging of a new bag to a close-to-empty IV medication.

So, an empty IV bag is a problem you can solve.

You wash your hands, restart your patient's pump, smile, and thank the nursing gods that you got a simple problem like this in your workday.

What about burnout? Is there the equivalent of an IV pump you can use to restart burnout and make it go away? The answer is an obvious "no." There is no one-step, permanent solution here.

THE IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

- The reason you can't find a one-step solution for burnout is *not* because burnout is impossible to prevent.
- The reason there is no solution is this—burnout is not a problem.
- Burnout is a *dilemma*.

di·lem·ma; noun - A situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two alternatives—especially when both alternatives are either undesirable or mutually incompatible.

In common language, we speak of being on the "horns of a dilemma." A dilemma is a never-ending balancing act. Here's the burnout dilemma.

DILEMMA: PRODUCTIVITY VS. BURNOUT

If you push your productivity too hard, you burn out and productivity falls. What you and your employer are seeking is a healthy balance of solid productivity at work without driving your energy account balances below zero and causing burnout. This is true whether you are employed by a large organization or are self-employed.

How do you "solve" a dilemma?

The short answer here is you don't.

- You *solve* problems.
- You *manage* dilemmas.

Your ability to distinguish between problems and dilemmas is a key new skill that will allow you to treat and prevent burnout. This *problem vs. dilemma* distinction is one you must learn to see clearly in order to build a fulfilling, balanced life.

POWER TIP:

Any time you find yourself struggling to “solve a problem,” question your assumptions.



Ask, “Is this a problem or a dilemma?” and proceed accordingly.

Learning to recognize and manage dilemmas makes your life easier.

FOUR STEPS TO MANAGING A DILEMMA

Once you recognize you are facing a dilemma and not a problem—as in the case at hand, dealing with burnout—use these four steps to manage it effectively.

1. DEFINE the two horns and the optimum balance point.
2. Design a STRATEGY to create the balance you seek.
3 – 5 New Habits
3. Build a SYSTEM to monitor the effectiveness of your strategy.
4. TWEAK your strategy and your system as often as needed.

THREE PROBLEM-SOLVING TRAPS FOR NURSES

We are problem solvers by our nature, our training, and our conditioning. We are always looking to find a solution to our patients' problems. We have a finely-honed sense of urgency as well. Because of the very nature of the pace of healthcare, we do everything we can to assess our patients and act on our evaluation in fifteen minutes or less.

We tend to see everything as a problem, and we derive our sense of worth and confidence from our ability to solve the problems around us.

Then, there's burnout. We make the mistake of thinking burnout is a problem too. We try to solve it over and over again and are unsuccessful. This is where a whole new layer of head trash tumbles in.

Rather than recognize burnout as a dilemma and work on a strategy, a large percentage of nurses will do one of these three things instead.

1.) Give Up

If you can't find a solution, it must be impossible to solve, right? You look all around and see many of your colleagues struggling in a similar fashion. Your programming has you work harder and try to figure this out all by yourself, despite your exhaustion. Eventually, many nurses simply give up on the possibility of having the life they want. Burnout is often a chronic condition.

2.) Play the Victim

Much more commonly, nurses slide into playing the role of the victim. I am not saying you are being victimized here. There is no perpetrator. No one is sitting in a smoke-filled room plotting to knock your life out of balance and deliberately torture you with EMR, staffing shortages, committee work, or patient satisfaction surveys.

Victim mode is a creeping change in your locus of control. You begin to believe you are not in charge of your life. You feel like you are swinging in the breeze, a helpless victim of the next administration order that comes down the pike.

The following behaviors are three signs you are playing the victim:

- 1.) Blame
- 2.) Justify
- 3.) Complain

Any time you find yourself doing one of these things, you are playing the victim. In most cases, you missed a chance along the way to take more charge of your circumstances. Now, you feel stuck. You don't see a solution, so these three options feel like the only reasonable thing to do. This behavior is very common among nurses, as you well know.

Playing the victim is learned helplessness.

Blaming, justifying, and complaining never work. These three behaviors will never get you what you want. You will only alienate the very same people who could help you out of the downward spiral.

Did you know there is a popular conception in healthcare management circles that nurses are just a bunch of whiners? Listen to their stories and you will see that many administrators are bombarded with nurses who do nothing but walk into their office to blame, justify, and complain about everything. They want something to be done about the issue at hand, yet are unable to offer any suggestions. Or, what's worse—they don't even go to management but instead just gossip and complain in the break room to their colleagues about everything that's wrong with the workplace. The constant repetition of victim behaviors is what causes administrators to give up on burnout prevention and deal with nurse turnover instead.

Playing the victim is one of the few things that is more common in nurses than the symptoms of burnout themselves. This head trash has got to go if you are going to get more of what you want going forward.

You can un-learn this behavior.

Doing so will make a big difference for a simple reason. When you blame, justify, and complain, you are giving away your power to change things. Instead of figuring out what you want and making it happen, you are venting your discomfort and then going right back to the miserable status quo.

Playing the victim means you missed an opportunity to take charge. When you catch yourself in victim mode, you will realize that at some earlier point you had an opportunity to take more control of the situation and you missed it.

You might have noticed the opportunity come up, but you did not take it. Or, you might have missed it completely. Either way, recognizing you are playing the victim gives you a second chance to take charge. Ask yourself these questions:

- What do you really want to have happen here—instead of the thing you are complaining about?
- What would you have to do to get that different result?
- What is the smallest first step you can take to begin turning this around?
- When are you going to do *that* instead of blame, justify, and complain?

I encourage you to recognize the victim when it pops up. Use it as a sign to get crystal clear on what you want in this situation. Then, take charge of the situation as much as possible.

3.) Find a Work-Around

Everyone knows that nurses are notorious for finding work-arounds. It comes out of nurses' mouths when they say things like, "Oh, I know how we can get to those supplies without entering the code to the stock room."

There is no work-around here, especially when we talk about burnout. Here is my experience:

- The origin of burnout is always multifactorial.
- A successful strategy for the treatment and prevention of burnout is always multifactorial.
- Creating your ideal career and an amazing life is always multifactorial.

There is no one thing. There is no work-around and no shortcut, no matter how much you may wish for it. The work-around is a universal form of magical thinking. The key is to recognize the presence of a dilemma and focus on building an effective strategy to end the downward spiral. The good news is that your strategy will ultimately only have three to five components. All it takes is a small number of little changes to get you back on track to your ideal career.

LET ALL THE HEAD TRASH GO

Treating or preventing burnout or building your ideal nursing career is always a combination of a number of little changes. Clean out your head trash and put together several new actions that get the results you are seeking.

As long as you remain focused on what you want and dedicated to taking action to implement the tools in your life, you will find that every new action produces a new result. The results of your new actions often add up in an exponential fashion. When you begin to live more on purpose and take actions to create your ideal practice, as little as two small changes can make a huge impact.

Get ready to put a number of things in play, one at a time. Then, you can sit back and watch the math of your new results take place.

KNOW YOU HAVE A STRATEGIC PARTNER NOW

Now that you understand burnout is a dilemma, you can recognize this book and the tools it contains as potential building blocks for your burnout prevention strategy. Build your own personal strategy by picking and choosing the ones that work for you and trying them out in your own career and life. You will quickly learn which combination works best to reach your goals.

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BURNOUT IS NOT THE ONLY DILEMMA YOU ARE FACING RIGHT NOW

I will point out additional dilemmas as we bump into them going forward. You will recognize them as stubborn places where you are struggling at the moment. Just to get you started, realize that electronic documentation and work-life balance are both dilemmas too. Go figure.

I will be reminding you to stop trying to solve dilemmas and work on effective strategies instead, giving you examples as we go along.

Taking out this head trash by calling out dilemmas when you see them is perhaps the most important trip to the dumpster of them all.

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