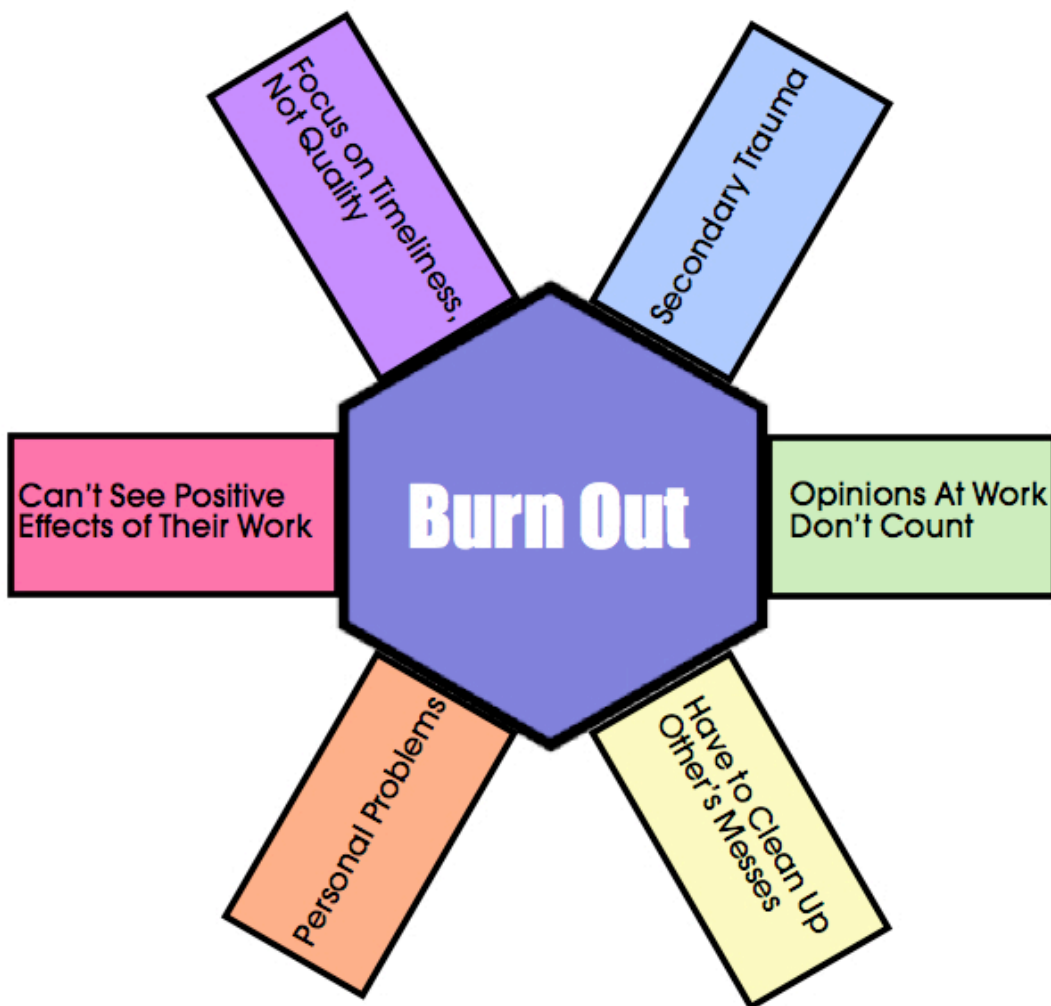


# Ideas to Prevent Pathways to Burnout

*in Child Welfare Services*



Protecting children from abuse and neglect is one the most noble professions one can choose. Child Welfare social work is complex, challenging, and it can be incredibly rewarding. Decisions made by Child Welfare social workers can positively, or negatively, impact children for the rest of their lives.

But what happens if the social worker gets *burned out*? What happens if the climate in a Child Welfare office becomes *disengaged*? How might that impact the way a social worker engages a family, or investigates a child abuse referral, or sets up a case plan, or decides where to place a child?

## Impact on Children and Families

Some potential impacts of *burned out* practice on a family are:

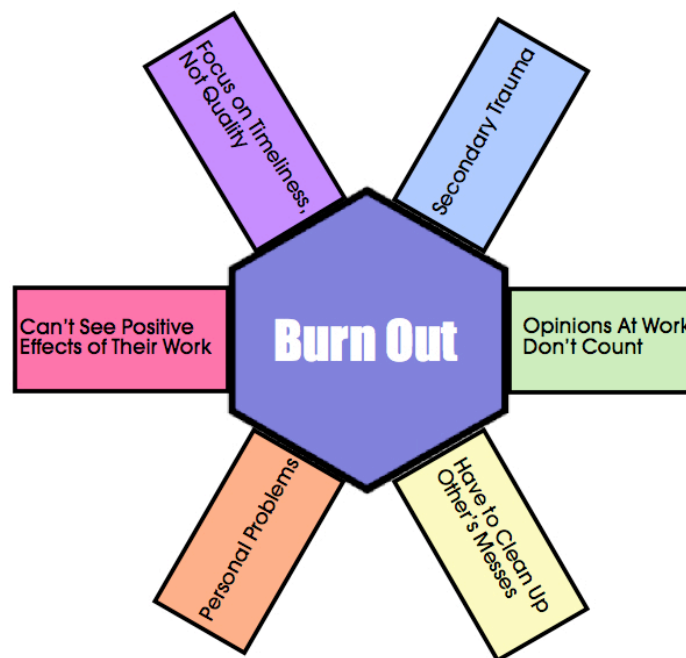
- Missed Motivational Events - when a child welfare social worker knocks on a family's door to investigate an allegation of abuse or neglect, this knock at the door has a high potential to motivate a family to make needed change to increase safety in their family. But if the social worker presents as not caring and being disengaged, the family can simply "wait out" the home visit, feeling reasonably comfortable that no further action will be taken.
- Incomplete Investigations - Burned out social workers can miss critical information about a family during an investigation. Another way to think of a burned out social worker is to think of them as *disengaged* and therefore not committed to *doing whatever it takes* to gather critical information to determine if a child is safe in their home, or not.
- Inaccurate/Unsafe Assessments & Decisions - If a burned out social worker does not engage a family, or gather and verify critical information pertaining to the child abuse allegation, the likelihood of making an *inaccurate* decision is high. A burned out social worker might leave a child in an unsafe home. Or they may remove a child from a home that is safe, or that could easily be made safe.
- Ineffective Case Plans - Burned out social workers tend to use "cookie-cutter" case plans that have no relevance to the needs of a particular family. It has been said that poorly written, ineffectual case plans can keep cases open in the Child Welfare system 6 - 9 months longer than cases with case plans that are tailored to a family's specific needs, that increase safety for their children.
- Ineffective Case Management - When a family hasn't been clearly told why their child is in protective custody, or told exactly what is expected of them to safely reunify with their child, and when the intervention does not match the actual needs of the family, case management services often do nothing more than add additional stress to the family. Burned out social workers tend to fall behind on setting up reunification services for

families, and they sometimes struggle to gather critical updates from service providers on a regular basis. Once again, burned out social workers are at risk of making unsafe and inaccurate decisions and recommendations to the Juvenile Court about returning a child home, or freeing them for adoption.

- Unsafe & Unfamiliar Placements - A social worker who is burned out is less likely to take the time and effort to search for relatives or family friends who might be safe caregivers for an abused or neglected child. A social worker who has become disengaged from the reasons they became a child welfare social worker in the first place is less likely to take the necessary steps to keep a child in their original school if they have to be removed from their home. Each time a child changes schools, research has shown that their academic progress can fall behind by 4 - 6 months. (Pecora et al. (2003)
- Bad Outcomes - The Child Welfare system has three primary outcomes for kids: safety, permanency and wellbeing. Children who have burned out social workers have less of a chance of meeting these critical, and deserved, outcomes.

### The Gravitational Pull Toward Burnout

It's clear that a social worker that becomes burned out can have a myriad of negative impacts on children and families. More concerning is the strong gravitational pull for a social worker to become burned out. The following illustration demonstrates six primary pathways to burnout.



- Focus on Timeliness, Not Quality - As the Child Welfare system has become increasingly focused on outcomes and gathering data, the *spirit* or *the art* of social work has lost its standing in the ranks of what's most important in Child Welfare. With increased focus on clear outcomes, policy makers and Child Welfare administrators keep a close watch on timelines. There is increased focus on how quickly a child was seen, how frequently a child was seen, ensuring that court reports are turned in timely, and that cases and referrals are closed within statutory timelines. Several social workers have told me, "There is no way I can do what is needed to be done with the families on my caseload and meet deadlines. So why even try?" Child Welfare social work becomes a string of compliance-based and procedural tasks. It's true that lack of timeliness can increase an Agency's exposure to lawsuits and fiscal penalties from federal and state government. There is good reason for the focus on timeliness, but the entire field of Child Welfare needs to take a moment to reflect on why they exist and what they are hoping to accomplish. Sometimes the best way to keep a child safe, or to ensure that their wellbeing and permanency needs are met, requires a social worker to just sit with a child while they cry, no matter how long that takes.
- Secondary Trauma - Andrew Turnell, author of *Signs of Safety: A Solution and Safety Oriented Approach to Child Protection Casework* says that, "Aside from war, Child Welfare social workers see the worst of what people can do to each other, on a daily basis." The climate in Child Welfare offices does not tend toward coddling social workers when they see horrible cases of child abuse and neglect. Social workers, supervisors, managers, caregivers, service providers, attorneys and judges are equally susceptible to the effects of Secondary Trauma. The symptoms of Secondary Trauma are essentially the same as the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to Erika Tullberg in her webinar called *Building Resilience Among Child Welfare Staff* one of the first symptoms of Secondary Trauma is a loss of perspective and critical thinking skills. Other symptoms are withdrawal, feelings of overwhelm, headaches and stomach aches. (Tullberg, 2010) The problem is that most people who have Secondary Trauma don't even know that they have it. It's like living in Los Angeles and forgetting that the air is filled with smog. One is most aware of the poor air quality when they are either driving toward L.A. and they can see the smog on the horizon, or when they are driving away and can actually see it in their rearview mirror.
- Opinions at Work Don't Count - One of the fastest ways to become disengaged in the work place is to notice a problem, offer a solution to the decision-makers in the office, and be shut down. It's common to have hierarchical structures in Child Welfare offices. Managers become silo'd from supervisors, supervisors become silo'd from social workers, and social workers don't always feel that they have a voice in the way things work in their office. Another way that social workers feel like their opinions don't count is when they make a

recommendation to the Juvenile Court, and the Court ignores the recommendation and does the opposite.

- Cleaning Up Other's Messes - It's common in Child Welfare to have staff turnover. Because of the high demand of the job, the fairly low pay, and the effects of secondary trauma, the field of Child Welfare struggles with high rates of turnover. In response to a 1995 APWA survey, 90% of states reported difficulty recruiting and retaining Child Welfare caseworkers. States reported turnover rates ranging from 60 - 85%, with one county in Massachusetts reporting 100% turnover in 1996. Staff turnover equals uncovered caseloads. Typically the highest performing social workers are tapped to cover uncovered caseloads, or they are tapped to "clean up" subpar work of lower performing social workers. The very act of calling on higher performing social workers to clean up the work of other social workers can quickly burn out the best and the brightest in a Child Welfare office.
- Personal Problems - It's common in any workforce for individuals to suffer personal tragedy. Whether it's a sudden illness, the death of a loved one, having to care for an ailing parent, or home foreclosure, social workers are affected by stressors in their personal lives. Personal problems can cause social workers to lose focus on their work, or dramatically reduce the energy they have to attend to the demands of a Child Welfare caseload.
- Can't See the Positive Effects of Their Work - Child Welfare services are typically delivered in two parts: Investigations and Case Management. If a social worker is in the *front-end*, or investigations, they only work with families for 30 - 45 days. If they remove a child, the case goes to a Case Manager, or a *back-end* social worker. It's rare that a *front-end* social worker is told how a child they removed is doing over the long run. It's rare that people change their behavior in 30 - 45 days, so *front-end* social workers rarely see the positive, long-term impact of their work with families. Similarly, *back-end* social workers don't see how a child does after the case is closed. They don't always get to know if a child graduated from high school, or fell in love for the first time, or that once home, the parents and children are now thriving together.

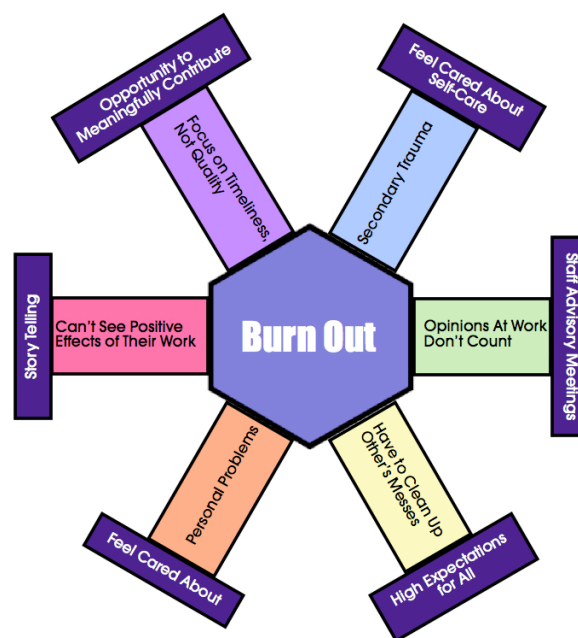
## Organizational Resilience

Researchers Glisson and Hemmelgard conducted a 3 year study of 250 children served by 32 child mental health workers in Tennessee in 1998. They discovered that organizational climate does in fact impact outcomes for kids. They discovered that if there are *High Expectations* of the staff, that if staff *Feel Cared About* by their supervisors, and that if staff has *Opportunities to Meaningfully Contribute*, that a few important things happen. Kids who were served by practitioners with healthier organizational climates have better outcomes. And offices with healthier climates have *half* the staff turnover. (Glisson & Hemmelgard, 1998)

The Gallup Organization has made similar findings when it comes to engaging staff and having positive outcomes. (Wagner, 2006) They have shown through research that work units that have higher employee engagement have higher productivity, less staff turnover and less workplace accidents. Gallup has identified 12 Elements that improve employee engagement. Employees are asked to rank their experience at work on a scale of 1 - 5, 5 being "most true":

1. I know what's expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

## Ideas to Block the Paths to Burnout



There are many ways to block each of the six paths to burn out. A good place to start is to meet with a group of staff in your office to select just one path to block. Your group can brainstorm ideas to keep your organizational climate healthy, and shift the path to burnout to a path to engagement instead. When you have mastered that path, try blocking another path. The gift of burnout is that it's a clarion call to create a climate of engagement and celebration. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

#### Focus on Timeliness, Not Quality - Starter Ideas for Blocking Burnout:

- Meet with staff to get their opinions and brainstorm their ideas about how to better meet timelines.
- See if there are tools, or newer technologies, that can help social workers to work more efficiently.
- Celebrate when timelines are met - determine rewards and celebrations you can do individually or as a group when key deadlines are met.
- Encourage staff to select 1 - 3 referrals or cases to "deep dive" and make more of an impact. Focus on small change and small acts of engagement so this doesn't feel like "one more thing".
- Tell stories of any success that a social worker in the office had with a family. Email short blurbs to the rest of your team about that success. Choose success stories that remind social workers why they decided to do this work in the first place.
- When tackling problems or challenges, use an Appreciative Inquiry approach: What is working well? What are we worried about? What needs to happen next?

#### Secondary Trauma - Starter Ideas for Blocking Burnout:

- Provide drinking water for staff. Research has shown that wellbeing increases when people are well hydrated and are eating nutritional food. (Rath, 2010)
- Have weekly potlucks consisting of healthy food
- Start a "Biggest Loser" competition in the office. Set an entry fee and penalties for weight gain. In one office the pot of money quickly grew to \$700 and the ten social workers who voluntarily participated in the competition lost a total of 160 pounds.
- Plan staff hikes, jogs and walks on the weekends. Start a walking group at lunch time.
- Finish meetings with a reflection, "When I reflect on my practice this week, I most proud of \_\_\_\_\_."
- Ensure that staff has access to the Employee Assistance Program.
- Tell stories of success with families. Tell the stories verbally in meetings, write a monthly one-page newsletter of stories in your office, or email great stories as they happen. You can pick a theme in your group, such as placing kids in familiar environments, and tell stories about your team's success on this goal.

- Find one or two things that your staff can “master” each day - an antidote to trauma is mastery. Ask the social workers for ideas of what would empower them if they could “master” that one task each day, or each week. (Tullberg, 2010)
- Post positive inspirational quotes, or data showing your team’s success, or family engagement tips, or self-care tips around the office. Rather than have the doors and windows filled with posters telling people what not to do, replace them with positive messages.
- Go to [www.bucketbook.com](http://www.bucketbook.com) and register so you can send “drops” to people when they do something great. Encourage staff to recognize each other by sending a “drop” that describes the act of engagement or teamwork they did. Drops can be collected and put into a bucket. In one office, they draw two drops from the bucket each week - one for a covered parking space for the week and the other for the work unit’s use of an extra county car for the week. Staff is incentivized to recognize each other so they can have a better chance of winning these two prizes. After the drops are collected each week, they are returned to the recipient and are typically posted in their cubicle. This one approach can dramatically improve the climate in an office.

#### Opinions at Work Don’t Count - Starter Ideas for Blocking Burnout:

- Post anonymous suggestion boxes around the office for the manager to review weekly.
- Have Staff Advisory meetings between the manager and social workers on a monthly basis. At these meetings, the manager can share their newest initiatives and get staff’s opinions about how to best implement the initiative, or to express their worries about the initiative. Staff can also share their observations and concerns directly with the manager in this meeting. It’s helpful if minutes are taken at these meetings and shared with all the staff in that region or office. It’s a nice touch to finish the meeting with “awards” for staff, generated by members of the Advisory Team. Award topics can range from “Above and Beyond” to “Team Player” to “Supervisor of the Month”. Participation on the Advisory Team should be voluntary.
- When solving problems or starting new initiatives, make a point of having meetings between management, supervisors and social workers to get input on the change or initiative.
- Enforce policies on a “harassment-free” safe workplace.

#### Have to Clean Up Other’s Messes - Starter Ideas for Blocking Burnout:

- Increase communication among teams to ensure fairness and accountability when cases are transferred between work units.
- Rather than have one social worker cover a caseload, consider having a team cover uncovered caseloads, and have each social worker cover the aspect of the case that is most interesting to them, or that plays most to their strengths.



- Have Quality Assurance supervisors, and supervisors, spot patterns of subpar social work and work quickly with managers and Human Resources to get that social worker help, or ensure there is accountability to avoid a chronic situation.

#### Personal Problems - Starter Ideas for Blocking Burnout:

- Keep in Touch - When a social worker is out of work dealing with an unexpected family problem, send emails, periodically call the social worker to check in on them, or even send cards of encouragement to their home.
- If there is a death in the social worker's family, consider attending the funeral to offer support from the office.
- Consider an office collection to send financial support to help a co-worker deal with an unexpected tragedy.
- Consider setting up a potluck rotation to have food delivered to the social workers' home.

#### Can't See Positive Effects of Their Work - Starter Ideas for Blocking Burnout:

- Encourage *back-end* social workers to call the *front-end* social workers to tell them about positive success stories in the child's life.
- Pick a signature theme in your group, such as same school placement, and tell stories anytime a social worker has success keeping a child in their same school after they come into protective custody. Highlight what the social workers on your team did to support the assigned social worker to make it possible for that child to have one less trauma associated with their removal from home. Share the stories via email, or at unit meetings, or in short newsletters.

## **Conclusion**

Child Welfare social work is difficult work. But the work that social workers do with society's most vulnerable children has the potential to help the children who need it the most, to strengthen families, to strengthen neighborhoods, and to strengthen society. When a social worker slips into burnout, how can the collective team rally around that social worker, to help them to get back to the practice they intended to do when they started their career? How can *you* take action to impact the climate in your office to prevent burnout?

*If you would like more information, training, or consultation related to preventing burnout in your offices, please contact Karen directly at [Karen@OutcomeInnovations.com](mailto:Karen@OutcomeInnovations.com).*

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