THE EXISTENTIAL CURE FOR BURNOUT

VIRTUE MEDICINE, P.C.  ~ JANETA TANSEY, MD, PHD

CURING BURNOUT
What is Burnout?
Burnout is a sustained experience in which perceptions of powerlessness, isolation, and a loss of identity undermine our beliefs in life’s meaning and purpose, and interfere with our will to choose and act authentically. Burnout, also described as demoralization, impacts the personal, social, spiritual and physical dimensions of our life, exists on spectrum of severity, and can present in any phase of life. Associated with depression, anxiety, anger, and illness, burnout disrupts life’s joyful and purposeful activities. And as a hijacking of our ability to experience a well-lived life, persistent, severe burnout is a true existential threat. But this paralysis in living is not without a CURE, for a renewed sense of power, identity, belonging, and meaning in life.

AS FAR AS WE CAN DISCERN, THE SOLE PURPOSE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE IS TO KINDLE A LIGHT OF MEANING IN THE DARKNESS OF MERE BEING. —C.G. JUNG

THE EXISTENTIAL CURE
While not all cures are painful, some can be, particularly when they challenge inertia and demand a shift in perspective that threatens cherished beliefs. The interventions described here are not passive, and they cure only insofar as they are applied to free us from self-deception, ignorance, and weakness of will, empowering us to engage in honoring what is good and true. Because the feelings and beliefs that accompany burnout are pernicious and full of suffering, the process of curing isolation, powerlessness, and a loss of identity requires compassion and courage. Do invite both virtues to the questions posed here, and remember that you are not alone in this very-human journey.

AGENCY—Explore your possibilities, seize choice

AUTONOMY—Will to Power, not enslavement

AUTHENTICITY— Honor yourself, for your sake

RESPONSIBILITY—Will to Meaning, with courage

Honor your NEIGHBOR

HONOR TIME—Plan a GOOD DEATH

Persevere in SUFFERING and ABSURDITY

Live IN THE WORLD—Celebrate embodiment

Lean into the OPEN QUESTION

BEING, NOT DOING—Rediscover wonder

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Ten existential principles are laid out here. Each has a short description, with challenge questions for reflection and journaling. The questions may be uncomfortable or feel foreign. This is to be expected, as burnout is a serious condition, and an effective cure could never be superficial. Some principles may strike closer to home than others, as we are not always struggling in all areas, but all ten are important for both curing and preventing burnout, and worthy of attention.

1: Agency. There is much about the suffering of burnout that prompts a stubbornly counterproductive conservation of energies, making the same choices over and over through habit and fatigue, circumventing a mindful intention to see and own our multiplicity of choices. But we are designed to be agents of our own lives, and we have the capacity to deliberate, to change, and to choose—and to do so with passion and commitment. Ask: What possible choices have I discarded or ignored or missed, and why? What choices would I consider if I was not held back by fear? By habit? By others’ expectations? What choices would free me to be passionate, invested, and committed rather than merely cooperative?

2: Autonomy. We are not infinitely free, but we have freedoms. Many of us are complicit with what Nietzsche called a slave morality. This is the naming and blaming of those with power as vicious, while praising ourselves for “humbly, cunningly, patiently, wisely, cooperatively” submitting. This false morality appears when we cultivate a perverse pleasure in pointing to our long-suffering or to our “insightful” perception of power inequities as sufficient to virtue, rather than owning our ability and responsibility to step out of enslaving attachments and habits. Ask: When have I put energy into blaming others, protecting my own inertia, fear, or false modesty instead of owning my will to be master of my own potential? What would I do if I abandoned a “slave” narrative and chose to own my power to be a light in the world without waiting for others to give me space or permission?

3: Authenticity. To know oneself is a lifetime project; we are storied, dynamic, evolving beings with multiplicity, individuality, and depth. To conscientiously discern our genuineness, with an unfolding knowledge of who we are and what we value, is to see ourselves justly. Each of us is unique and irreplaceable. And exercising compassion without shaming allows us to invite imagination, creativity, kindness, and wisdom to integrate our complexities into its authentic whole. Ask: What makes my life and my story, both its light and its shadows, exist as beautiful, potent, purposive, and deep? What is my irreplaceable, unique mission? What would I believe if I really knew myself as worthy of honor and justice?

4: Responsibility. We live in a tension between what we are, and what we are called to become, still unaccomplished. Clarity of vision about our authentic nature may not be sufficient for action, even with ample choices and sufficient freedom. Viktor Frankl states that since each of us is being questioned by our very existence and the circumstances in which we find ourselves, a Will to Meaning is to courageously answer for our own lives with concrete, real-time responses that satisfy our search for significance. Each of us must fulfill our own responsibility to and for ourselves in action. Ask: How can I better show a commitment to my authenticity in my daily responses and choices? How would a courageous responsibility for what I have yet to accomplish change the way I live today?

5: Honor your Neighbor. The isolation of burnout comes from disruptions in our attachments to others. Conserving our energies, we often restrict the power of other human beings to demand from us, giving disproportionately
to our own self-preservation. Of course, there is a time for healthy boundaries. But to allow others to speak, to demand, to beseech, to challenge and sharpen, to love and cherish, is the cure for the demoralization of solipsism. The cure is not without cost. When we honor our neighbors, we allow them some power over us, and limit our freedoms. But this dialogical space between self and other is the precious heart of the ethical life. *Ask:* Who are the others to whom I am uniquely accountable and connected? How will I choose to allow these others to speak into my life, perhaps uncomfortably, for the sake of my own purpose-filled and meaningful existence? Where will I allow the other to limit my freedoms, for the sake of justice, and of love?

6: Honor Time, and plan a good death. Is there any deception more pervasive than believing that death always remains far off? If so, perhaps it’s the deception that we can wait until tomorrow to do what needs be done today, because we’re just waiting for “a better time.” While we have no freedom to choose in what time we live, nor to fully choose the form of death, we often quietly pretend as if we do, and this prevents us from designing our lives with a clear-minded awareness of our finiteness and finality, creating those little cracks where demoralization and burnout take hold. *Ask:* What do I want my life to demonstrate, celebrate, and create now, knowing that I will die? How am I actively investing in my life’s finality, honoring my potential, in the foreshadowing of my death? What is my relationship with temporality, and how do I embrace the gift of time rather than trivialize its passing?

7: Persevere in suffering and absurdity. Existentialism takes seriously the challenge of our meaning in an impersonal, mechanistic, chaotic natural world, with all its limits on our freedoms and causes of our suffering. Rather than conflate our freedom and safety beyond what is true, or abandon ourselves to nihilism, both of which will inevitably result in demoralization, the challenge is to loosen our attachment to either-or dichotomies and submit as gracefully and powerfully as possible to living as both free and not-free. Camus had a very specific image for us in *The Myth of Sisyphus.* Even though Sisyphus was doomed by the gods to roll the boulder up the mountain forever—a suffering absurdity, Camus tells us that Sisyphus chose to be happy. The limits on our existence need not extinguish our power to choose our attitude and to make meaning where we will. *Ask:* Where is there an unavoidable absurdity or suffering in my life? What choices do I have in the midst of that serious obstruction to define my meaning, purpose, and joy? How can I cultivate inner peace despite absurdity, and how is that an authentic act of my identity and will?

8: Live in the world, and celebrate embodiment. While the natural world has certain indignities, absurdities, and suffering, we are inextricably connected to our physical existence. The pleasures and wisdoms of living in our bodies should be embraced as part of living fully. Cultivating sensory, kinesthetic, and aesthetic experiences are powerful antidotes to burnout, orienting us in the world with such joys as beauty, music, deep sleep, warmth, calming breath, and all that goes with bodily ease and satisfaction. *Ask:* What physical practices and comforts would help me bring back a sense of harmony, meaning, and growth? How might I inhabit my spaces in a more conscious, nurturing way?

9: Unknowing and Not-knowing: Curiosity and the Open Question. When we are burned out, it takes a bit of radical courage to resist organizing the world into tidy (false) answers and the empty reassurances that we crave, particularly questions that are associated with suffering. But what burnout needs is a renewed and childlike curiosity about what...
is not yet known, but full of possibility. One of the most powerful things we can do is look for and lean into the open questions for their promise of growth, searching for depth of meaning. A multiplicity of closed questions, or the too-easy “truth” constrains our awareness of agency and our authenticity. Ask: What easy or superficial answers have I accepted, when I should be wrestling with what is not known? How uncomfortable am I with admitting to myself or others that I don’t know the answer? Can I practice a loving-kindness and curiosity in NOT knowing, without falling into anger or despair? What relief might come if I allowed myself to consciously not-know for a while?

10. Being, Not Doing. In all the activities of human perceiving, believing, judging, willing, acting, feeling, and even in our authentic commitments to a meaningful life, a kind of malaise can occur with the effort of it all. It may be that for some, the drive for activity begins to function as an ersatz existence. We might mistake the vigorousness of productivity for a life full of existential purpose, when in truth, the quantity of our productivity is so much less important than the depth of our authenticity. There is a kind of loneliness in giving ourselves permission to stop and reconnect with the wonder of being alive and full of possibilities. In fact, it is often in the quiet space of surrendered and simple being that we find a renewed capacity to return to our work of authentic doing, with lovely (not frantic!) rhythms. Ask: Am I too busy? Is my burnout a function of mistaking productivity for meaning, or substituting a plethora of activities for true individuality? What would happen to my sense of self and my will to power if I deliberately chose to do less, but aligned each choice more consciously with my sense of purpose?

IN CLOSING – AN INVITATION TO COMPASSION & COURAGE

One of my favorite works is Franz Rosenzweig’s “Little Book,” Understanding the Healthy and Sick. It often comes to mind in my conversations about burnout, because of the encouraging and compassionate way he speaks to his reader, whom he’s discerned is experiencing a paralysis of living. After he lays out the truly challenging cure, similar in many ways to what I have suggested here, he invites rest before returning to the labors of life, and offers a most compassionate and honest summary. “You must be a little frightened. Contrary to our initial agreement, we have dealt with serious matters. Certainly they have become more serious than you expected. The responsibility for that, however, does not rest with me. Life is a serious matter. Ordinarily you are aware of this yourself. You would strongly resent it if your work, your actions and your tribulations were not taken seriously. The things we have dealt with are of the same order of seriousness. They are not more serious. But they are serious. At this point we must part company. I hope that I am not bidding you farewell forever. We have had such a close acquaintance that I believe that many things remain to be said. Whenever you are able to spare some time come and visit me at my home. You will be welcome.”

It is the nature of being human that we brush up against burnout’s potent paralysis periodically. Sometimes it really takes root and needs an aggressive cure for our survival. And we are surrounded by other persons in various states of similar paralysis, some of whom will be uncomfortable with our efforts towards meaning, because of their own inertia, fear, self-deception, or bad faith. Take heart! You are not alone, your existence matters, and on this journey towards a richer authenticity, I too bid you a warm welcome. Join me.

Janeta Tansey, M.D. Ph.D. is a physician, ethicist, and professional-executive coach in Iowa City, Iowa, specializing in existential and humanistic care.