

## For Some, Life During Pandemic Has Led to Burnout

### In the News

After a year of living with the restrictions imposed to combat Covid-19, including living under "quasi-house arrest," as Sarah Lyall, a writer for *The New York Times*, put it -- some people are now experiencing "a late-pandemic crisis of productivity, of will, of enthusiasm, of purpose."

In other words, pandemic burnout.

Lyall admitted to being afflicted herself: "Sometimes, when I try to write a simple email, I feel I'm just pushing disjointed words around, like peas on a plate, hoping they will eventually coalesce into sentences. Am I excited about my daily work in this month of April, 2021? I would have to say that I am not."

Recently, the *Times* asked its readers to describe their work-related challenges in what is now month 13 of the pandemic, and nearly 700 people responded, including a clergyperson, a pastry chef, an I.C.U. nurse, a probation officer, a fast-food worker, budget analysts, librarians, principals, college students, real estate agents and others. Despite their different circumstances, Lyall said, "their mood was strikingly similar." One respondent said that no matter how many lists she makes, "I find myself falling back into deep pajamaville."

Another respondent said, "Once the world went into lockdown a year ago, I felt like I logged onto work and I'm still waiting to log off."

Other evidence of burnout comes from an Employee Benefit Trends Study conducted by Metlife in December and January, which found that workers felt worse than they did in April of 2020.

The study included 2,651 employees. Some 34 percent said they felt burned out, up from 27 percent a year ago; 22 percent reported feeling depressed, up from 17 percent last April.

Such results hardly seem surprising following 12 months that for many people included losses of home, job, security, face-to-face social interaction and/or loved ones. Even some who didn't lose any of those things are feeling stress as many normal routines of life have had to be put on hold for so long that the hold is starting to feel permanent.

And it's not just mental health that's taken a hit from the pandemic restrictions. Physical well-being is affected as well when motivation slumps. Some now speak of a new number for the virus: Covid-19+15, with the 15 referring to pounds gained while hunkering down at home.

The *Times* article focused on burnout among people still in the workforce, and a recent study from *The Harvard Business Review* concluded that burnout levels are highest among Millennials.

But retirees aren't immune from pandemic ennui. The TWW team member who brought the *Times* article to the team's attention is retired, but he said that both he and his wife had read the article and said, "Oh yeah! That's me!"

What's more, even if retirees aren't directly affected by job loss, they see it happening among their grown offspring and know about the pressure their kids are facing with having their own children constantly at home. And, of course, the virus itself is no respecter of age.

The *Times* essay didn't suggest any quick fixes, but did report that some respondents to the questionnaire said they were meditating, exercising or re-engaging with a spiritual practice. Other sources, such as the *Forbes* article in the links list below, suggest steps that one might take to counter burnout, but, of course, taking those steps may require a level of motivation that cannot easily be mustered up when feeling that one has nothing left in the tank.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[We Have All Hit a Wall. \*The New York Times\*](#)  
[Is Pandemic Burnout Draining Your Motivation and Energy? Here's How We Can All Promote Recovery. \*Forbes\*](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

Unlike some motivational pieces, the "In the News" section above did not end with "Five things to do to combat burnout" or any similar list of behavioral adjustments prescribed to lift one from the morass of burnout. Such lists do exist, and one can be found in the *Forbes* article in the links above.

But we make two observations:

First, we all differ in circumstances, emotional fortitude and endowed personality traits; some of us are easily overwhelmed, some of us are almost "unsinkable" and many of us are somewhere in between. Thus, not all of us will readily identify with the frazzled state described in the *Times* article. Some will say, "Yeah, that's me" and others will say "Nah, that's not me."

Second, the wisdom gained as we experience the vicissitudes of life suggests that the usefulness of general self-help activities and quick-fix prescriptions is limited. For many, the primary technique (if that's the word) for weathering such difficulties can be called "muddling through."

But, we at *The Wired Word* think that muddling through is a place where God's word meets us. Exploring that will be the topic of this lesson.

### **The Big Questions**

1. To what degree do you think your overall mood and energy at this time is affected, if at all, by the restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic? How has your mood and/or energy changed as the pandemic period has lengthened?

2. Do you have a strategy to keep yourself on an even keel during this time, and if so, what is it?
3. One dictionary definition of muddling through is "to cope in a more or less satisfactory way despite lack of expertise, planning or equipment." How much of life would you estimate that you muddle through? Why do you think that is the case? Do you think God means for it to be that way? Why or why not?
4. In scientific circles, "muddling through" is both praised as a highly sophisticated form of problem-solving and denounced as no method at all (see, for example, page 88 in ["The Science of Muddling Through"](#) ). How do you think it should be considered for dealing with life issues?
5. If your congregation has gone virtual in some form during the pandemic, are you as faithful in attendance, giving and discipleship as you were previously?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Genesis 7:7, 10, 12, 16-17, 24**

*And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. ... And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth. ... The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. ... And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in. The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. ... And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days. (For context, read 7:7--8:18.)*

This truncated account of Noah's family riding out the great flood indicates that they were on "lockdown" for at least 150 days, though, when we add the flood abatement period described in Genesis 8, we realize they were unable to leave the ark for over a year. (See [a detailed timeline here](#).)

While the time in the ark for Noah and his family is not an exact parallel to the pandemic shelter-in-place orders, the extended isolation and lockdown are similar. Many retellings of the great flood story emphasize God's saving of Noah's family and the representatives of the animal species. But the emotions the family felt must have run the gamut: grief, anger, anxiety and trauma of the near obliteration of the human race, including people who may have been some of their own relatives and friends. Flood burnout must have been rampant onboard.

Taking care of all those animals would have kept them busy, a blessing in one sense, as it may have helped keep their minds on work rather than on the enormity of what was happening. But it surely must have been burdensome as well. How did they cope just with the problem of waste disposal? And keeping all the animals fed, and natural enemies separated? When did the humans sleep? *Could* they, in fact, get any rest, with all the noise and animal smells?

How did they manage their own hygiene needs? Were they claustrophobic, climbing the walls, suffering from cabin fever, the way many people are today? How long was it before they cried out in exasperation or desperation, "How long, O Lord?"

But since they made it to the end of the flood with all the animals still alive, they must have muddled through, with God's help.

**Questions:** If Noah or one of his family members had kept a journal while in the ark, how do you suppose the subject matter of the daily entries during the last days on board differed from their first days on the ship? How have your most recent days under pandemic restrictions differed from the first days? Do some of your dreams reflect pandemic experiences?.

### **1 Kings 19:4**

*But [Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."* (For context, read 19:1-15.)

In the scene pictured in this verse, the great prophet Elijah sounds overwhelmed. Ironically, he had just had a major success. In a confrontation with some 450 prophets of the god Baal and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah, Elijah, alone representing Yahweh, proved that his God was the only one with power. (You can read the details of that encounter in 1 Kings 18.)

But here in chapter 19, Elijah is anything but pumped up from his resounding triumph in the name of God. In fact, hearing that Israel's Queen Jezebel is after him because he trumped her prophets, Elijah hightails it out of the area. Then, when he is safely away, all his energy leaves him, and he begins to feel sorry for himself. He has had it with being a prophet and he wants to resign his commission. He is burned out.

That's not merely guessing at Elijah's state of mind. This is one case where the biblical author tells us what's up with the prophet by using metaphor and by quoting Elijah's own words. The metaphor is in the detail that Elijah, alone in the wilderness, "sat down under a solitary broom tree." That is a poetic way of conveying how Elijah felt -- all alone like that single tree. And then Elijah's words let us look into his mood: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

What happens next, however, tells us that God is not about to let Elijah give up. The prophet goes to sleep, but God twice sends an angel to wake Elijah and give him food -- nourishment for what is to come. And then God directs Elijah to make a forced march to Mount Horeb, where instead of looking for a fresh vision or renewal, the prophet promptly takes refuge in a cave. That apparently was not what God had in mind, for God comes to Elijah in the cave and says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The prophet's response is whiny and shows again how burned out he feels. "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (Actually, that was quite an exaggeration. There were thousands in Israel who remained faithful to God, but when we are exhausted, we often fail to see the hopeful reality of a situation.)

God tells Elijah to go outside the cave and witness what God is about to show him, but Elijah won't go. So God sends first a great wind, and then an earthquake and then fire, but none of these things cause Elijah to budge from his hidey-hole. But after all the pyrotechnics of nature are over, there is nothing but the "sound of sheer silence," and it is that which finally lures Elijah to move to the mouth of the cave.

In the end, God gives Elijah more work to do: "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. ..." When he gets there, he is to anoint new kings for Aram and Israel, as well as begin schooling a new prophet who will eventually be Elijah's successor.

God doesn't seem very sympathetic. Here is poor Elijah, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually exhausted from his work as God's prophet, with people out to kill him, and God won't even let him rest -- won't even let him hunker down in this cave in peace. And when the weary prophet finally does stagger out of the cave, God adds new work to Elijah's to-do list! Elijah must muddle on.

But here's the real surprise: That is what works. God tells Elijah to get back to work, and Elijah does it. He goes on to again work successfully for God right up through his final hours on earth.

**Questions:** To what extent does this get-back-to-work response seem like a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" (or a "get back on the horse when thrown") approach to depression? Why might that approach work in some instances and not in others?

When has reimmersion in your work or other responsibilities helped you get past burnout? When has reimmersion only made matters worse? What, if anything, did help? Is there a time you felt like giving up and then knew God was internally nudging you to keep going? If so, did you resent or welcome God?

Does it help if you have specific added assignments, such as God gave to Elijah, to keep you going forward?

### **John 16:33**

*I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!* (For context, read 16:25-33.)

In the verse above, the Greek word translated as "persecution" can also mean "trouble" or even "pressure" or "stress." (In the original Greek, the word is derived from a verb meaning "to press" or "to squeeze.") The NIV Bible translates it as "In this world you will have trouble."

In the context verses, Jesus was telling his followers of troubles and even persecution to come to them after his death. But applying the verse to ourselves, while we seldom face persecution, we can identify with the statements, "In this world you will have trouble" and "In this world you will have stress." Our own experience bears out the truth of Jesus' words. We know about pressure; we live with it much of the time. Stress is the emotional wear and tear we feel from the pressure of life, and extended stress can result in burnout.

Jesus' statement tells us that it is impossible to live in this world without some sort of troubles. To live is to have stress.

**Questions:** How can Jesus' words here help you when feeling pandemic fatigue? What do his words ask of you when you feel that you have nothing left to give?

### **James 4:13-15**

*Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." (For context, read 4:13-17.)*

James here urges us to acknowledge that circumstances cannot be counted on to remain unchanged. Thus, we can make plans, but we also need to accept that things can change in a moment, and what is "normal" can suddenly be gone. In such cases, we should remember that our lives are in God's hands, and do the best we can, in light of the new circumstances -- which is probably a good definition of "muddling through."

TWW team member Stan Purdum comments, "When I was a young person, I naively believed that for most problems, there were solutions 'out there' somewhere, that if you let the right people know about your difficulties, or got in touch with the right agency, things would be fixed or solved. Life has since taught me that that is often not so. Yes, there are helping agencies. Yes, there are wise people. But in many circumstances, there is only so much others can do. Some of what remains is up to God -- and some is up to us, and we have to muddle through."

In practice, muddling through means putting one foot in front of the other, somehow doing what needs to be done today. Muddling through means dealing with what comes up. Along the way, we may even have to back out of previous commitments and leave some other good things by the wayside. We generally have to start from whatever mess we find ourselves in and muddle our way out, doing the best we can today, and leaving it at that until the next day, when we again do what we can.

Part of the wisdom of some of the 12-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, is that they don't focus on lifetime solutions; they talk about daily strategies -- staying sober one day at a time, for example. That's a muddling through sort of approach, but remarkably, it is often the only way that works.

As we muddle through our own difficulties, we may meet others having troubles of their own, perhaps far worse than our own, and in the midst of our struggles, we do what we can to help them. But to us, it's not that big a deal; we were just muddling along and happened to give a hand to somebody. We didn't do it to "earn points" or receive credit. We just did it.

So imagine our surprise at the final judgment, when we find our self among the redeemed, and Jesus says to us, "I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me" (Matthew 25:40, CEB)

**Questions:** When, in the midst of "muddling through" some difficulty, did you become aware of God's presence? How did that change things? How have you helped, or been helped, by fellow muddlers?

Were there expectations (vacations, gatherings, goals) that you had to muddle *past*? What did that feel like? Did you feel like God was present with you on this part of the journey?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Comment on this: What is "normal"? Is any period of time so without problems for some that we can define it as normal? In 1939, as war with Germany was looming over England, the great writer C.S. Lewis said, "We are mistaken when we compare war with 'normal life.' Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil ... turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of crises, alarms, difficulties, emergencies."

2. Respond to this, from TWW team member Mary Sells: "I discovered I no longer feel antsy or compelled to leave the house. I accept my limitations rather than dreaming of more. That is my version of burnout."

3. Discuss this, from TWW team member Heidi Mann: "Jesus said, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens ...' (Matthew 11:28-30), but that begs the question, *how* do we do that, exactly? Especially when we can't 'go to church' to worship in a space with a bunch of others around us, buoying us with voices joined in song (for example)? Maybe some people get rejuvenated by enjoying more time to read the Bible and related books and to pray. Maybe some have joined with and found support through faith communities far away, where they could not worship or do Bible study were it not for digital conferencing platforms."

4. Consider this, from TWW team member Jim Berger: "There are many forms of weariness within the same experience. I realized that 'Retired' was a privileged class, because my income was secure. My son lost his well-paying job and was out of work for six months. Parents with small kids at home had a different experience from empty-nesters. And let's also remember the other stressors of 2020, the year that felt like a gut-kick: 33 named hurricanes and storms, the huge fires in the western states, the election and the lies. There was no shortage of stressors."

5. Reflect on this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "Early on in the pandemic, I discovered I was working and working and working. Because I did not have the normal 'proof' that I was earning my keep I was overcompensating. A fellow pastor, one much younger than I, told me to set a time when I was clocking out, and to stick to it. I found that helped.

"Because I have been dealing with my weight all my life, I belong to Weight Watchers. At the start of the pandemic, in-person meetings were canceled. I don't do as well with virtual meetings and virtual weigh-ins. For one thing, I didn't really have a working scale, and once I bought one, I refused to go back to it when I didn't like the results. During 2020 I stopped joking that I was putting on 'the Covid 19' when I realized I had gained more than 19 pounds. By year's end, I had gained 30 pounds. In January we were able to return to in-person meetings, although the meeting places nearby were closed. I had to travel a little ways. However, since January I've

taken off half of the weight. That absence of personal presence and accountability had really taken a bite out of my normal resolve."

6. One TWW consultant reports: "Our pastor is often in contact with funeral home directors, one of whom recently told him that the number of suicides, drug overdoses and domestic violence victims he has received has 'skyrocketed' over the past year. We are in one of the 'stricter' states when it comes to government edicts, and the governor has not specified the criteria necessary for removal of all restrictions. There is a widespread sense that things will never get back to 'normal.'"

What can you do to help people who are tempted to commit suicide, to overdose or to take their frustrations out on household members? How does the Gospel message of salvation help in these circumstances?

### **Responding to the News**

Here are some verses for your personal meditation this week:

- "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit." --Psalm 34:18
- "When I thought, 'My foot is slipping,' your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul." --Psalm 94:18-19

### **Prayer**

Orient me, O Lord, so that your will guides me as I muddle through difficult times. In Jesus' name. Amen.