



Learning to Enjoy Abundant Energy... How It All Fits Together

By Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D. & Duane Trammell, M.Ed.

Why is it almost impossible to be an effective servant-leader when we are in burnout? How do predictable behaviors sneak up on us and suck us into burnout? As leaders in a research team, we have shared a twenty-five year journey with our Clients in pursuit of answers to these questions. And in the process, we are discovering the unlimited energy of Kidspirit!

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Brief Summary

If you are in burnout, it is almost impossible to be an effective servant-leader. We can intellectually understand the key elements of energy renewal, but applying the elements consistently can be a challenge. Often energy renewal or play does not carry the same value as accomplishing work. Adding to this challenge...

- Advances in technology “being wired” 24/7 makes it difficult to disconnect from work and have dedicated renewal time.
- The way adults “play” often involves competition and can cause more stress instead of renewal.
- Well-intentioned role models taught us to “make” ourselves get our work done (at any cost) and devalued play as a “waste of time.”

Four Key Concepts that Work In Tandem

1. **WHEN WE OVERWORK INTO BURNOUT, OUR LEFT BRAINS TAKE CONTROL AND OVERPOWER OUR RIGHT BRAINS, REFUSING TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE NEED FOR BALANCING PLAY.**

The standard advice for getting out of burnout is to start a regular exercise program, eat a healthy diet, drink lots of water, and keep a positive attitude. When we are already overworking our left brains—the center for focus, discipline, deadline-driven work, analysis, and critical thinking-- this approach asks us to be even more disciplined with food, exercise, and reorganizing priorities and work tasks...more left brain. There is no room in this plan for the right brain to contribute and allow some “rest time” for the left brain.

2. **NEXT, OUR RIGHT AND LEFT BRAINS ENGAGE IN A WAR WHICH ADDS TO THE ENERGY DRAIN. WE CALL THIS STATE “DUALITY.”**

Duality is about feeling pulled in two directions. The left brain tells us to choose the healthy choice, an orange for our mid-afternoon snack, but the joy-starved right brain tells us we “need” a Snickers bar to keep going. Then a mental tug of war ensues. It is more of an energy drain and we get added guilt for choosing the candy bar. Duality also shows up in childish behavior. We work continual 14 hour days, go to the company party, feel like we deserve some fun, drink too much, make fools of ourselves, and offend other guests. Our right brains are like bad little kids out of control.

3. **WE MUST DISCOVER AND ADDRESS THE PARTS OF OUR LIVES THAT ARE CAUSING BURNOUT.**

It is important to identify personal burnout symptoms and create an early warning system to address them. There are some universal symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, worry, lethargy, over-eating, negativity, and apathy. Sometimes, we want a quick fix and turn to a medication to get rid of the symptoms. It is essential to get to root causes of burnout and use the right brain to help find “fun” ways to exercise, choose healthy foods, and dedicate time to renewal or play.

4. **REDISCOVERING KIDSPIRIT IS THE DOOR TO REVERSING AND PREVENTING BURNOUT.**

If you learn to rest your left brain by switching over to right brain activities, you will find you have more energy, more patience, better collaboration skills, more effective listening, and a more open mind. Generate a list of 40 ways to experience joy, renewal, and energy in 2-5 minutes and spread these throughout your work day. As you begin to open up small periods of time for renewal, you will begin to reverse the negative work spiral which leads straight to burnout.

Practical Applications

TUCK 2-5 MINUTE ENERGY BREAKS THROUGHOUT YOUR WORKDAY

To get started, think of things that are fun for you. Examples might include: telling a joke, drinking an energy beverage, checking out a weekend get-away on line, browsing a favorite magazine, taking a short walk around your office, calling your spouse, etc.

PLAN SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO EVERY WEEKDAY EVENING AND WEEKEND

If renewal isn't scheduled, it isn't likely to happen. Plan some mini-vacations on weekends. Take at least an hour of weeknights to do something you enjoy with your spouse and/or kids or by yourself. Step completely away from work.

RECRUIT A LEARNING PARTNER TO HELP YOU STAY COMMITTED TO THE PLAN

Burnout patterns can be hard to change, but it is easier with support and encouragement from others. Find someone to share and practice strategies with and have fun reporting on progress. It is also a great way to get new ideas for fun and generate new options.

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Early in our work on Servant Leadership, we discovered that it's almost impossible to be an effective Servant-Leader if you are in burnout. You'll be tired, grumpy, impatient, and controlling just when you need to be flexible, encouraging, and collaborative. Having a balanced life is an essential foundation for Servant-Leaders so in 1985 we researched and created an approach to life/work balance that proved to be life-changing. It has been used by thousands of Clients and we wrote a book to describe it called, *You Don't Have To Go Home From Work Exhausted: A Program to Bring Joy, Energy and Balance to Your Life*. Many people came to our seminars and read the book, being delighted by the fresh ways of thinking about designing one's life so you can recover from burnout and enjoy abundant energy. Yet they (and sometimes we) were not always making the most important step which was to put these concepts to work in their/our lives. We kept wondering why we couldn't do this consistently. What was the obstacle?

At first we discovered inner mental barriers such as old scripts..."When all your work is finished then you can go out to play." For adults in highly responsible positions or simply a parent, your work will never be completely finished. So you need to unlearn and replace that internal rule

that works great when you're a kid but will put you right into burnout as an adult. We discovered that play is the balancing essential to keep work energized and inspired. So it's essential to replace that old script with a new one that says something like, "Make sure to enjoy time to stay creative, energized and refreshed!" or "Have you played today?" Today, it is even more of a challenge to break from work with the advances of technology; wireless enables us to check email when waiting on our mocha cappuccinos at Starbucks or complete a proposal draft while "relaxing" on the beach. The lines between "play" and "work" have been permanently blurred.

Then we identified that most adults (us included) had very low personal value for play and had actually forgotten how to play in ways that renew our spirit and energy. When adults play we typically follow rules, keep score, work hard to win (compete) and constantly measure performance. It can be agony to "play badly" whether it's golf, tennis or Sudoku. We want to play at our best. To complicate matters worse, popular culture is infatuated with competition more than ever. Many of the highest rated primetime television shows feature talent competitions, weight-loss competitions, dating competitions, cake decorating competitions,

interior decorating competitions, and physical endurance competitions. Virtual sports and computer games base their appeal on beating your score. And while there is nothing wrong with enjoying competition, we recognized that this is all coming from our left hemisphere, the same part of the brain that dominates when we are working. As a result we won't experience energy renewal from this form of play. Additionally, competition can create a temporary adrenaline rush that produces a shot of energy, but can't be sustained. Adrenaline blocks the immune system and can be highly addictive. So becoming dependent on adrenaline can lead to unconsciously putting things off till the 11th hour so the crisis of a last minute rush can "energize" us into action. We become an arsonist, creating "fires" without realizing why. We have forgotten how we played as kids which happened primarily from the right hemisphere. And herein lie the secrets of abundant energy.

In our research we found 15 characteristics in the way very young children play that are diametrically opposite to traditional adult play, and all 15 generate endorphins which relieve stress, enhance creativity, block fatigue and pain, strengthen the immune system and reverse aging

Here's where we have been puzzled for the two-plus decades since we first began to teach this counterculture approach to life/work balance. Why do we get it intellectually but then can't seem to bring it successfully into our lives? What's the barrier? It's almost like one of those fascinating Magic Eye patterns where you are challenged to stare at a very busy visual pattern on a page and if you can relax your eyes, in about 2 or 3 minutes a three-dimensional picture within

the picture jumps out at you. But you must first learn how to re-focus your eyes to see it. In what we call Energy Engineering, the same is true. You must understand all the parts of the system, and then be able to put them together in your life. You must be able to unlearn several old beliefs and habits in order to rediscover things you did naturally as a child. And as you do, you will experience new energy, new creativity, improved health and so many more refreshing benefits.

HERE ARE FOUR KEY CONCEPTS WHICH REVOLUTIONIZE THIS APPROACH AND BECOME A SYSTEM.

I. When busy, highly responsible adults overwork ourselves into burnout, there's a very logical reason why we can't get ourselves to do the three things we are told relieve burnout and stress. Our overworked left hemisphere takes over refusing to acknowledge the importance of balancing right hemisphere ways to refresh. Here's what's going on. We are told to get regular exercise, cut out junk food and all the treats we love (refined sugar, caffeine, salt, greasy food)...oh yeah and drink more water. And now, we're on this spartan diet and where the heck are we supposed to find time to work out when we're overwhelmed trying to get all our work done? And, last but not least, we're told to have a good attitude!

We made a breakthrough when we realized that when in burnout we were overworking our left hemisphere, the control center for our work ethic and the part of our thinking that keeps us focused and on track, assesses, evaluates, and can be the critic who typically bullies, bosses and shames us into getting our work done. As children most of us were praised for hard work. Play was seen as something frivolous and unproductive. As a

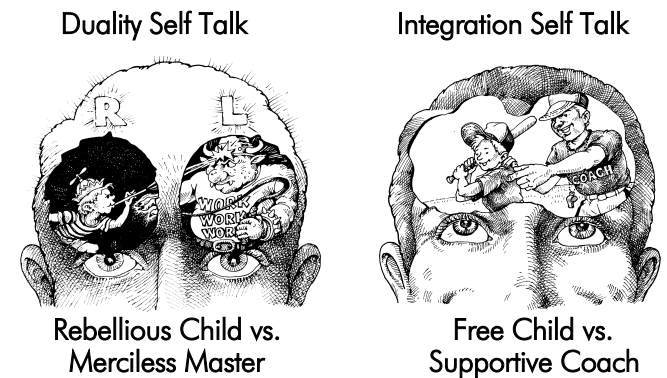
result, we tend to overvalue work at the expense of equally valuable ways to renew.

Early in life most of us have role models that teach us to value one way of thinking over the other. Our left brains learn to become unrelenting task masters, pushing away any right brained interruptions in our effort to get all our work done. We can be overly critical of everything we do, making us have to stay on work-detail even longer. And as a result, the right side of the brain which reflects feelings, playfulness, spontaneity, and curiosity, gets overruled constantly by left hemisphere thinking, which is the site of responsibility, goals, rules, and discipline. If we do this, we lose a great deal of energy and joy in our lives as the adult part of us brow beats our child-like playfulness into more work.

Over-use of our left brains leads directly to burnout and blaming and shaming triggers a revolt from our right brain.

So let's go back to the story where we are told to add to our daily habits regular exercise, healthy eating and keeping a positive attitude. Our list of things we "should" do is a mile long and now we are told that to manage stress we "should" do three more things that don't sound like much fun. In fact, the few ways we are experiencing pleasure are to collapse on the couch and escape into mindless TV after work, enjoy the pleasures of junk food and trade Dilbert stories. In essence, the last remaining pleasures have now been snatched away as causes of burnout. "You think you've got it bad? Let me tell you my sad story!" We relive the day's frustrations as we vent to a friend, not realizing that by simply retelling each frustration and trauma, our brain responds as though the event is happening all over again. We suffer all the consequences of negative neuro

peptides (brain chemistry) as we sink deeper into burnout!



II. Duality (when right and left hemispheres fight with each other) drains energy.

Integration (when right and left hemispheres cooperate with each other) builds energy.

When one part of your personality does not trust or support the other, you experience great energy loss, frustration, and go into burnout! For example, your left brain says, "Go through your entire in-basket before you leave work!" The right brain says, "I'm sick of work so I will just distract you with daydreams or visions of Cheetos and chocolate chip cookies." You read through papers without remembering anything on them. This is duality...the hemispheres at war. When this happens, you get joy starved and stuck due to low or no permission to play. Burnout quickly follows!

Another example of duality vs. integration can be found in two different ways to play...childish vs. childlike. The first, childish, refers to half-brained play...where the right brain is having fun but forgetting about unintended consequences. This can be at the expense of our own reputation, credibility and the safety and comfort of others. In other words, we might be having fun, but with little or no regard about how it is impacting others. On the other hand, when we enjoy child-like play, we are exercising right-brained

spontaneous, creativity balanced by the prudence and wisdom of the left-brain. We don't jeopardize safety or good judgment for the purpose of fun. Childish play is energy draining for those observing it whereas child-like play is energizing both for the participants and observers. This is yet another example of what is lost when we polarize left and right hemispheres versus the unlimited synergy when we integrate the benefits of our right and left hemispheres.

III. Discovering and addressing your symptoms of burnout is essential to good energy management. Identifying your personal symptoms of burnout and checking in with yourself weekly can create an early warning system to cure and then prevent chronic burnout from getting a foothold in your life. While each of us has a unique set of symptoms that describe what happens to us as we slip into burnout, there are some universal symptoms and stages. Identifying yours can help raise awareness and, like a smoke alarm, alert you to what's happening and help you create a system to climb out of burnout and better yet, learn strategies and practices to prevent it.

There is a chemical connection between burnout and abundant energy. When we go through the list of symptoms for burnout (such as anxiety, grumpy, fatigue, insomnia, worry), someone often notes that these also describe chronic depression. And isn't this many times a chemical imbalance? We would agree with this insight. But instead of starting with a pharmaceutical solution, why not begin with a systematic, proactive, long-term solution? We know that our brains emit chemicals directly in response to certain factors. When we don't get regular exercise, we miss the endorphins which are generated with exercise and which re-energize us with euphoric, positive feelings. When we experience stress (traffic,

arguments, anxiety from multiple looming deadlines, money worries, etc.) we get a buildup of toxins in our bodies that drain our energy and put us in a funk!

When we feel anxious, tired and worried, it's hard to choose to take time to exercise when our brains are emitting chemicals that cause us to not "feel" like exercising. And the downward spiral into burnout is set in motion! We are joy starved, fun doesn't sound like fun, and exercise is the last thing on our minds. We get stuck!

Identifying and unlearning negative patterns/scripts is essential to enjoy and maintain optimum health, energy, and productivity. Unhealthy scripts tell us that play is a waste of time, you must get all your work done first, or that play is frivolous and doesn't belong in the work place. Write yourself a new script (i.e. "Enjoy childlike play to keep refreshed, energized, & creative") and post it on your bathroom mirror, desk at work, and other key places in your daily routine.

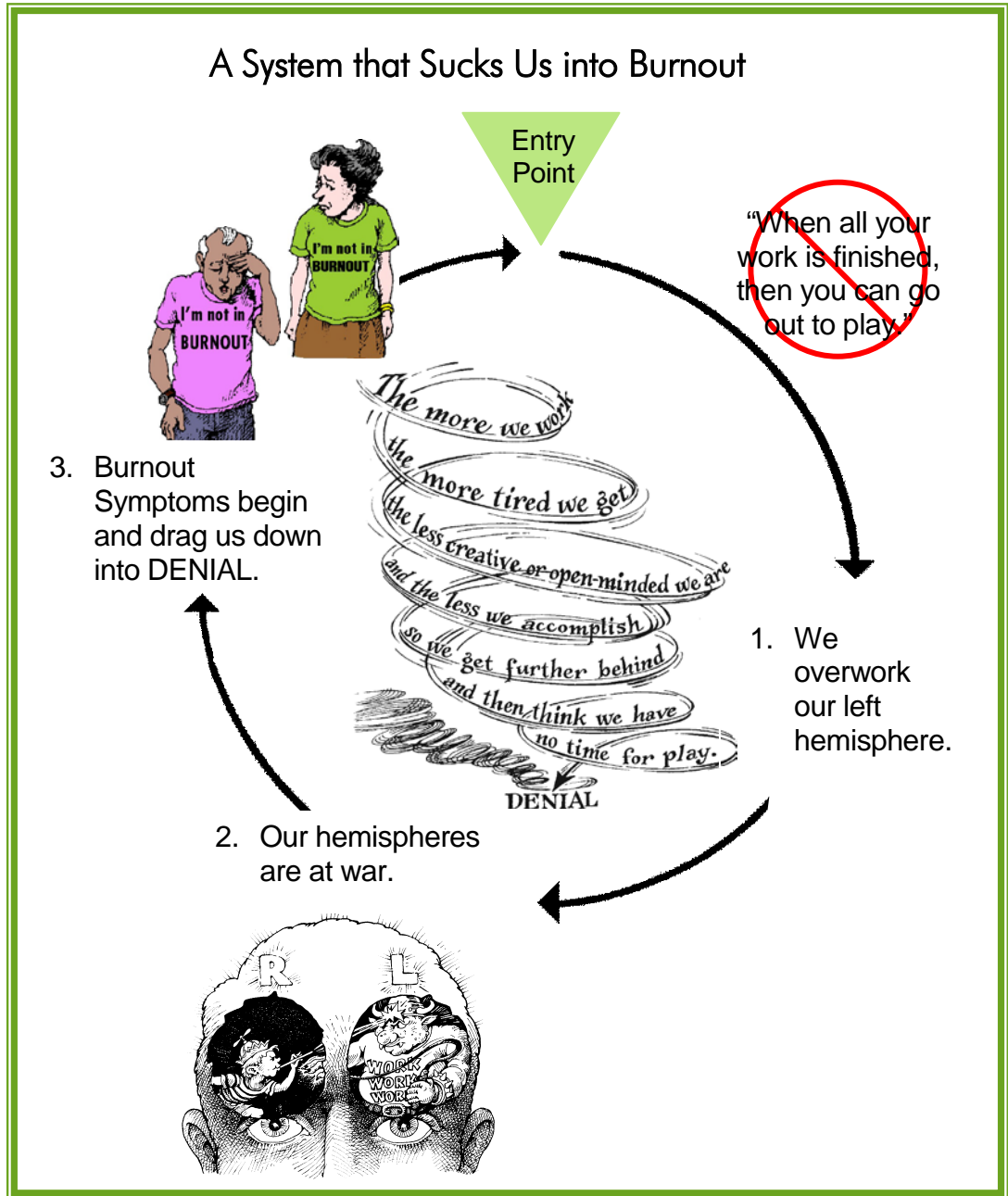
IV. Rediscovering KidSpirit is the door to reversing and preventing burnout. KidSpirit is a term we coined to capture 15 unique characteristics in the ways children and highly creative adults play (renew) that opens abundant energy, creativity and leaps of genius. Spend time with youngsters under the age of six and just observe. Avoid interfering. You'll learn LOTS. You'll find a list of the 15 characteristics of endorphin generating, child-like play enjoyed by both young **children and creative adults** on pages 22-25 in *You Don't Have To Go Home From Work Exhausted!: A Program to Bring Joy, Energy and Balance to Your Life.*

Replenish energy frequently during each day.
Generating your own list of at least 40 ways to

experience joy and fresh energy in 2-5 minutes can be a breakthrough for most weary or burned-out adults. Why 2-5 minutes? Because most adults in burnout don't believe they have any longer to be off duty. But even the busiest of persons can find a few brief 2-5 minute breaks during a day to replenish one's spirit. And, as you do, we encourage you to track the benefits.

Why bother to generate at least 40 ways to do this? At first it seems impossible! In fact most burned out adults get grumpy and resistant when they hear this suggestion. We did this early on with a large group of business leaders who were all experiencing burnout. No adult

As you discover the significant advantages to resting your left brain by switching over to the right (or simply doing something that brings you a small burst of pleasure), you will find that you have more energy, more patience, better collaboration skills, more effective listening and a more open mind. These qualities are all critical for effective teaming, servant leadership, parenting and social intelligence.



could get more than 12 ideas for their list. Meanwhile one manager had brought her children, ages nine and eleven. In the same

amount of time the adults sat stumped, the boy, age eleven, generated a list of 65 ideas and the girl, age nine, came up with 135 ideas. We find this consistently.

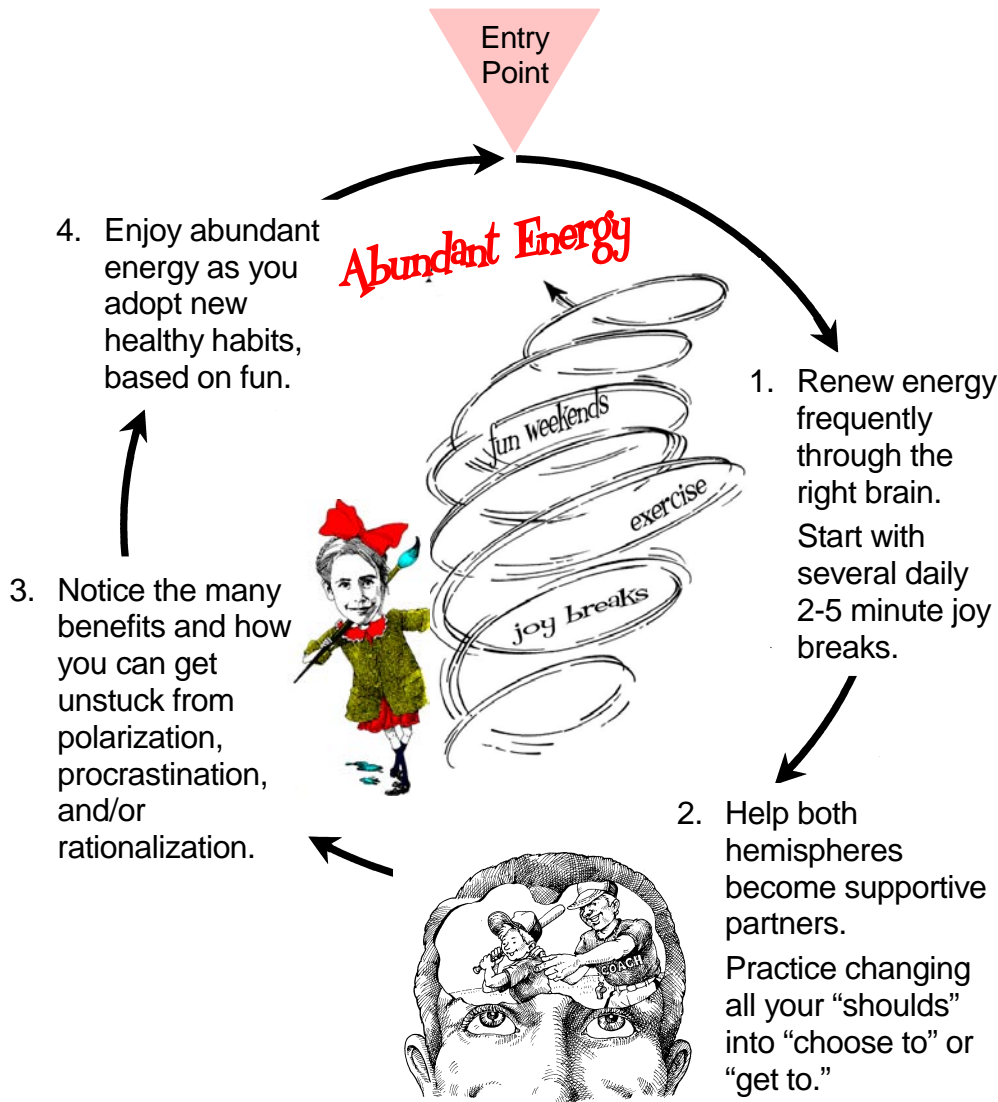
But as we age we are told to “grow up and act our age!” And, as we do, we calcify our lives, our creativity and our enthusiasm. Challenge yourself to get to at least 40 ideas. Making this list, alone,

will give you a breakthrough as you discover that there are endless ways to renew in almost any situation. Some of the most delightful levity which can free us from the clutches of hopelessness happens when we are metaphorically hanging by a tiny branch and it begins to crack!

So, in summary, think of burnout as a system or negative downward spiral. Attention and dedication to work and home responsibilities can begin with good intentions and are necessary for successful careers and keeping a family going. You have a great work ethic, love your work and

want to do the very best for those you serve. We found it of great interest to learn that people who love their work can be at high risk for burnout. Why? Because we have such a deep commitment and satisfaction from serving others that our own

Rediscovering KidSpirit: A System that Breaks the Burnout Cycle and Leads to Abundant Energy



Very young children rarely run out of ways to create amusement in their lives and often find ways to make the most mundane task fun.

needs, such as fatigue and hunger, get overlooked until we are deep into burnout. And when in burnout, we are also in denial. When those who care about us try to make us aware that our work habits are working against us, we feel defensive, unappreciated and criticized. We are least likely to be able to respond constructively. We can easily fall into victim mentality, feeling, - “After all I’ve done for you this is the thanks I get!” Or, “Easy for you to say. You’re not the one saddled with an avalanche of work!” or worse.

If we view these four key concepts as a systems solution, with steps of a problem that connect into solutions and opportunities—we can then begin to listen to our intuition and get curious about creating a set of new practices that work for us.

Going back to the beginning, we all know that the key to healthy, high energy is regular exercise, eating healthy food/avoiding junk food and choosing a positive attitude. Yet if we are deep in burnout we will be very unlikely to do more than feel guilty as we find ourselves unable to get motivated to follow through with any of these three classic solutions. Do you recognize this hemisphere duality fight? Left brain says exercise = good! Right brain says exercise = no fun, do something else. When we realized that these three classic solutions are coming from the left brain at a time when most adults in burnout are joy-starved from an over-use of the left brain, a light of awareness flashed on. What if the first step of burnout recovery is to rediscover ways to tuck small periods of pleasure and enjoyment into each day as a way to build and practice benefitting from energy breaks, (calling on the right-brain to provide balance).

Energy is very contagious, whether it is negative or positive. So when we treat ourselves to a joy break, we begin to energize not only ourselves but

also those around us. And as we begin to notice the many benefits from these 2-5 minute energy breaks, we begin to break the negative bonds of destructive scripts such as those which view joy breaks as a big waste of time that could be used to be productive. That is as foolish as to imagine that you can save time or be more productive by not sleeping. Before long, being sleep-deprived robs you of the balance you need to enjoy your greatest productivity.

The second step is to plan something fun to look forward to in every evening and weekend. If in burnout, you may be tempted to throw down this article with frustration at this ridiculous suggestion. You may be thinking, “I have kids to pick up after school, supper to prepare, a kitchen to clean up, kids to help with homework, paperwork that has to be done from the office that couldn’t get done during the day because I was in meetings, an elderly parent to care for in the nursing facility, and a committee meeting to attend at church. And the weekend?!?!? There are floors to mop, laundry to do, home repairs to make, lawn work that needs attending to, kids to shuttle to practice, and community work that was promised through my job or church.

We agree that every moment of the day can be taken up with responsibilities.

The fact still remains we can only renew when we make a conscious effort to schedule renewal into our busy lives with the same commitment we would schedule our other promises.

Making some part of every weekend a mini-vacation or making the mundane fun is a great way to rediscover the essential benefits of true vacations. As we rest our brains and put work aside for awhile, our creative subconscious is still

busy searching for solutions. So the paradox is that the better you get at mentally stepping completely away from work and problems, the more creative and effective you will be once you return. And I bet all of us can remember some brilliant solution that popped into our mind when we were mentally a million miles away from work. Research on creativity validates that one of the most effective ways to insure heightened creativity is to enrich your life with many diverse interests and enjoy being playful and curious as a balance to being driven and deeply focused in our work. So, go to a movie or a concert on a weekday night, read a sonnet, turn up the jazz CD, plant something in a flower pot, sit on your porch and wave to a neighbor, take a walk around the block, read the sports page, greet someone with a smile, shoot baskets, make eye contact with a check-out person and thank them, play frisbee (no rules, just laughs) with your kid, have a pleasant exchange with a stranger while standing in line, go to a baseball game during the day, vary a tight schedule, drive home a different way, sing out loud in the car...regularly. You get the message; come up with more of your own.

A third and final step, is to recruit a learning partner to help you stay committed to this new plan. The negative patterns that lure us into burnout are strongly imbedded in our habits and life patterns. It will take some practice to recognize and unlearn those habits that are pulling us into burnout. So be gentle with yourself and encourage your learning partner to do the same. The good news is that this is all about learning to nurture yourself into a far more productive way to enjoy life, enjoy far more abundant and productive energy and become a far more fun, interesting and productive servant leader and team mate. The benefits will include significantly

improved health, creativity and energy. Expect to benefit immediately.

A game we have played as a way to measure improvements and create an interesting challenge is to estimate what percent of the time we experience what level of energy. At the beginning for me, (Ann), probably 50% of the time I was at about 50% energy. Then by experimenting with energy breaks and eliminating polarized internal messages I was able to improve my energy to 60%. Then I'd begin to find ways to enjoy regular exercise with a friend and reward myself afterwards and move up to 70% and so on. I now find that I easily enjoy 80 or 90+% energy 80 or 90% of the time. And regaining great energy is not that difficult because I now have so many ways of doing so. If you aren't finding this to be true for you, do let us know. Often a small oversight or change can make a huge difference. Expect to rediscover the unlimited energy of childhood!

Once we are able to live a life of more energy and balance, we have the potential to become better servant-leaders for our families and those we work with. Living a life of serving demands a great amount of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual energy. Becoming a good Energy Engineer can help you achieve that goal.

“It is not important that you write books, achieve high status, etc. It is important that the quality of your life be extraordinary, and that you carry this quality into the work of the world.”

—Robert K. Greenleaf

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at AMCA.com