UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental and physical exhaustion caused by excessive stress. It occurs when people feel overwhelmed and unable to meet the demands made on them. As the stress continues the person may lose interest in or motivation for the role that they wanted to do in the first place.

Burnout is not the same as stress. Stress by in large involves too much – too many pressures that demand too much of someone physically and psychologically. Stressed people can, however still imagine a time when they will get things under control. Burnout on the other hand is about not enough. Being burned out means feeling devoid of motivation and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don’t see any light at the end of the tunnel. While you’re usually aware when you are under a lot of stress you don’t always notice when you’re burned out.

Anyone who feels overworked and undervalues is at risk of burnout. Work-related causes of burnout include:

- Feeling like you have little or no control over your work
- Lack of recognition or reward for good work
- Unclear or overly demanding job expectations
- Doing work that’s monotonous or unchallenging
- Working in a chaotic or high-pressured environment

But burnout is not solely caused by stressful work or too many responsibilities. Other factors such as lifestyle and certain personality traits can contribute as well.

Lifestyle causes of burnout:

- Working too much, without enough time for relaxing and socializing
- Being expected to be too many things to too many people
- Taking on too many responsibilities, without enough help from others
- Not getting enough sleep
- Lack of close, supportive relationships

Personality traits that can contribute to burnout:

- Perfectionist tendencies, nothing is ever good enough
- Pessimistic view of yourself and the world
- The need to be in control, reluctance to delegate to others
- High achieving, Type A personalities

Burnout is a gradual process that occurs over an extended period of time. The signs and symptoms of burnout are subtle at first but they get worse as time goes on. Learning to recognize these early symptoms as warning signs and taking action is important to arresting the progression of burnout.

Physical signs of burnout:
- Feeling tired and drained most of the time
- Lowered immunity, feeling sick a lot
- Frequent headaches, back pain, muscle aches
- Change in appetite or sleep habits

**Emotional signs of burnout:**
- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Feeling of hopeless, trapped and defeated
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world
- Loss of motivation
- Increasingly cynical and negative outlook
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment

**Behavioural signs of burnout:**
- Withdrawing from responsibilities
- Isolating from others
- Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done
- Using food, drugs or alcohol to cope
- Taking out frustrations on others
- Skipping work, coming in late or leaving early

As a Volunteer Coordinator there are a number of things you can do if you notice a volunteer demonstrating signs of burnout. These include:

- Actively address problems – if you notice that someone seems stressed or is exhibiting symptoms of burnout gently bring it to their attention and see if they recognise the behaviour in themselves. Ask them what would help?
- Clarify role expectations – use the role description for their position to identify those things that they are expected to do and those that are above and beyond the call of duty. Agree on what can be taken off the list.
- See if a change of role would be helpful – if a Volunteer has been doing the same role for some time, ask if a different role or a different level of role would be more interesting and fulfilling for them
- Schedule time off – perhaps its time for the person to take some time off – it may be worth considering a holiday from volunteering – recognising that if they'd like to come back there will still be a role for them