



Executive Burnout

We live in stressful times. The media appears preoccupied with tales of recession and its effects on businesses both large and small. The talk in the cafes and bars along the Algarve is one of doom and gloom; "Business is poor this season", "Nobody is buying property", "We will need to lay off staff soon". With all this negative talk executives and managers become more stressed with added pressure from above and added responsibility for their staff. If we are not careful we start to use alcohol or even drugs excessively in order to cope. There is the danger of a breakdown or burn out. But what is burn out?

We all have stress in our lives. It is part of everyday life and it helps drive us forward, keeps us on our toes and helps us meet our aims and objectives in life. It is when we allow it to become too much that the problems start. Burn out is the result of physical and mental exhaustion brought on by working too long hours for too long under too much pressure. When the fuse blows and the lights go out it is too late and only a period of rest and recuperation with therapeutic help will help us get back on our feet again. The secret is to recognise the symptoms and seek help before the fuse blows. Don't overload the circuit!

It is important to recognise that stress or burn out can affect all of us in the working environment. It is not the private domain of the highly successful Directors of multi-nationals. All of us who are conscientious workers, demanding of self with high expectations of self and others and a perfectionist streak are susceptible to burn out. Recognising it is another matter. When you are used to managing others it is highly likely you will struggle to manage yourself.

There are many symptoms of burn out. Some are easier to identify, others are more hidden. In order to identify the symptoms it is often vital that you listen to others and not ignore what you may hear as criticism. It is also essential you listen to yourself – listen to what your body and your head are telling you. Don't ignore it. Your performance may decline as you become more tired (you work longer hours to achieve the same output); you become more irritable in the workplace or at home; your sleep becomes disrupted; your enjoyment of life outside or work decreases and relationships start to suffer. Tiredness leads to exhaustion and with it physical health problems (high blood pressure, headaches, ulcers, heart attacks) and maybe mental health problems (clinical depression).

There is an unfortunate tendency to start to self-medicate at any stage along the road to burn out. Alcohol is often the 'medication' chosen by most but in today's world other drugs such as cocaine are taking an ever increasing role in helping us to cope. Both [alcohol](#) and [cocaine](#) are highly addictive and although we may start by having a couple of drinks to help us unwind or to get to sleep, or a line of coke to help us unwind, the addictive nature of these drugs is such that you need more and more of the substance to achieve the same effect. Before you know where you are addiction has set in and your job performance suffers even more. This rapidly increasing downward spiral has an inevitable consequence:

You lose your job, your business or your family or all three. If you have managed to avoid excessive use of alcohol or drugs there is a strong possibility that clinical depression will result. Clinical depression is not an illness of the weak – they don't get overly stressed. It is an illness of the strong. And watch the coffee consumption. It often rises in periods of excessive stress. It has reputation for keeping you awake but it also keeps you from sleeping and recharging the batteries. It can cause headaches, irritability and it increases your blood pressure. In very large quantities coffee has an addictive quality and for some classic withdrawal symptoms – increased anxiety, slight hand tremor and the craving for the 'drug'. Cigarette consumption also increases in times of stress. The dangers of this are well known and well publicised.

If you can identify the build up to burn out, it may be you will be able to apply self-help techniques and avoid the need to see a Doctor or Therapist. Cut back on alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes or cut them out completely. Alcohol, drugs, cigarettes and caffeine have a negative effect on sleep; Either they affect the quality of sleep or they stop you from sleeping. Sleep is essential to rebuild and to regroup after a stressful day. Take a break – a weekend away can be very beneficial and the business will still be there when you get back. Take some regular but not necessarily strenuous exercise – 30 minutes a day two or three times a week. If the gym isn't your scene, try just simple walking. It's great exercise. If you can find ways to relax, do it. Reflexology; Tai Chi; Meditation; Taking the dog for a walk. But most important of all and probably one of more difficult changes you may have to make is recognition that there are so many aspects of your life you cannot change. Recognise what you can change and change it. Accept the things you cannot change and move on.

Stress and Burn Out need to be taken seriously. If you are in any doubt you should consult your Doctor or a qualified Therapist. Don't put it off. Burn out is not a sign of weakness. Recognising it is a sign of strength. Doing something about it is a sign of taking responsibility. As a manager or company Director you also have a duty of care to your staff. Recognising the symptoms in them and helping them get help can save you long periods of staff absence, expensive litigation and money.