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For Governing Boards

Emotional Exhaustion: A Price To Pay For Your Civic Duty?

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It's rare these days to pick up a daily newspaper and not read something at least once every two weeks about some celebrity being hospitalized for "exhaustion." Yet, a review of standard medical reference books reveals no illness called "exhaustion."

The condition is generally a combination of a number of different symptoms that medical literature does not categorize.

Because of the enormous hours and high-level decisions surrounding governance of an electric utility, governing board members are vulnerable to exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is a component of burnout, which has three elements. The first is a feeling of depersonalization. This is a sense of being disconnected from other people and feeling the need to get away from people as much as possible. It also involves showing impersonal responses to people. The second relates to fear of failure or having few positive feelings about recent accomplishments. The third is emotional exhaustion, which is usually the most pronounced—and most studied—element of burnout. This is a feeling that you are completely drained, either by work demands or other people, or both. You can end up so tired that you lose control of your emotions.

Symptoms of emotional exhaustion can manifest themselves in many ways. Physical symptoms can include lack of energy, insomnia, gastrointestinal problems or rapid breathing. Emotional symptoms can include sadness or depression, negativity, increased cynicism or anxiety. Mental symptoms can include decreased creativity and reduced ability to concentrate. Social symptoms can include quickness to anger, defensiveness, being on edge, and blaming others.

Emotional exhaustion can compromise a person's ability to perform responsibilities properly. "If you suffer from emotional exhaustion, you will begin to make poor decisions," said Greg Jantz, Ph.D., director of the Center for Counseling & Health Resources, Inc. in Edmonds, Wash., which works with executives from around the country who attend multi-week "intensives" that involve healthcare, nutrition, counseling, and other wellness initiatives.

Board members are prone to emotional exhaustion in part because they tend to be givers who find it difficult to say "no" when asked to do something. They are often the "go to" people. When people have problems, they look to those in authority for help. Martin L. Martens, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the John Molson School of Business at Concordia University in Montreal, calls such people "toxin handlers," a

term he borrowed from Peter Frost, a professor at the University of British Columbia. "These are the people other people go to when they have problems that they don't want to discuss with their bosses," said Martens. While "toxin handlers" can help others avoid burnout, they end up getting exhausted themselves by handling so many "toxins" from other people,

"A lot of people in positions of authority not only find themselves with business responsibilities, but they end up finding themselves in mentoring roles for one or more people," said Ronald G. Downey, Ph.D., a professor in the psychology department at Kansas State University, Manhattan. These people come to them not only with work-related problems or community concerns, but also with personal problems.

Philip Chard, president and CEO of NEAS, Inc., Waukesha, Wis., a consulting firm, agreed. He has found that empathic individuals who pour too much of themselves into what they do frequently experience emotional exhaustion. "These are very giving people who often end up feeling that other people don't appreciate what they do or feel that other people expect too much of them," he said.

The key to success in the professional world is to run a marathon, not a sprint, Jantz said. "A marathon requires good self-care," he said. This involves diet, exercise, sleep, and not taking on more work than you can handle. "Marathoners constantly refuel themselves. If they don't, they cramp up and can't finish the race."

Downey agreed. "Exercise has been proven to reduce stress, and if you can keep stress levels manageable, you can do a lot to prevent emotional exhaustion and burnout," he said. But if the exercise you select involves playing sports with other people, keep it non-competitive. "If you're naturally competitive, then it is probably better to walk or swim than to play tennis or handball," he said.

"Do not eat at your desk during lunch," said Downey. If you do, the tension from the morning will continue into the afternoon. Taking a break and going somewhere else to eat breaks this tension. What about "working lunches"? "If you go somewhere else to eat, this may not be a problem, but don't do it every day," he said.

Next, monitor yourself. According to Jantz, many people realize they're getting close to emotional exhaustion, yet they keep going. "At some point, you cross an invisible line where you crash," he said. "You wake up one morning and realize that you just can't handle things any more." Before, you could always keep yourself going. Once you cross the line, though, you can't take care of yourself anymore. "I talked with one executive who was so exhausted that he said it took energy to breathe," said Jantz.

Downey agreed: "Board members and executives need to know when it's time to tell themselves that 'enough is enough'" he said. You may need to back off on some of your responsibilities, at work, at home, in the community, or a combination.

For many board members, knowing the importance of preventing emotional exhaustion may be insufficient. Pride and ego can get in the way. Many board members are very proud of their abilities to be so active in their communities and businesses, and believe cutting back would be a sign of weakness. Downey placed this concern in perspective. "Clearly, as you increase the number of things you do,

your ability to do things well will necessarily decrease," he said. "If you continue to say 'yes' to everything, there will come a time where you will begin to fail."

If you suffer from emotional exhaustion, or fail to heed the recommendations for preventing it there are ways to recover. "First, you need to adjust how you spend your time," said Chard. "Cut down on certain activities and begin new ones." If you like to spend a lot of time online, Chard recommends spending more time "unplugged." Individuals experiencing burnout can also find support from family and religious or spiritual communities. Get back in touch with nature. "This gives people a renewed sense of hope about life," said Chard. Engage in substantive interaction. Find people with whom you can discuss what is important in your life. "This will help you to reconnect with what has real meaning in your life," said Chard.

Some people may benefit from professional counseling because they may lack the resources to think clearly and design their own recovery strategies.

Finally, maintain balance as you are recovering. "Some professionals are such overachievers that, once they experience emotional exhaustion, they realize they need to take better care of themselves," said Jantz. "One element is exercise, so they go to the gym for the first time and spend three hours straight exercising. The next day, they're in worse shape than they were before."