

## ***Four Keys to Focus Your Life and Stay Refreshed***

***Learn to avoid burnout altogether.***

*By Seth Widner*

Burnout has a tendency to grow behind the scenes without us knowing. We become cranky, rude, tired, and selfish. Instead of viewing our small-group members as close friends, we see them as obligations. And while group meetings used to be the highlight of our week, we now dread them.

Have you experienced the sour taste of burnout? In 2005, I found myself hating small-group leadership. My burnout seemed to come out of left field, taking me by surprise. It knocked the wind out of me, and stole my passion. It was as if I couldn't think straight. And my heart didn't feel any compassion toward my small-group members or fellow leaders. Simply put, I wanted to run away from small-group ministry and never return.

By Christ's grace, I survived the dungeon of burnout, and I am extremely thankful. Many small-group leaders fall prey to burnout and never return to lead a group. So I'm thankful for the mentors Christ placed in my life. When they saw me pulling back and retreating into isolation, they pursued me and helped me heal.

If you are not experiencing burnout, I want to help you avoid it. Use these practical steps to avoid burnout from the beginning. And if you find that you're already burned out, use these steps—and the help of others—to walk out of it. Remember to keep these steps in order because they build on one another.

**1. Feed Yourself.** At first glance, this may appear to be selfish. In reality, it will empower you to serve others more effectively. As a small-group leader, you spend time caring for others, preparing for and leading meetings, offering advice, and sacrificing for group members. That's a lot of giving. How much are receiving—and from where?

Healthy small groups are led by healthy leaders. Too many leaders neglect their needs, thinking this is a noble task. They may be able to persevere for a season, but in the end, they will become unable to serve their small group. The leader will reach burnout and the group members will suffer.

In John 15:5, Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." As small-group leaders, we must remain connected to Jesus. He is the source of all good things. When we stay connected to him, we can be powerful catalysts for life change. If we neglect our spiritual nourishment, we will be little help to others. Intentionally feed yourself daily by spending time with God. Read the Bible, reflect on his Word, pray, or otherwise connect with Jesus. It's only when you're regularly being fed by God that you'll be able to give freely to others.

**2. Be Accountable.** Small-group ministry teams are unique. We serve Christ at different times in different locations. Some leaders may have evening groups while others facilitate morning or afternoon groups. Some groups may gather at the church building, while other groups gather in homes and at other locations. Because ministry like this can leave us feeling unconnected to the ministry as a whole, it's crucial to stay connected to your small-group director, pastor, or coach. By doing so, you will be guarding yourself from burnout.

Sometimes small-group leaders can be lone rangers and even territorial. After all, we know our group members best, right? Who else could be more equipped to guide and direct them? When we take on this mentality, we begin to see ourselves as experts. By doing so, we won't be willing to ask for help—even when we desperately need it.

Small-group leaders must be humble. We must be accountable to our small-group director, pastor, or coach. Why? Our group members matter! They deserve the very best that we can give them. Start-up leader training is not enough to sustain us as we lead a group. We need guidance throughout the journey. By connecting regularly with your small-group ministry staff and with other leaders, you'll gain valuable wisdom, life experience, support, and a safe place to vent any frustrations you have. We challenge our members to walk in accountability, and we must lead by example by submitting ourselves to accountability.

**3. Establish Your Priorities.** When small-group leaders burn out, the root of the problem often lies in a problem with priorities. Priorities help us determine what to do and when to do it. They help us avoid committing ourselves to tasks that may steer us away from what's most important. Priorities help us stay focused while avoiding temptations to extend high energy in unproductive ways. After all, a small-group leader has limited time and energy to give.

Imagine that you're going on vacation. Your goal is to reach your destination in the least amount of time, so as you map out your route, you highlight three interstates. After following the first stretch of interstate, your GPS offers some alternate routes. These alternate routes offer beautiful scenery, but you'll also have a much longer drive. Since your goal is to travel in the least amount of time, you choose to stay on the interstate routes. How did you make this decision so easily? Because arriving in the least amount of time is a higher priority than beautiful scenery, even if they're both important to you.

When we fail to identify and hold to our priorities—and the correct priorities—we will chase after things of little eternal value. We will waste precious energy and resources. We'll experience stress which leads to burnout. Take some time to list out your top five priorities. Here's my list to give you an idea. Once you have a clear list of priorities, you'll be able to make decisions more easily and avoid unneeded stress.

1. Jesus
2. Marriage
3. Parenting
4. Extended Family
5. Small-Group Ministry

**4. Guard Your Priorities.** Now that you've established your priorities, you must learn to guard them. Although some things that try to pull you away from your priorities obviously will be bad, there also are other good things that may try to pull you away. For instance, as people see how well you lead your group, they may invite you to lead something in their ministry, such as leading a children's Sunday school class. Although this invitation is flattering, do not accept the position quickly. Spend time praying and seeking wisdom from the Lord. If there is any chance this new ministry position would interfere with your priorities, humbly decline. If you are confident that the new ministry position would not interfere with your existing priorities, accept it on a trial basis. During your trial period, continue to pray and evaluate how this new opportunity affects your priorities.

If you are currently suffering from burnout, do not try to overcome it by yourself. Work through these steps with another leader or with your small-group coach, director, or pastor. Christ used trusted friends to minister to me during my burnout. And I'm so thankful for their faithfulness. Open your eyes to the people God has placed in your life. You're not alone.

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#### **Discuss**

1. Who are you accountable to? How do you stay plugged into your ministry leaders?

2. What are your top five priorities? How did you come up with your list?
3. How well do you stick to your priorities? What can you do to protect them more going forward?