Burnout in the Home

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Currently there is tremendous concern and talk about the subject of professional burnout. The literature has mainly centered around caseworkers and administrators. But in the last few years there has been an increasing number of women in the Church who have re-evaluated their own mental health as a result of a documentary film produced by KSL television called “Depression in Mormon Women.” This film has been aired on public television, and the film has been presented in numerous firesides and conferences. The result has been an increasing number of Mormon women seeking ecclesiastical and professional counseling to combat the depression symptoms mentioned in the film.

However, in working with women whose presenting problem was depression, the authors discovered that there was a large number of women who did not respond to either medication or to individual psychotherapy. It was then determined that the problem might not necessarily be depression, be it situational or biological, but burnout. The authors then reviewed some of the literature on administrator and caseworker burnout and discovered amazing similarities between the demands on helping professionals and homemakers.

Burnout has been defined with variations as a debilitating psychological condition affecting individuals who work in high stress jobs, brought on by the cumulative effects of prolonged stress. The burned out homemaker may indicate burnout by:

1. Loss of concern for her children that in the extreme evolves into cynical hostility and a demeaning perception of herself, which in turn lead to increased guilt and self-depreciation.
2. Deterioration of the quality and sometimes quantity of care offered to children.
3. Emotional isolation from children, homemaking chores, and duties. This can be expressed by increased involvement in outside work, church work (often during daytime hours), or increased time spent in the home but with little accomplished.
5. Lowered morale, higher rate of sickness, lowered productivity and a high desire to break out of the marriage, family, and/or church.
6. Physiological changes such as higher blood pressure, poor appetite, insomnia, and psychosomatic symptoms (Daley, 1980).

There are additional symptoms such as: irritability, exhaustion, desperate measures to deal with routine problems, impatience, distrust, resignation, withdrawal, apathy, negativism, lack of attentiveness, cynicism, decreased energy and motivation, and increased distance from husband and children. After reviewing these symptoms and characteristics, it is easy to understand how one can misdiagnose cases of burnout and depression (Lewis, 1980).

It was also determined that there are higher rates of burnout among:

1. Younger, inexperienced homemakers—especially those homemakers who compare themselves with older and seemingly better women and mothers, and try to live up to the myth of the “perfect mother in Zion syndrome.”
2. Homes where there are many children and the leadership is autocratic—such as the father being the all­knowing patriarch, who dispensed “wisdom and counsel” without first understanding the situation and without recognizing free agency.
3. Homes where patriarchal structure and support are lacking at key times—such as the active husband who always finds time for his “important” church meetings but rarely has time to really play and be with his children and wife consistently.
4. Homes in which the homemaker does not know what is expected of her and communication of family rules and regulations is unclear. These families are usually characterized by patriarchal leader dominance.
5. Homes in which there is little autonomy for the homemaker, few opportunities to use innovation, and low spouse support. This can be illustrated where the needs of the wife and children rotate basically around the needs of the husband.
6. Homes in which the mother is overly conscientious and has too high an expectation of herself.
7. Homes in which the homemaker has not learned to set priorities or when she does follow her own priorities, and feels guilty for not doing more (Lewis, 1980).

Homemakers are accorded a high status in the literature of the Church, and have the important and difficult assignment of bearing, training, and raising children in righteousness. Unfortunately, the welfare of homemakers is a concern, but not a critical consideration in terms of many family, ward and stake priorities. Their right to a higher priority ranking as judged by resources and time allotted for their support and training suggest a relatively low status (Lewis, 1980).

It is our feeling that examples of low resource allocation for support of the homemaker are found in most homes where burnout has occurred. This may be evidenced by the husband coming home from work and, rather than relieving his wife, saying he needs to rest. So he reads the paper, eats dinner, has a five-minute interview with the kids, goes to his ward basketball game, then attends his leadership meeting. He returns home refreshed and invigorated but returns home to and is confused by an angry wife—a wife who has

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probably been taught to sublimite her needs to that of her husband and children, and is angry because he doesn't know how to communicate with her. She feels guilty because of these feelings of anger directed towards her husband, especially since he is a "nice man and faithful in the Church."

Another example of low response allocation might be the apparent lack of woman support activities such as a consistent effort in each stake to encourage women sports, mother-daughter outings, mother overnighters, and women's conferences. It appears to be much more acceptable for men to do these things than women. Also, for many homemakers experiencing burnout there seems to be an attitude of the male spouse that the mother is basically responsible for the children, rather than realizing that the responsibility for parenthood should be equally shared.

The Mormon homemaker also faces severe attacks from society. Although she might have been prompted to enter motherhood with expectations of a high order and expected to exercise influence on her children and others who would seek her help, she quickly discovers that her abilities are not so powerful as she thought nor can she apply them as need dictates because family support resources are deficient. She may also learn that her work is not highly valued in circles that distribute resources and that her efforts are demeaned along with the idea of even having children (Lewis, 1980).

The rewards of motherhood are usually intangible and come after much effort. Children's curses may be more frequent than their praises. In addition, objective measures of success or failure are absent. Homemakers must make decisions for their children, but the criteria upon which the decisions are based are subjective and the homemakers are many times uneasy about their validity. This search for tangible measures of success might account for the importance parents place upon visible symbols of spirituality in their children, such as the Duty to God Award, temple marriage or mission. Even though in actuality the person might not be worthy or fully comprehend such, they have the appearance of doing the right thing.

Conclusion: The purpose of this paper is to present the possibility of misdiagnosis of depression in certain Mormon women, and to clarify some of the dynamics of burnout. It also has the purpose of suggesting these concepts for further research and evaluation, and proposing several recommendations to deal with burnout.

Recommendations: Our recommendations are based upon this supposition, "to meet the needs of her children, a mother's needs must be met, and therefore the mother's needs must be met basically by the husband." It is the authors' contention that while some women may exhibit characteristics of rebellion or lack of respect to their husband or priesthood leader, most of these are probably reactions to a lack of being listened to, understood, and/or appreciated by the husband or priesthood leader. Most women would follow a husband or priesthood leader who 1) understood and listened to her, 2) understood her needs, 3) showed and expressed consistent appreciation, and 4) allocated more resources to support her in her role as homemaker.

We also recommend that the homemaker review the article by Louise A. Brown, in March 1982 issue of the Ensign, and that she be taught and practice the following skills and principles:

1. She is responsible for her own behavior and decisions.
2. Learning to turn off inappropriate negative thoughts and appreciate the good in herself.
3. Setting realistic expectations.
4. Learning to look at repentance as growth and forsaking sin as meaning forsaking things that limit growth.
5. Learning to follow her own inner confictions, and learning to think in terms of "different," saving the concept of "right" and "wrong" for appropriate moral situations.
6. Setting priorities and recognizing and working within her limitations.
7. Being able to accept help, but not expecting it. It should be noted that Sister Brown was able to deal with the "darkest hour of her life" through a supportive, caring husband who listened to her and helped her to find the positive in herself. One wonders what the end result would have been had Sister Brown not had the support of her husband. Here again is testimony of the importance of the supportive relationship of the husband to the wife (Brown, 1982).

It is also our recommendation that all counselors carefully evaluate those individuals they are counseling with the presenting problem of depression, and to determine if the problem is one of burnout. If it is burnout, we recommend that they be treated according to the psychosocial treatment method in which the worker recognizes the interplay of both internal psychological and external social causes of dysfunctioning (Hollis, 1968).

REFERENCES: