

# Combating Marriage Encounter Burnout

by Ralph & Jane Becker

Marriage Encounter is a wonderful, enriching, and fulfilling ministry, but it can be very demanding. Our mission to "renew the church and change the world" is a huge job! Many Sacraments come off of a Weekend experience full of drive and enthusiasm, just begging for things to do to help the cause. More "seasoned" couples and priests may find that they are asked to do more and more as their experience and capability within our movement grows. However, as our burden increases, our stress level can go up, and our ability to perform those tasks may go down.

## Signs of burnout

Do you find yourself:

- Wishing that you had more family time?
- Arguing over Marriage Encounter duties?
- Losing the enthusiasm you once had for Marriage Encounter events?
- Without a free weekend for months on end?
- Often feeling tired and fatigued?
- Spending less and less time on the things you love to do?

If so, you may be experiencing Marriage Encounter burnout.

What is "burnout"? One definition of burnout, drawn from research into people-oriented, helping professions like health care, social services, and education, is "**a state of mental and/or physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress**".

Physical symptoms of burnout can include backaches, headaches, nausea, weight gain or loss, and insomnia or hypersomnia.

Mental symptoms may include depression, mental exhaustion, an increased concern for self over others, and an increasing avoidance of contact with Marriage Encounter people and events.

Emotional symptoms of burnout include emotional exhaustion or detachment (which translates into a reduced ability to empathize with others), impatience, or a tendency to blame others.

Social symptoms include feelings of isolation from others, or with our movement. Other signs include rudeness, irritability, or impatience, and a lack of time for friends, family, or personal activities.

If some, most, or all of these symptoms apply to you, you may already be burned out or approaching burnout.

When we are burned out, we do not operate at our best. We feel unmotivated, the quality of our participation declines, we enjoy it less, and we find it increasingly unfulfilling. We may withdraw from the movement, either as a couple or individually.

We know that being isolated from each other can be damaging to our marriage relationship, and being isolated from the WWME Community may also prevent our relationship from growing and maturing. Couples who become inactive in Marriage Encounter often cite burnout as a primary cause.

## **Causes**

Recognizing the symptoms of Marriage Encounter burnout is one key to combating it; another key is recognizing the causes.

Our Personality styles can drive us to burnout:

- Organizers are sure they can fit "one more thing" on their to-do lists
- Helpers never want to say "No" to any request
- Catalysts are willing to take on anything new and different
- Thinkers want to show how capable they are, and that no one can do the job better

Chronic work overload is a major factor. In addition to delivering weekends, presenting team and community couples are asked to invite couples, deliver pulpit talks, attend meetings, organize supplies, track prayer couples, maintain web pages, and on and on. There never seems to be enough people to do all the work necessary. This creates pressure to do more, and the stress that accompanies it.

Lack of feedback is another factor contributing to burnout. If a couple spends seemingly endless hours on Marriage Encounter, and no one seems to notice, they can quickly become discouraged and judge that their efforts are not appreciated. We all need to acknowledge the efforts of others.

## **Fixing and Preventing the Problem**

What can you do if you judge you have Marriage Encounter burnout, or are getting close to it?

- Share your feelings

Use the powerful tool of daily Dialogue to share your feelings with your spouse. They may have no idea that you are burned out, much less the depth of your feelings. Dialogue can get you thinking and deciding together.

- Prayer

Use your prayer life to seek knowledge of God's will and His guidance. God will never ask more of us than we can handle, but we can easily ask more of ourselves than we can handle.

- Know Your Limitations

We all lead busy lives. Job, family, parish, and Marriage Encounter are all important and all are time-consuming. No one can do it all! Take a hard look at your life and decide on your priorities. Then decide to have limits, and stick to them. If your priorities are in order, then it should be easy to decide where to draw the line.

- Learn to say No

Along with Knowing your Limitations is the need to know when you cannot take on any more. It can be very hard for some people to say no, but sometimes it is absolutely necessary. If you are burned out, or close to it, discern carefully before taking on any new tasks.

- Ask For Help

If you have too many tasks, or your tasks are too large, get help! Ask other couples, especially newly encountered couples, if they can help. Give away your smaller jobs, and break your bigger jobs into smaller pieces and give some of those away, too. Carefully documenting what each job requires can make it much easier to hand off.

- Take a break

Make sure you make time for yourself and your relationship. Take a vacation, schedule a getaway weekend, have a date night every week, have family time, and Dialogue daily. Don't worry, your Marriage Encounter tasks will wait for you to get back.

## **Conclusion**

Marriage Encounter burnout is a very real problem. It can cause stress and division within a relationship, and can cause us to lose sight of our movement's mission. Recognize burnout and deal with it, and you will be more satisfied and productive in your ministry. Everyone benefits when we work within our limits!