

# Introduction

**BACK WHEN THIS BOOK** was just a hazy blur of ideas, I talked with Redleaf Press's editor-in-chief, Sid Farrar, about whether the book should focus solely on burnout among family-based providers or address the concerns of all early childhood professionals. We wondered if there were too many differences among early care and education programs and professionals for one book to deal with them all effectively. After some discussion, we finally agreed that when it comes to burnout, there are more similarities than differences. It doesn't matter if you work as a center director, lead teacher, classroom assistant, or cook. It doesn't matter if you own or work in a family child care program. It doesn't matter if you work in a preschool, Head Start program, or elementary school. Nor does it matter if your facility is brand spanking new or one hundred years old, or if this is your first week as a provider or you've been on the job for more than thirty years. If you are feeling stressed out, run-down, anxious, out of gas, over the edge, befuddled, broken, lost, astray, overwrought, uptight, drained, in a rut, in a rush, in a funk, or insignificant, this book can help.

We all have at least one thing in common: we are caregivers. And not just at work, either. Most of us habitually take care of other people. We are empathetic, giving, warm, and nurturing—and we have a hard time saying no to anyone who needs taking care of. We take care of not only children but also their families, our own families, our neighbors, our religious and civic groups, total strangers, stray dogs, and baby birds who have fallen from their nests. It's what we do.

The problem is the part about not being able to say *no*. When I train caregivers on the topic of burnout, I urge them to say *no* at least occasionally. In every session, a provider says, “I can’t say *no*.” We want to, we know it will unburden us, but we can’t make the tiny and powerful word come out of our mouths. We feel guilty. It’s as if we are letting someone down. Too often, we equate saying *no* with being weak or failing. So every request we hear gets a resounding yes.

“Can my kids stay an extra hour?” Yes.

“I can’t pay you until next Wednesday, is that okay?” Yes.

“The baby has a fever—can you still watch her?” Yes.

“Mom, can I have \$20?” Yes.

“It’s Monday, and Maggie didn’t show up again. Can you cover her hours?” Yes.

“Our licensing visit is next week; can you come in this weekend and do some cleaning so the place will be ready?” Yes.

“Mom, I’m wondering if  
we can move home for a while.  
We can stay in my old room.  
Just until we get caught up on  
some bills. You could spend  
more time with your  
grandkids!” Yes.

YES, YES, YES,  
YES, YES, YES, YES,  
YES, YES, YES, YES,  
YES, YES, YES, YES!



We take care of everyone but ourselves. We give so much of our time and energy and so much of ourselves to others that we tend to neglect our own needs. We vainly try to hold things together, turning a strong face toward the world while falling apart inside. We need to ask ourselves: What is really happening here? Why are we sacrificing our physical and emotional health to the demands of a job?

If we choose to ignore our needs, no matter what our profession, we become physically and emotionally exhausted; we become burned out. This is what burnout looks like: We become detached from ourselves and from others; we become zombies who go through the motions of caregiving. Our hearts and minds are no longer in the work; we are out of tune. Burnout affects us physically as well: insomnia, sore backs and necks and knees, headaches, tight chests, queasy stomachs, and lack of energy. Burnout also affects us emotionally: we drift without focus or direction, filled with an all-consuming emptiness or anxiety and a variety of uneasy feelings. We neglect our families and friends, our coworkers and peers, and the children in our care because we lack the energy to deal with the myriad things we have said yes to. And here lies the irony of our situation: *the more we neglect our own needs to give to others, the more we shortchange them and ourselves.*

We need to care for ourselves first before we can care for others. This bears repeating. We need to care for ourselves first in order to have *the internal resources* to care for others. When we don't care for ourselves, personal dreams drift away into the dark corners of our minds. Goals go unrealized. Life becomes an unending slog through waist-deep mud.

When burnout reaches this point, we find ourselves at an important crossroads where we can choose to leave the profession entirely; make superficial changes (like a lateral job change) and continue as a burned-out zombie; or make subtle and mindful changes that lead in a fresh, energized, and positive direction. We have to choose our course and find our answers; no one can do it for us.

If you are still reading, you probably work as an early care and education professional. It doesn't matter where you work: child care center; preschool; Head Start or family child care program; elementary

school; agency providing support for direct-care providers; or in someone else's home as a nanny, au pair, or caregiver to a relative. Wherever you fit into the early care and education field, you have at least some experience with burnout—if not your own, then that of a colleague. It's no wonder: We child care professionals have a lot on our shoulders. We have a huge social and economic impact on our community, our state, and our nation.

Imagine the havoc that would ensue if all of us who spend our days or nights caring for other people's children took a two-week vacation at the same time:

- ◀ Manufacturing would grind to a halt.
- ◀ Wholesale and retail sellers would be unable to open for business.
- ◀ Hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics would close their doors.
- ◀ Police stations and fire departments would close.
- ◀ Elementary and secondary schools would be forced to call a two-week recess.
- ◀ Spring break would come early for college students and professors alike.
- ◀ Local, state, and federal government agencies would be incapable of everything from picking up the trash to guarding the nation's borders.

This vision may be slightly exaggerated, but not much. Your profession allows parents to go to work or attend school. If you quit doing your job, they would be unable to do theirs. On top of that, you are providing much-needed early nurturing and educating while parents are away from their children. You are guiding the emotional and physical development of our nation's future. The first woman to visit Mars; a future president; the inventor of the cure for AIDS; the next Mozart, Sinatra, or Bono could be sitting across the room from you eating play-

dough right now. You are an awesomely important person doing a vital job. A job you probably love . . . or used to.

## Rewards and Stressors

And why not love it? Working with children can bring many intangible rewards:

- ◀ Unconditional love from children
- ◀ Heartfelt appreciation from some parents
- ◀ The feeling that you are making a positive difference in the lives of the families you serve
- ◀ Seeing children grow and develop new skills

We get a lot of rewards from this job, but the job also comes with many stressors:

- ◀ Keeping parents happy
- ◀ Assuring children's health and safety
- ◀ Constantly modeling appropriate behavior for kids and good parenting for parents
- ◀ Working long hours that are physically and emotionally demanding
- ◀ Receiving compensation that is often not in line with the demands of the profession

This list could go on for pages, because caregiving is demanding and complex. Research from the Center for the Child Care Workforce shows that every year, 30 to 40 percent of providers drift right out of the profession. This is a disturbing turnover rate, especially when

you consider that quality child care is based on strong child/caregiver relationships. The impact such turnover has on children is huge.

The purposes of this book are to offer insight into why caregivers burn out and to provide tools for coping with the stresses that come with your profession. In the following chapters, I will explore who is affected by burnout, why your profession is so prone to it, tools for dealing with burnout, suggestions for handling common stressful situations, and methods to help you get back on the path toward living your Ultimate Purpose. What it boils down to is that the responsibility and stress intrinsic to being an early care and education professional can lead to burnout. I know—it happened to me. I don't want it to happen to you.

Before you read any further, take three or four deep, cleansing breaths and remember that if you're not taking good care of yourself, the care you are providing to others is inadequate too. The only way you can fully be there for those you care for is to fully be there for yourself. I can't offer you any one-size-fits-all answers. There are no easy ways to avoid provider stress and burnout, but if you are willing to do some work, you can make subtle and mindful changes in your life that will put you on a less stressful, more serene path.

Now, take those breaths, relax, and know that you are strong enough to make needed changes in your life.