



# Landcare Notes

Landcare Note 8.4

## Beating burn-out

**'Burn-out' is a problem for many volunteer groups. Most of the work seems to be done by a few dedicated people who soon run out of steam.**

**Relying on a few can limit what you achieve whereas a more involved, more harmonious group can do more.**

**This note may help you share the responsibility and reduce the risk of burn-out.**

### What is 'burn-out'?

'Burn-out' is the name given to the state of stress, anger, frustration and a sense of being overwhelmed or losing control that can occur when high demands are made on people.

Usually it happens in a job situation, but sometimes it occurs because of over-commitment in a voluntary activity. In groups like Landcare, the logical and usual action is to walk away from the pressure and become less involved.

The jobs being done by the 'burnt-out' person then fall to others who may also suffer the same type of stress. Landcare groups, like many other community organisations, can find themselves running out of members and even struggle to continue due to lack of interest or support.

There are numerous signs:

- Fatigue, exhaustion, tiredness, or a sense of being physically run down
- Anger at those making demands
- Self-criticism for putting up with the demands
- Cynicism, negativity, and irritability
- A sense of being besieged.

Landcare members, who are mainly volunteers, usually withdraw before suffering more extreme effects such as weight loss, sleeplessness and depression.

### How to deal with it

For burn-out and for many other stress related problems, prevention is better than cure. Broadly, burn-out can be eased through practices including:

- Providing responsibility that will challenge and excite
- Limiting the activities and responsibilities of any one person
- Taking time out when tired
- Knowing what you do well
- Finding space to develop creative ideas and strategies
- Providing stimulating, enjoyable and interesting tasks
- Finding a balance between work, friendships, relaxation and intellectual stimulation
- Having a clear plan of action that provides direction and focuses the group on agreed tasks

However, it is easy for stress to develop as projects and activities roll on, unless it is monitored and addressed.

### Awareness of the problem

- Be aware of the early signs so action can be taken before you lose valuable people resources.
- Recognise the symptoms in yourself. Are you constantly volunteering or expected to do everything and anything? You may be coping now, but you risk 'burning-out' and contributing to the instability of your group by giving other members the impression they're not needed.
- Be aware of the possibilities of burn-out occurring in group members and in support staff like Landcare coordinators, facilitators, and paid staff.



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## Avoiding burn-out yourself

- No one is indispensable. Look for your replacement. The best way to ensure everyone realises you can be replaced is to persuade someone else to have a go. Ask them to help with some of your tasks (e.g. chairing a meeting, writing Minutes, doing a press release), and support them as they do it.
- Give notice you're unable to get to a meeting or fulfil your usual role, and ask someone to fill in. With some help from you in advance, members will be proud of what they achieve in your absence.
- Identify your group's untapped people resources. Do a skills audit. How many members aren't attending meetings? Invite them to the next one. If they are attending, include them when delegating tasks and involve them in activities. They are your untapped resources.
- Develop a calendar of events. Set dates for meetings and events. If members are reminded, they're more likely to attend and get involved.
- Share ideas. Consult manuals from other clubs or talk with their members. You may get some useful tips, as some clubs seem to never burn-out!

## **Avoiding burn-out in others**

Saying 'thank you' to key members is much easier than trying to find replacements for them. Verbal recognition of their work or a token of appreciation can be vital to keeping members going. Why not develop your own local awards and celebrations?

## Share ownership of the group

Take the initiative where you think it is necessary.

- Your group hasn't had a meeting for some time? Suggest a meeting be called.

- Background noise interfering with your meeting? Jump up and shut the door.
- Seen a new source of grants that may assist the group? Mention it.
- Notice someone's missed a few meetings? Call them.
- A meeting has decided on an action you could do that would otherwise be left to a group leader? Offer to do it.

It may seem simple, but you'll be amazed how much difference it makes when people become actively involved.

## **Regular monitoring for burn-out**

Noticing, let alone preventing, burn-out is not easy or obvious - until it happens. These examples of some groups' practices may be helpful.

- Keep a record of the level of involvement of members so you have some idea of who is doing what.
- At a specific time each year - the meeting before the AGM, perhaps - review the work load of members and seeks members' opinions of any concerns and ways to reduce stress. This can be followed up at the AGM if necessary.
- Develop a written policy to provide assistants to members in key roles to spread workload requirements.

## **Further references**

Chamala, S and Mortis, P (1990) - *Working Together for Landcare*; Queensland Department of Primary Industries; See Chapter 9, *Motivating People*.

Neils, H (2007) - *13 Signs of Burnout*:  
<http://www.assessment.com/mappmembers/a voidingburnout.asp>



Victorian  
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## Related Landcare Notes

This Landcare Note is one of a series. These notes provide an excellent guide for the ongoing operation of your group.

## Acknowledgements

Nicole Blackett: Landcare Note - *Beating Burnout (2002)*

Compiled by the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority's Landcare Support Team

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