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Avoiding Burnout ★ NEW!

Your skills, knowledge, mind, body, relationships, motivation, commitment, capacity for enjoyment, emotions - are all of these still sharp? Regularly engaging in appropriate activities to sharpen up can help you avoid burning-out.

"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four **sharpening the axe.**" (Abraham Lincoln, 1809-65)

Habit #7 in Steven Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is called "Sharpen the Saw". Covey uses the common analogy of a woodcutter who is sawing for several days straight and is becoming less and less productive. The process of cutting dulls the blade. So the solution is to periodically sharpen the saw.

I've found that in practice, however, most people fail to understand what sharpening the saw really means. If you're overworking yourself and your productivity begins to fall off, common wisdom says to take a break, maybe even go on vacation.

However, that isn't sharpening the saw - that's putting the saw down. When you put down a dull blade for a while, the blade will still be dull when you pick it up again. Sharpening the saw is actually an activity, just as the analogy suggests.

Here are some saw-sharpening ideas:

1. Educate yourself (read, listen to audio programs, attend a seminar)
2. Learn a new skill
3. Exercise
4. Improve your diet
5. Meditate
6. Have a deep conversation with someone
7. Set some new goals or review/update your old goals
8. Organise your home or office
9. Read up on some of your favourite blogs

Now the woodcutter can't just alternate between cutting wood and sharpening the saw indefinitely. Downtime is needed too, but it isn't the same as sharpening the saw. The woodcutter can become even more productive by sharpening the blade, studying new woodcutting techniques, working out to become stronger, and learning from other woodcutters.

Forgetting to intentionally sharpen the saw can lead to a feeling of burnout. If you merely alternate between productive work and downtime, your production capacity will drop off. You're still working hard, but you don't feel as productive as you think you should be. When you sharpen yourself regularly, you'll find that you can flow along at a steady pace, week after week, without getting burnt-out.

Whenever I feel burnt-out or overwhelmed, taking a day or two off helps a little, but not very much. What yields a much greater benefit for me is attending a weekend seminar, reading an inspiring book, or having an interesting conversation. It's common to see people return from a conference with a notable spike in motivation that lasts for weeks. But this isn't really a break or a vacation - going to a conference is an activity, but it's the kind that often increases energy and motivation.

How are your various blades doing?

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