

SUNDAY MONEY

AT LUNCH WITH

MICHAEL STAVER

Winning the Battle Against Burnout

By CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH

MICHAEL STAVER remembers exactly when he knew he was burning out.

He was in the Atlanta airport, en route to what felt like the millionth presentation that he would make that month. He sensed his mental systems shutting down, one by one.

"I'm exhausted, I'm sitting among these odors and screaming babies, and I decided, on the spot, I'd had enough," he said.

That was almost two years ago. Today, Mr. Staver, 45, still runs the **Staver Group**, his executive training company on Amelia Island, Fla. But he now has a staff of people who give at least half the speeches he used to give, and hold even more of the training sessions. He spends a lot more time writing, and working one on one with senior executives — the part of the job he loves most.

A few clients balked at first, but they came around. "I had nurtured a culture of dependency on the part of my clients," Mr. Staver said. "I had to break them of the idea they had to get all their attention from me alone."

Substitute "boss" or "significant other" for "clients," and the concept is as applicable to burnout in jobs and relationships as it is to leadership. Often, Mr. Staver maintains, a boss will lighten a workload, a spouse will let you spend Thursday night with your friends — if only you ask.

And if they won't?

Acknowledge failure, and move on. "So many of us were raised to 'try harder,' no matter the cost," Mr. Staver said. "Too often, that translates into trying to make a doomed relationship or a bad job work." And what, exactly, does that have to do with burnout? "When you keep investing more energy and the return remains low, that's when you burn out," Mr. Staver said.

Mr. Staver learned that the hard way. He was born in Charleston, S.C., the old-



Michael Falco for The New York Times

Michael Staver, founder of the Staver Group, an executive training company, says that acknowledging failure, then moving on, can help keep one's passions from dying.

est of three sons of a stay-at-home mom and a father who was both a Southern Baptist preacher and automotive executive. The family was always on the go, moving to Missouri, to Florida, to California, wherever his father's latest job or church took them.

The need to constantly fit in at a new school put a pall on Mr. Staver's childhood. When puberty, with its attendant insecurities, hit, the fish-out-of-water feeling was nearly unbearable. Mr. Staver still winces when he recalls moving to Costa Mesa, Calif., from Florida at the age of 12.

"I got dumped into public school with a bad haircut and an accent that made me sound like Gomer Pyle," he said. "The other kids just tortured me."

Desperate to fit in, the young Mike Staver took one of the first steps to burnout: he tried to conform to values and behaviors he did not share. "I obsessed on wearing the right Levis and the right Earth Shoes," he recalled.

Then he took the second step to burnout: he lashed out. "I refused to get a haircut, I refused to do Sunday school lessons," he said. "I acted like the typical angry teenager."

And still, he did not try to control his own life. He had always been fascinated by airplanes; he even took flying lessons when he was 16. So he applied to what is now the Spartan College of Aeronautics and Technology, which specialized in aviation, in Tulsa, Okla. He was accepted; his father balked at letting him go. So Mr. Staver went instead to California Baptist University, 50 miles east of his home, where he majored in business and minored in psychology. He still planned to become a pilot when he graduated in 1983, but his father scuttled that one in an unusual way. "He persuaded me that Staver men have terrible vision and thus can't fly," Mr. Staver recalled. "I had 20-20 eyesight, and still do. Yet I believed him."

So Mr. Staver married a girl whom

he had met at church, and went to work analyzing the books at the car dealership where his father worked. That job lasted a year. His marriage lasted five. "I was a caged animal, an internal cauldron of hostility, and I pretty much killed that marriage," he said.

Mr. Staver pumped all his energy into his career, and rose through a series of corporate jobs he did not enjoy, ending up as chief operating officer for a burglar-alarm company. But then, with the help of a psychotherapist and a book — "The Road Less Traveled," by M. Scott Peck — he traded in his passive rage for active change. He enrolled in a night program at National University in San Diego and graduated with a master's degree in counseling psychology in 1990.

He began running general-interest seminars for local hospitals, first on how to recover from broken relationships, then on how to build healthy ones. Finally, he was doing something he loved. So, perhaps inevitably, in 1992 he formed the Staver Group.

Mr. Staver remarried in 2000, but that marriage ended in divorce in 2005. His wife was the one who wanted out, he said, and he acquiesced.

"We're still good friends, but I had learned not to invest energy in situations that just can't work," he said.

Mr. Staver thinks he's probably burned out on the concept of marriage. But with that Atlanta airport epiphany behind him, he is loving his work. And over a recent lunch at Agave, a Southwestern restaurant in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, he offered some tips on how others can keep their passions from burning out.

- *Don't assume you need calming down when you may need revving up.*

Depression and ennui can sometimes masquerade as anxiety. A simple non-drug aid: Set your clock radio to the liveliest jazz or pop station around. "Start your day with music that pumps you up," Mr. Staver said. "It'll create a sense of positive energy, and prepare you to tackle challenges with minimum frustration."

- *Don't be a news fiend.* The world being what it is, the news can be depressing. "You need to be less exposed to things that suck the life out of you," he said. "Yes, you want to know how the war is going, but you don't need to hear about every person who dies."

When the payoff is low, trying harder can lead to exhaustion.

- *Set aside times to do specific tasks, and make that schedule sacrosanct.* If you are overwhelmed by e-mail messages, decide to answer them only, say, from 2 to 3 each afternoon. If you hate writing sales reports, do them first thing, and be done with them. Sure, break the rule if your boss demands your presence, or if a true emergency crops up. But otherwise, sweetly but firmly tell colleagues or spouses or children to come back in an hour.

- *Fix it, then forget it.* Beating yourself up over mistakes will not undo the mistake, but it can undo you. Assume that you've learned from the mistake, and that the learning process has changed you. "You are no longer the same

person who made the errors, and you cannot blame a person who does not exist," Mr. Staver said.

- *Set up a weekly meeting with an "accountability partner."* That person will know whether your own destructive patterns — and not your boss or your marriage — are the source of your angst. Your significant other might be loath to confront you with unpleasant truths, so choose a longtime friend or colleague. "You need someone with the guts to say, 'Your marriage is disintegrating because you treat your wife badly,' or 'You've got to stop putting your boss down at meetings,'" Mr. Staver said.

- *Take frequent power naps.* Mr. Staver says that if you do it correctly, nodding off for 15 minutes can be as rejuvenating as a long sleep. Elevate your feet; it helps oxygen flow to the brain. And set a "low-tech alarm clock": hold a pen or a set of keys in one hand, preferably with the arm slightly raised. When you are fully relaxed, you will drop the object, and the noise will startle you awake.

- *Don't mistake one sort of angst for another.* If your marriage is unsatisfying, it may be a hangover from your job problems — or vice versa. "It's not always easy to tell where burnout starts," Mr. Staver cautioned.

- *Don't conclude that you're burning out when you're just having a down day.* "There's something in human nature that makes us think we're supposed to feel good all the time," Mr. Staver said. "Well, nothing feels great every day — no job, no relationship, nothing." In other words, give it a few days, maybe even a week. But if your energy is not back by then — well, reread Mr. Staver's tips.