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That Burnt-Out Feeling by Cathy Tsang-Feign

"I'm too young to retire and too old to start all over again. I feel stuck," Jim sighed.

Jim, 47, originally from Scotland, has been with his company in Hong Kong for nineteen years. Both he and his family feel quite settled. On and off he complains about the lack of quality of life, pollution, pushiness of people, etc. But like most people, he has learned to live with these. Yet since six months ago Jim has been getting extremely irritated by every little thing: traffic, noise, crowds, etc.. He also feels more and more overwhelmed by his work. His performance has declined, which means he has to spend more time in the office to catch up. This leaves him less time to relax or be with his family. The more exhausted and depressed he gets, the less work he gets done and eventually he must stay even longer hours and weekends to catch up. It turns into a vicious cycle.

"What do I get out of life? I just want to get out of here already," Jim says, exasperated. He claims he wants to drop everything and take the family back to Scotland. But in the back of his mind he knows that at 47 it would not be easy for him to find another good position. "And anyway, I don't know whether I really want to move back home," Jim questioned.

Jim is experiencing "burn-out", which many people in business suffer to different degrees. One feels mentally and physically exhausted and that his or her capacity is reaching its limit. A person may feel fatigued, withdrawn, unmotivated, short-tempered, cynical, easily irritated and depressed. Even recreation becomes difficult, as one may have lost all enthusiasm for life.

Jim blames his job and the environment and ignores the real causes of his exhaustion. Burn-out is caused not from without but from within. Usually it originates from a general feeling of constant routine with no end in sight. Feeling that life is one unending series of responsibilities, with no time for oneself and little enthusiasm for anything else, a person will easily feel overwhelmed and trapped.

Prolonged burn-out may even result in damage to one's mental health. Moving away will not remove burn-out. In fact, it is unwise to make any drastic decisions because people usually cannot view things objectively in this state of mind. Jim is likely thinking of Paris as

a haven for him. He believes that once he moves, everything will be fine.

Naturally, he will focus on the good things there and totally forget things that might have annoyed him in the past. With such notions in mind, relocation may turn out to be a big disappointment and disaster.

The only lasting cure for burn-out is a change in attitude and lifestyle. The first step is to tackle the feeling of being trapped by altering the routine, removing some of the obvious stressors and actively making the present situation more tolerable. Such can include: cutting down outside business meetings, delegating duties to trusted personnel, limiting the number of phone in-takes, getting more sleep, giving oneself a treat, etc. This way, a person can regain a sense of control over the situation.

Breaking the routine is essential to tackle burn-out. It would be helpful if one took a vacation as soon as possible, to refresh oneself and regain a sense of balance. However, this is easier said than done for many people. It often takes a concerted effort to pull oneself away from work or duty. A holiday may not be beneficial for the job in the short run, but it will definitely be beneficial for one's mental health in the long run.

In Jim's case, leaving Hong Kong may be one of many options for change. But instead of immediately rushing into such a major decision, it is advisable to explore first. Taking an extended trip home will give him and the family a more realistic idea of the advantages and disadvantages of relocating.

Burn-out is a signal for attention. Avoiding dealing with it may damage one's mental health. Obviously, running away will not resolve it either. It is important for a person to deal with burn-out where it originates: from within. Otherwise, wherever the person moves, he or she will fall back into the same old patterns. If an individual is willing to confront their problem with care, likely they can work it through and grow from such an experience.

The above is not an actual case, but a reconstruction based on actual cases.

*Cathy Tsang-Feign is an American- licensed psychotherapist based in Hong Kong. She works with individuals and families on problems of stress, marital dilemmas, career pressures, foreign relocation, and other issues. She is the author of the book **KEEPING YOUR LIFE, FAMILY AND CAREER INTACT WHILE LIVING ABROAD.***

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