Relationship Burnout

Most of us have heard of the concept of “burnout” as it relates to work, especially in caretaking fields (i.e. nurses, teachers, etc.). It is the psychological term for the experience of a long-term exhaustion and diminished interest due to overworking oneself and neglecting one’s own needs. I recently thought of how this concept is also valid as it relates to relationships. In the same way that we can “burn out” by overworking at a job, we can do the same in our significant relationships. When we begin to feel resentful, cynical, and apathetic in a relationship with our partner, we have probably reached the point of burnout. Burnout usually begins with an extreme desire to be validated by a loved one and excessive self-sacrifice designed to “earn” that validation. This evolves into a pattern of unequal contribution to the relationship and the overworking partner often feels the need to work harder and harder to achieve the same level of appreciation. These overworking efforts in combination with a neglect one’s own needs leads to emotional and physical exhaustion, bitterness and depression. Burnout is the ultimate end result. By the time someone has “burnout” in a relationship, it is often very hard to re-engage and reactivate energy toward the relationship. Thus, it is always beneficial to start couples therapy when the energy toward the relationship still exists and before “burnout” is evident. However, once burnout has resulted, I often think it is best to look inward rather than focusing on the partner. By looking inward, a person can discover what his/her own needs are – both for self-care and from a partner and can also develop insight into why they have “overworked” in the relationship. Once a pattern of self-care and self-reflection begins, a person often feels better overall – more energetic, less stressed, more engaged. At this point, it is possible to find the energy necessary to work on the relationship itself, by taking care of oneself and also articulating what is wanted from a partner. This is when the real work of couples therapy can begin.