



Dr Pete Stebbins PhD

WELLBEING QUICKSTART

Burnout Risk Profiles: ‘The Prodigy’



Burnout is a state of emotional exhaustion caused by ‘over investing’ in other people or things and ‘under investing’ in ourselves. The Prodigy is a burnout risk profile that causes us to take our need for achievement & being elite or ‘special’ to an extreme level – much to the detriment of our mental and physical health.

The Prodigy isn’t as common as The Martyr (see previous article) but it is more complex to untangle. The roots of the Prodigy usually begin after we have learned much earlier in our lives that we cannot reliably keep people happy around us despite our ‘Martyr’ style efforts – thus we cannot rely on them for love no matter what we do for them. This inability to get love from others despite all our efforts leads us to (a) feel defective and (b) gives us an existentially threatening problem to solve (as we can’t tolerate the thought of being somehow defective or incapable of being loved). As such we must urgently create a ‘reason’ why we are unloved beyond our own failed Martyr-ed efforts. And if we can’t self-blame our way to getting love, then the only other existential option we have is to decide we are ‘special’ - worthy to exist in the absence of love. We may also be told we are ‘special’ by those we so desperately seek love from further reinforcing our identification with The Prodigy.

Being ‘special’ creates two useful (although quite unhealthy) types of adaptation:

(1) Blaming our ‘specialness’ for why we are unloved allows us to seek out self-improvement – setting up ‘conditions’ in the format of ‘achievements’ for our own self-love (and hopefully recognition and praise from our carers (i.e., ‘*look how smart/clever/strong etc. you are*’)); and/or

2) Blaming our ‘specialness’ for why we are unloved allows us to see those who reject us as inferior or unworthy and elevates ourselves as ‘chosen ones’ or special in some way as an explanation for why our suffering and persecution is outside our control. Thus any rejection from others further confirms our ‘specialness’ or self-righteousness in a self-reinforcing (aka self-sabotaging) cycle.

The Prodigy provides our younger self with useful explanations for our inability to receive love and care from significant others allowing us to cope with emotional abuse and/or neglect (and other more severe traumas) in our early years. The Prodigy also creates highly ‘driven’ goal orientated behaviours that can lead to incredible intellectual, physical or material achievements over the course of our lives. However, in our adult years it causes major problems. We over-identify with the righteousness of our cause or pursuit of excellence. We become intolerant of contrarian views & feedback leading to heightened levels of passive aggression, rigidity and physical bracing. Eventually we exhaust ourselves perfecting our ‘specialness’ in an attempt to meet our unmet needs but it doesn’t work and we burnout.

The path to healing from the Prodigy is to therapeutically reverse engineer these unhealthy adaptations – swapping the habit of seeking self-improvement and/ or self-righteousness as a proxy for self-love with reconnecting to the feeling of unconditional self-love that originally existed within our True Self (and still does). Healing the wounds of The Prodigy may not necessarily lessen our desire to be elite in our chosen field (although in some cases it does) but rather it moves it from a driven ‘*must do*’ to a motivated ‘*would like to do*’. And, to use sports analogy, this is the difference between winning one contest vs succeeding on the long road to becoming the world champion!

DrPeteStebbins.com