



Captain George Burk USAF (Ret.) is an internationally-known motivational speaker, author, and quality improvement coach.

In 1970, he was the sole survivor of a military plane crash. He suffered extensive burns and multiple internal injuries. He spent 90 days in intensive care, 18 months in hospital, and endured years of operations and rehabilitation.

George Burk knows first-hand the motivation required to overcome adversity, and to hold fast to your dreams. His presentations are credible and emotional. They leave audiences encouraged and inspired to follow their dreams, and make their visions into reality.

George Burk is available for keynote addresses, presentations to corporate and not-for-profit groups, and for interview with radio, television and print media.

George Burk

Motivational Speaker

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) & Survivor Guilt – A Survivor's Experience and Lessons Learned

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): “A common anxiety disorder that develops after an exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which a grave physical harm occurred or was threatened.”

Survivor Guilt: “A deep feeling of guilt often experienced by those who have survived some catastrophe that took the lives of others; derives in part from a feeling that they did not do enough to save the others who perished and in part from feelings of being unworthy relative to those who died.”

Now I know I experience PTSD and Survivor Guilt. Many of you know that I'm the sole survivor of a military plane crash and the extent of my burns and internal injuries. Until about 15 years ago, I never knew or heard about PTSD or Survivor Guilt. For over 25 years, I was pretty much left to fend for myself and learn how to deal with the emotions I was experiencing, all the while not knowing or understanding what I was feeling or why. There were no support groups or other burn survivors with whom I could vent and share my emotions and frustrations. Not many I knew survived.

I still recall my primary doctor telling me in mid 1971 “George, we heal the body, we don't have time to heal the mind.” He was responding to my question to him, “Doc, what happens to the guys when they leave here (the burn unit.)?”

As the sole survivor, I know about guilt! After hearing what I still believe were cries for help, I crawled back to the burning plane on my elbows and knees in a futile attempt to try and save my friends and co-workers. I crawled to within a few feet of the wreckage that was burning, heard a muffled explosion and then felt a great deal of heat on my face. I knew then there were no survivors.

Here are a few of my many lessons learned on how I've dealt with PTSD and Survivor Guilt. It's been trial and error, hit and miss. I try to remember what worked and why it worked and discard what didn't and have the wisdom from God to know the difference. It's a process---beginning and middle with no end---and the healing is continuous. God is my pilot!

I've made the physical pain I've had for 39 years my ally; I've learned to live with it. The mental pain is a silent killer.

ADMIT YOU HAVE IT. The first step in the problem solving process is to identify (acknowledge) the problem and it's source(s). This is a vital first step. Without it, no amount of therapy or medication will help. They'll only mask the real issues. To be open and honest with others, you must first be open and honest with yourself. It's all inside! Have the character to think it out and the courage to talk it out.

“We are better persuaded by reasons we discover ourselves than by those given to us by others.”
Blaise Pascal, mathematician

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IDENTIFY YOUR PURPOSE (mission). Everyone has a purpose in life; however, no one else can find our purpose for us. We must find and work at it every day. It may include right actions and right deeds, taking time to enjoy the beauty around us in nature, our family and friends. We accept the suffering we are experiencing is as unique to us in the entire universe. Strive to live life to a higher calling with a strong spiritual value system. My doctor, medical staff, family and close friends never let me quit. They gave me even more hope to live so that I could still lead a full and satisfying life.

SET APPROPRIATE GOALS. Goals are what you want to accomplish. They are tangible results for which to strive. A goal starts with active verbs such as: develop, create, manage, and establish. Goals can also have a timeline, establish accountability and are measurable for success. Set them every day. Develop a plan and work the plan. That helps provide structure to your life.

CHANGE WHAT YOU CAN...and don't sweat the small stuff. As one of my friends said to me a number of years ago while we were in the burn unit together, "Don't sweat the small stuff Captain, because it's all small stuff." I once heard the term insanity defined as, "doing things the same way but expecting different results." We can only change ourselves, not others; the internals, not the externals. I've experienced rejection; it's taken many forms. About 20 years ago, when faced with a personal or professional challenge, I learned to ask myself, "Hey dummy, what's the worst thing that can happen here? Nothing! It's already happened. There's no second place. You're not laying in a burn unit struggling to breathe."

"He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils, for time is the greatest innovator."

Francis Bacon,
philosopher

TAKE AN EMOTIONAL BREATH. Regardless if its lunch break, work breaks, or "time outs" at home, take them regardless if you think they are needed or not. The breaks you need the most are usually the ones you don't want to take. Close your office door, place your feet on the desk, close your eyes and relax; or take a walk in the park and listen to the birds singing. It all works and can help you manage stress.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOU'RE NOT TO BLAME. Self-imposed guilt can kill you. And don't let others play the blame game, either. Know that all healing takes time, and time is one commodity you have on your side. Don't be an enabler or permit others to enable you!

"We see things not as they are, but as we are."

H.M Tomlinson, writer

LEARN TO TURN NEGATIVE SITUATIONS INTO POSITIVE RESULTS. Train yourself to find or see something positive in every situation. Remember, it's not what happens to us, it's what we do about it that counts. Practice positive self-talk and fill your mind with positive affirmations. Learn to see your "glass of life" as half full, not half empty. How you see yourself is a good benchmark of how you see the world. Commit to live your life in a way that honors friends, family and the doctors and staff who worked to save your life.

"A friend is a present you give yourself."

Robert Louis Stevenson, poet

PRACTICE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES. These techniques counteract the body's reaction to the mind's "fight or flight" syndrome. Experiment with biofeedback, meditation or mind-mapping techniques. As a burn survivor, I learned first hand how to practice and implement both meditation and mind-mapping techniques. Today, I sat and watched four desert quail walk across our patio.

"Ask yourself the secret of your success. Listen to your answer(s) and practice it."

Richard Bach, writer

DEVELOP A WORK AND PERSONAL SUPPORT GROUP. Surround yourself with people who want you to succeed, not fail. These people are "leaders" who provide you the skills, opportunities and encouragement to strive to reach your goals. It has always been a source of amazement and inspiration to meet upbeat and energetic people who always seem to bring out the best in others. Ask people you admire to serve as your mentors and coaches.



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KNOW YOURSELF. Develop and expand the ability look introspectively at who you are and where you to are headed. Change your internal script from “woulda,” “coulda,” “shoulda,” to “shall,” “will,” “must.” You’ve heard the term “GIGO,” which stands for “garbage in, garbage out” as it applies to computers. Our minds are computers, too. If we continuously program it with negative thinking, the results are the same: GIGO. Your brain is a computer. Nourish it wisely, well and often.

“We have met the enemy and he is us.”
Pogo, cartoon character

REWARD YOURSELF MORE FREQUENTLY. Learn to celebrate even the smallest of victories. Reward yourself with an ice cream cone, a special meal or a movie. To me, one of life’s many small pleasures is a large bag of popcorn, no butter, in a darkened theater. Give a hug, get a hug.

KNOW THE TRIGGERS. People, places, things, events. I still have dreams about plane crashes. I know they will happen and I’ve learned to expect them and deal with them. Alcohol is a depressant. Don’t drink. If you smoke, stop! Smoking robs the blood of needed oxygen and affects vital organs. Eat right; you are what you eat. Exercise regularly, it helps burn off unwanted stress, calories and helps you to relax so you can sleep better. Wean your mind off the pills! They only mask the real issues. Peel the onion! Life is about choices! I’m grateful and blessed I’m alive, and I choose to live every day like it may be my last.

GET A LIFE (OF YOUR OWN.) The time away from work should be time devoted to yourself and your family. Establish clear physical and emotional boundaries between home and work, and hold to them as much as humanly possible. Fill your life with “pictures” of people, places and events that have enriched you.

Oh yeah, one other suggestion. Don’t get all stressed out trying to manage your post-traumatic stress and survivor guilt.

“Write a letter to Santa and tell him how you would like your life to be next year at this time.”
--“2,002 ways to Cheer ☺☺ Yourself Up”



About George Burk

George Burk is the author of *A Bridge Never Crossed: A Survivor's Search for Meaning* (Proceeds benefit the New York Fire Fighters Burn Center Foundation) Science & Humanities Press (1998/1999); *Value Centered Leadership: A Survivor's Strategy for Personal and Professional Growth* (Published 2004) and *My Mother, My Friend - The story of a boy and the love of his mother* (Beach House Books/Spring/2006). His books are available at www.georgeburk.com.

In May 1970, George Burk was the sole survivor of 14 passengers in a military plane crash. The crew was enroute to Spokane, Washington to conduct an operational analysis. Ascending through 3000', the aircraft experienced rapid de-compression and massive structural failure, crashing in the hills near Sonoma, California. George suffered severe burns and multiple internal injuries. He spent 90 days in Intensive Care and 18 months in the hospital. He was medically retired from the Air Force in 1971. While in Intensive Care, he had two Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). George saw the bridge, he saw the door and the light and he believes we all have guardian angels.

Captain George Burk's awards include: The Bronze Star; Air Force Commendation Medal; Presidential Award for Outstanding Employee with a Disability; Department of Defense Outstanding Employee with a Disability; Department of the Navy Outstanding Employee with a Disability; Air Force Meritorious Civilian Service Award; and the Adrian College, (Michigan) Alumni Achievement Award.

He was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree from Adrian College in 1963 and a Master of Arts degree from Webster University in 1975. George was inducted into the Adrian College Athletic Hall of Fame in 1998 for baseball and basketball, community involvement and his military service.

George has over 25 years teaching experience at the university and community college level and is a contributing writer for several magazines and newsletters in the United States and Australia.

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Sign up to receive Captain George Burk's quarterly newsletter with articles, facts and tips about overcoming adversity and change, organizational self-management and leadership. The newsletter is helpful for business leaders, not-for-profit organizations, health care providers, colleges, faith-based organizations, safety & fire prevention and military organizations.

For a list of George's speaking engagements, visit www.georgeburk.com.

