

Recognizing and Recovering from Burnout

by
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Burnout Defined

Webster's dictionary defines burnout as *the exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, usually as the result of prolonged stress or frustration*. Exhaustion tops the list of symptoms of burnout and appears to be a hallmark feature. Bateson and Hart describe burnout as *complete mental or emotional fatigue lasting weeks at a time, generally as a result of exposure to stress that is pervasive, complete and prolonged*. Common symptoms include exhaustion, fatigue, detachment, boredom, cynicism, sadness, annoyance or irritability. Attorneys facing burnout often feel drained, as if they have nothing left to give, feel a lack of achievement, purpose and sense of hope. Some experience distrust or a sense of impending failure. Burnout is a disillusioning experience.

Results of Burnout

The results of burnout can include being less efficient, wasting time, procrastinating and coming up with extra errands during the day. The quantity and quality of work may decline. Doing the minimum can become a challenge and what was easy before now seems difficult. Once the cycle of burnout begins, the attorney may start a project expecting failure, find it hard to invest much effort, and ultimately receive negative feedback. Workaholic tendencies, burnout and depression can fuel each other.

Many attorneys experiencing burnout feel the urge to make radical changes out of a sense of desperation. Usually this involves urges to quit abruptly or to leave the profession altogether with or without a backup plan. Two poles of burnout range from adopting a robotic, detached, automatic work style to the rescuing, overinvolved super-helper attorney who has worn out. Some feel that they are unimportant; others irreplaceable, as if every task was critical and none can be delegated.

When burnout is more advanced, the attorney's usual demeanor may harden. The lawyer may come across as jaded, detached or cynical. Clearly it is time to rejuvenate. Some display oddly placed bits of anger, sigh, have morning inertia, cyber slack or take on extra errands during the workday to avoid other, more pressing things. There can be lethargy, perfunctory or inconsistent performance, vigorous cynicism, and disparagement. Left unattended, burnout can contribute to challenges to ethical duties, particularly communication and diligence.

Factors that Raise the Risk of Burnout

Environmental, situational and personality factors can increase susceptibility to burnout. Environmental contributors include competition, downsizing, being in an extremely stressful situation for a long time, time pressures, long workdays, the adversarial nature of the court process, work overload, disparity between demands and resources, the need to keep up with variety of topics, feeling inadequate, unimportant or underappreciated, and struggling to balance personal/professional obligations. When demands on an attorney seem too high for too long, coping skills can become overloaded.

Attorneys are part of a very hard working profession, with 1/3 of attorneys working an estimated 50 or more hours a week. The legal profession tends to attract persons with perfectionism or workaholic traits. Personality factors that increase susceptibility include a high need for control, over dedication, perfectionism and workaholic tendencies. The constant quest for perfection can lead to dissatisfaction in the long term. Others at higher risk are idealists, those with unrealistic expectations or low coping abilities. Very empathic attorneys who pour high levels of emotional energy into their work can become overwhelmed over time. Attorneys who have limited social support or a personal history of trauma may be at greater risk of burnout. Additional risk factors are the toll of highly complex, emotionally charged cases over time. Those working in family and criminal law may find their risk is greater as well.

Factors that Protect Against Burnout

Some factors that protect against burnout include the use of humor, getting regular exercise, enough sleep, keeping in touch with friends, having hobbies and taking planned vacations. At work, it is helpful to seek perspective by recognizing when you have done a good job and identifying what you can control. If you have coworkers, foster a healthy team environment. Having one can help protect against burnout. Having support staff can make a big difference. If you are a solo practitioner and are consistently low on resources, assess your hiring needs. If you hire support staff, it is helpful to hire around common work values that are important to you.

Burnout itself is not a mental health diagnosis. Some of the symptoms of burnout can parallel symptoms of depression, such as sadness, detachment, pessimism and irritability. Attorneys who suspect they are facing both burnout and depression may benefit from additional assistance.

Recovering from Burnout

If you are experiencing burnout, there are many ways to recover. Recognize that you are experiencing burnout, identify signs that led to it, and then consider ways to resolve it. Think about what you really enjoy, what gives you meaning in your work and personal life, what will help you recharge, and focus on those items. Plan to do these things very soon. While doing them, note you are doing this to refresh and rejuvenate. Seek support and reduce your stress level. Identify factors that are causing you stress right now and what is likely to cause it in the future. Consider what you can do to reduce your overall stress level and what you need to accept for now.

Other strategies to recover include using humor, setting realistic goals, focusing on fitness, participating in creative non-work activities and taking time away including mini breaks and regular vacations. Mergendahl recommends raising your awareness by considering some questions about priorities. Examples include considering whether or not this is a life or death situation, whether or not you should delegate, and what if anything your client will lose if this is not finished today. Crawford and Querin suggest considering the meaning of your work. Consider what drew you to the law, how your job fits into your community and the larger world around you.

Blackford notes that it's important to differentiate your problems from your client's troubles. If you feel your client's troubles have become yours too, get support. Consider if you are an introverted or extroverted person. Introverts can benefit from taking time alone, away from the hustle and bustle. Extroverts can benefit from frequent physical activities and opportunities to interact with friends and family.

If you are considering making radical or drastic changes, slow down. Take some time think it over carefully. Consider minor changes before making any major moves. Evaluate whether your problems relate to your particular job or certain circumstances. If the problems are internally driven, changing your environment won't solve them in the long run. Use office support, try to reduce your level of perfectionism and reevaluate your expectations. Slow down or interrupt yourself if ruminating on negative thoughts.

Reestablish some boundaries. Decide when you will stop lawyering for the day. Will it be when you lock the office door, turn into your driveway, hug your loved ones, or turn off your cell phone? Legal work involves working with feelings, not just intellect. Working with emotions can exact a price. The time you take to refresh and renew will be time well spent.

For professional, confidential assistance in coping with burnout, contact MOLAP at 1-800-688-7859.

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