

Lawyers ASSISTANCE

By Dr. Angela White-Bazile, Esq.

TOO MUCH IS EVOLVING: BURNOUT

My thoughts: "I'm busy right now. I have so many deadlines."

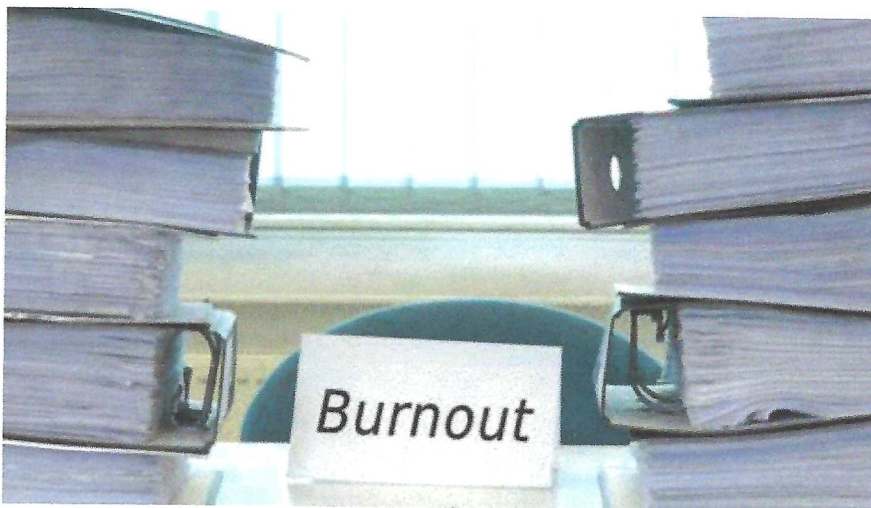
Their requests: "Can you get this done before you leave today? I just need you to review (respond to or resolve) ASAP."

The practice of law has a competitive culture leaving little room for error or a break, with unforgiving hours, tight deadlines and persistent demands from superiors and clients that can lead to high stress, exhaustion and, ultimately, burnout.¹ Our work can be complex and stressful as people count on us to handle their most sensitive legal issues and guide them through some of the most traumatic experiences of their lives.² Yet, through it all, we are expected to overcome each challenge in a professional and tactful manner per the Rules of Professional Conduct.³

Some of us have had tunnel vision early on. We received good grades and set our sights on a particular law school and dream job. Now, we sit all day researching, writing, preparing for court appearances, responding to emails, coordinating conference calls, and staying abreast of case law and procedural updates. Yet, we were never taught the importance of prioritizing our mental health.⁴ Is it any wonder that research shows lawyers have some of the highest rates of alcoholism, depression and suicide among professionals?

Certainly, temporary moments of stress are a natural part of life, and everyone gets a little worn out sometimes. However, burnout is constant emotional, physical and mental exhaustion due to excessive and prolonged stress.⁵ Burnout, affecting our ability to work and function, does not happen overnight but slowly progresses.

Signs of burnout include physical and mental fatigue from chronic stress,



headaches, body aches and pains, disrupted sleep, significant weight changes, social withdrawal, inattention to detail, absenteeism, and drug and alcohol abuse to cope.⁶

The endless cycle of pushing beyond our maximum limits and trying to achieve the most billable hours to build up our reputation and career will eventually affect us physically, emotionally and mentally, if it has not already done so.⁷

Burnout is not a new phenomenon. In 2004, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a study explaining that working more than 10 hours a day or 55 hours a week can dramatically increase the chances of cardiovascular issues such as stroke and heart disease by as much as 60%.⁸ Various studies over the years show how chronic stress can impact almost every system in the body, and, when it goes untreated, stress suppresses the body's immune system, leading to illnesses such as cold and flu and vulnerability to depression and anxiety.⁹ Thus, rigorous work practices, dissatisfaction and "toughing it out" should not be accepted as the norm for a successful career.

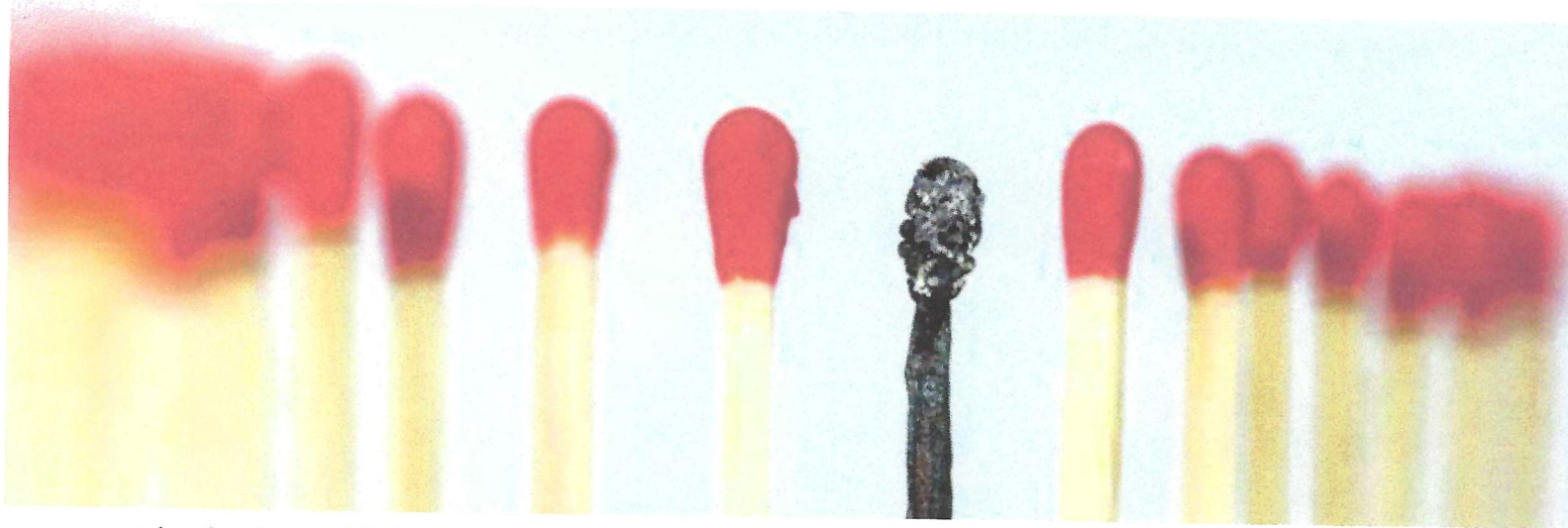
Why does someone have to suffer a

heart attack, stroke or die for us to realize the danger we put ourselves in when we ignore our physical, mental and emotional health?

If you no longer find joy in any aspect of your job or get little to no sense of accomplishment from your work, you may be experiencing burnout. Not only do you suffer the consequences, your clients and loved ones do as well when the demands of your career cause you to feel inundated with stress and exhaustion to the point of burnout.¹⁰

How long do you think you can continue to deal with sleepless nights, an upset spouse and skipping meals?¹¹ Maybe you describe your exhaustion as feeling empty, blank, numb, fed up and beyond done.¹² Burnout can also be a sense of failure and self-doubt, an increasingly cynical and pessimistic outlook, procrastinating, or taking out frustrations on others.¹³

Unfortunately, as lawyers, we hardly ever make ourselves a priority. The court, the firm or the client comes first. Working more hours equals less time for ourselves and those we care about. We must grasp that we cannot help others if we do not help ourselves first.¹⁴ We must stop masking the warning signs



and opting for a quick fix in another cup of coffee or powering through one more late night. We cannot continue to overlook our health and basic well-being needs, as burnout worsens if ignored.¹⁵ We cannot continue to self-medicate and risk ethical violations or more severe consequences. We cannot continue down an unsustainable path.

Prevention is the best solution to avoid burnout through building and maintaining healthy habits such as adequate sleep, spending time outdoors, taking regular breaks, eating nutritious food and regularly exercising.¹⁶ For example, a short walk outside can significantly impact your overall mental and physical health, as physical fitness has been shown to help enhance mental sharpness, concentration and mood.¹⁷ Disconnect from work and carve out time to rest, relax and recharge.¹⁸ Create boundaries and do not read emails after a specific time. Do not overextend yourself. Take a vacation.

You are not alone if you feel you are not allowed to be exhausted, overworked and overwhelmed; you question whether you still like being a lawyer; or you try to convince yourself that maybe everything is not all that bad.¹⁹ Feeling like you are sacrificing your life to keep up with what you thought would be an amazing career after working hard to get an education is frustrating.²⁰ Perhaps the practice of law itself is not the problem, but rather your firm or area of practice.

We need to realistically examine our lives to balance how much we work and how much time we spend doing things we love to avoid reaching a breaking point. If we do not make time for our wellness, we will be forced to make

time for an illness.

If you need help processing your own unique experience of burnout or exhaustion, reach out to JLAP at (985)778-0571, email jlap@louisianajlap.com, or visit the website at: www.louisianajlap.com. The call costs nothing but could make a huge difference.

JLAP is committed to encouraging judges, lawyers, law students and legal professionals to openly discuss mental health and how we can support each other through transparency and honesty. We all need to learn to take back control of our time and focus on what makes us happy and is most important to us. A healthier lawyer can only be a better lawyer.²¹

JLAP is a CONFIDENTIAL Safe Haven of Healing.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The threat of burnout is real in the legal profession," Thomson Reuters, <https://legal.thomsonreuters.com/en/insights/articles/threat-burnout-legal-profession>.

2. Charlene Gisele, "How Lawyers Can Prevent Burnout," ALM Law (May 11, 2022), www.law.com/international-edition/2022/05/11/how-lawyers-can-prevent-burnout/?slretu rn=2022071210579; Sarah Bottorff, "How to Avoid Lawyer Burnout Using Legal Technology," The National Law Review (Feb. 1, 2022), <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/how-to-avoid-lawyer-burnout-using-legal-technology>.

3. Angelia Salgado, "Attorney Burnout Is on the Rise. What Can You Do About It?" Attorney At Law (May 20, 2021), <https://attorneyatlawmagazine.com/attorney-burnout-is-on-the-rise-what-can-you-do-about-it>.

4. Gisele, *supra* note 2.

5. Melinda Smith, Jeanne Segal and Lawrence Robinson, "Burnout Prevention and Treatment," HelpGuide, <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm>.

6. "The threat of burnout is real in the legal profession," *supra* note 1.

7. Charlene Gisele, "It's Time to End Burnout Culture in the Legal Industry," Lawyer Monthly (Jul. 30, 2021), <https://www.lawyer-monthly.com/2021/07/its-time-to-end-burnout-culture-in-the-legal-industry/>.

8. Bottorff, *supra* note 2; Claire C. Caruso, Edward M. Hitchcock, Robert B. Dick, John M. Russo and Jennifer M. Schmit, "Overtime and Extended Work Shifts: Recent Findings on Illnesses, Injuries, and Health Behaviors," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (April 2004), <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2004-143/pdfs/2004-143.pdf>.

9. Gisele, *supra* note 7; Bottorff, *supra* note 2.

10. Bottorff, *supra* note 2.

11. Gisele, *supra* note 7.

12. Kate Ahern, "Now is time to banish burnout from your practice" Minnesota Lawyer (Feb. 8, 2023), <https://minnlawyer.com/2023/02/08/now-is-time-to-banish-burnout-from-your-practice/>.

13. "Stress, Burnout and Balance," NCLAP, <https://www.nclap.org/stress-work-life-balance/>.

14. PracticePanther "Why Lawyer Burnout Is Still An Issue in 2021" The National Law Review (Sept. 9, 2021), <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/why-lawyer-burnout-still-issue-2021>; Bottorff, *supra* note 2.

15. Gisele, *supra* note 7.

16. PracticePanther, *supra* note 14; Bottorff, *supra* note 2; Gisele, *supra* note 7.

17. "The threat of burnout is real in the legal profession," *supra* note 1; PracticePanther, *supra* note 14.

18. "The threat of burnout is real in the legal profession," *supra* note 1.

19. Ahern, *supra* note 12.

20. Ahern, *supra* note 12.

21. Gisele, *supra* note 7.

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