

# Combating Attorney Burnout

BY JUDD KESSLER
Illustration by Gilberto Sauceda

Burnout affects all working professionals, hindering their ability to perform their best. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, burnout is exhaustion of physical or emotional strength as a result of prolonged stress or frustration. Those who experience burnout are not only exhausted emotionally and physically, they can be irritable and resentful of people, places, and things they used to care deeply about.

Attorneys are no strangers to the world of stress. Running a law practice is, above all else, a business. The pressure of working long hours, winning settlements and trials, and staying on top of all deadlines and events can easily get the best of you. Many attorneys find themselves burned out from mundane, daily tasks. Burnout affects everyone differently, but it can cause mild to severe depression, fatigue, and feelings of failure. In the legal world, these can be a deadly combination.

A large part of having a successful law practice is the ability to provide outstanding client services. A satisfied client is your best referral source so it's vital to turn all clients into raving fans. Excellent client satisfaction starts with communication: Listen to what your clients are saying, hear what they are asking, and respond accordingly. It is important to treat your clients with respect, return their inquiries in a timely manner, and assure them that while you are doing everything in your power to get a desirable outcome, things may not turn out the way they want. If your clients have unrealistic expectations at the beginning of their cases, they may be unhappy with your services because the outcome wasn't what they expected, not because you didn't do your job well.

When you are burned out, you are unable to do your job well. When you're not motivated to work, your clients will notice and your practice will suffer. Burnout happens slowly. Often, attorneys don't notice the progression until it is too late. It is important to recognize that you may be experiencing burnout. Once you acknowledge this, you can take control of your practice. Your peace of mind will return and, like magic, burnout will become a thing of the past.

If you feel overwhelmed, it is important to write down your goals so you don't lose sight of them in your hectic life. List all of the personal and professional goals that matter to you, including career, family, financial, personal, and spiritual ones. After you've done this, list a couple of priorities under each goal and be prepared to follow through with them. No matter how well you may think you are doing something, there is always room for improvement. List some aspects of your practice that can use improvement and pick one to focus on at a time. It's not reasonable to think you can change your practice all at once. Taking small steps ensures your new plans will work for you, not against you. A great way to ensure you stay on track is to take time each week to review your list. If you find that you are overwhelmed, depressed, exhausted, and irritable, take a moment to reassess your priorities. Look for things that you would like to change. It is not easy to evaluate yourself, but it's important that you are honest and, above all else, realistic.

Practicing law is brainwork, and you need time to foster your best creative thinking. If you've let things slip to the point where you don't have productive thinking time, then you're robbing yourself. Figure out when you're most creative and schedule time each day with yourself.

Burnout stems from taking on too many responsibilities at once and expecting too much of yourself and others. Practicing law can become more stressful when you try to do too many things at once. A 2009 Stanford University study showed multitaskers have more difficulty filtering out useless information. Though it's enticing to talk on the phone, answer an email, and monitor Twitter all at once, something is bound to fall through the

cracks. It is more effective to multitask by switching to Project B while you wait for input from others on Project A. This method makes sense and improves your productivity.

Many attorneys lose sleep wondering if they forgot to return a phone call, respond to an email, schedule a deposition, or submit a court form. It's important for attorneys to stay organized and keep a schedule. Adopt current technologies to help alleviate mundane tasks.

Dealing with all of the issues involved with burnout is an important way to face it head-on. If, however, you find that you are unable to deal with burnout on your own, contact a professional or utilize the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP). TLAP's staff members are trained to help lawyers who are struggling with difficult issues. All communication with TLAP is confidential. For more information, call (800)343-8527. dealing with your feelings, you can overcome burnout and continue doing what you first imagined: Practicing law and helping others.

#### **Notes**

1. This article references Burnout Prevention for Lawyers, Don Jones, State Bar of Texas Law Practice Management, December, 1996.



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