

# **BURNOUT PREVENTION FOR LAWYERS**

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## BURNOUT PREVENTION FOR LAWYERS

by Don Jones

### Do any of these sound familiar?

- You expect high quality from yourself all the time under all conditions.
- You believe there is simply no excuse for mistakes.
- You believe it is always better, and usually easier, to do a task yourself than to delegate.
- You feel particularly uncomfortable saying “no” to new responsibilities.
- You feel anxious or angry when you don’t have control over situations or circumstances.
- You obsess about a job until it is finished.
- You feel uncomfortable unless you are doing *something*.
- You feel angry when things don’t go the way you have planned
- You believe you could do better than your supervisor or anyone else in authority.
- You find it hard to “let go” of past mistakes.
- You feel angry or anxious when you are late to an appointment.
- You often find it difficult to “leave your job at the office” when you get home.
- You rarely take a vacation, and when you do, you frankly find it difficult to tolerate.

If so, you are probably closer to burnout than you think. It may be that lawyers are more prone to burnout than members of other professions. If not, we certainly rank high on that list.

### What is Burnout?

As Director of the Texas Lawyers’ Assistance Program, I receive calls every month from attorneys across the state who find themselves in the crisis stage of burnout. They feel overwhelmed, overstressed, and trapped. Not a pretty picture, but one in which too many of us find ourselves.

Essentially, burnout is what happens to people when they are highly invested in a way of life, a career, or relationship that fails to produce the reward expected. Burnout sufferers tend to feel physically and emotionally exhausted, chronically impatient and irritable, and acutely resentful and apathetic toward people, places and things about which they once cared deeply.

Like so many other problems in which we find ourselves, burnout is not an event but is a process. It progresses through various stages, most of which we ignore until it is too late. In keeping with the fire analogy, I call these stages 1) fueling; 2) ignition; 3) consumption; and finally, 4) burnout.

### Fueling

Camping 101 will tell us that for any fire to burn, it’s got to have fuel. And, Camping 102 will tell us that there are good fires and not so good fires, and that the difference between the two depends in large measure on the type of fuel used. The same is true for burnout.

“Good burnout fuel” generally consists of expectations, beliefs, attitudes and fears. Some of the more common are:

- The belief that you must, and can, be all things to all people.

- The underlying fear of saying “no” to new responsibilities.

- The attitude that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

- The expectation that you must perform at your top capacity at all times in all situations.

- The attitude that there is always a “right way” and a “wrong way” and that you, and everyone else, should always act according to your “right way”.

- The belief that you should always be in control.

- The expectation that your career, job, relationships, etc., should always give you what you want.

- The attitude that unless you are doing *something* productive, you are simply wasting time.

- The fear that others are just waiting to judge and criticize you.

- The belief that there are never any excuses for mistakes.

- The attitude of constant vigilance for the opportunity to criticize others, especially those you are closest to in your job, your family and your friends.

- The attitude that all the “touchy, feely” things, like acknowledging and talking about your emotions, are simply a waste of time.

Now, some of these, of course, sound pretty negative and most of us would probably deny that we even come close to harboring them. But the truth is, all of us have some of these in some measure. If you hold some of these expectations, beliefs, attitudes or fears, you have the right fuel for a really good

burnout.

### Ignition

Once you have the fuel, all you need to be on your way to burnout is the right spark. For some of us, simply embarking on the practice of law is all the spark we need. It is a demanding profession, requiring a great deal of physical, intellectual and emotional energy.

We deal with difficult people in difficult situations, often with little control over the final outcome. Many of us entered the practice of law expecting to change the world, save the downtrodden, champion the cause of justice, or even just make a healthy, secure living. Too often, none of these expectations are realized to our satisfaction.

Add the following to the circumstances inherent in the practice of law, and you find you have sparked the fuel and started the slow burn.

- **Role overload.** Acting on our belief that we can, and should, be all things to all people, we take on more roles than we can handle. We are not only an overworked lawyer and perhaps family member, spouse, parent, and friend, but now we are director on three different boards, soccer coach, volunteer for five different organizations, president of four other organizations — they name it, we’ll do it. While some may be able to handle all of these roles and even manage them into a healthy picture of balance, for those prone to burnout, they generally cause conflict, anxiety and resentment.

· **Responsibility overload.** Add to these roles your belief that if you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself and your reluctance to say "no" to new responsibilities, and you find the work to be done in any one of these roles to be overwhelming, not to mention the work of all of them combined.

· **Expectation overload.** Having set ourselves up with high expectations, burnout-prone individuals in the ignition phase will take action toward realizing these expectations. In each of the roles and responsibilities we have assumed, we expect perfection from ourselves and rewards from others and from the work. Overloading these roles and responsibilities, however, tends to make the former impossible. Idealizing these roles and responsibilities tends to render the latter unsatisfactory.

### Consumption

It is in this stage that the fire we ignited in the former phase begins to consume our lives. Life becomes difficult and often overwhelming. We find we are unable to meet our own expectations in our roles and responsibilities, and we begin to discover that the rewards we expect are not always forthcoming. We don't get the recognition we deserve. We don't get the satisfaction from the work and relationships we had hoped for. And often, we don't even get the monetary compensation we feel we deserve.

It is in this phase that we begin to experience power failure. Whether we admit it or not, those of us who are burnout-prone ultimately believe that we have the power, or at least *should* have the power, to make people, places and things act or unfold as we

desire. It doesn't take long, however, before we slam into the brick wall of powerlessness. People don't always do what we want them to do. Institutions don't always act right. Careers don't always give us what we expect. Sometimes the song is right — you work your fingers to the bone and you get nothing but bony fingers.

The consumption phase is further fueled by our reluctance or inability to admit that we can't handle what we have taken on. We discount, or ignore completely, the emotional and physical signs that tell us we may be heading for trouble. We do not pay attention to the depression and fatigue that are establishing a foothold in our lives. What's more, we believe that the way to defeat these gremlins is simply to work harder and take on more. Obviously, the problem is well into the proverbial "vicious cycle" and may continue for months or even years.

### Burnout

This is the crisis phase of the whole process. Our once bright fire has burned out, and we really do feel "extinguished". Disillusionment with our careers, relationships, even with ourselves has reached an all-time low. We often feel chronically depressed. We are emotionally "tapped out." We feel pulled in all directions. It seems everyone wants a piece of us. When others ask us for more, or even just a little, we feel angry and resentful. We begin to hate our work and avoid those people we once sought out. On top of that, we often feel trapped in our jobs and relationships and either can't see a way out or just don't have the energy to exercise our options.

Often, we experience physical problems in this stage. Due to fatigue, our

immune system is not as healthy as it once was and we seem to be always fighting some illness. We have frequent tension headaches and generally feel rundown all the time.

### **Burnout Prevention**

It should be obvious from what has gone before, that the best burnout prevention is early burnout prevention. There is absolutely nothing wrong with feeling passionate about our lives, our careers and our relationships. There is nothing wrong with being committed to a cause and to ideals. But we have to burn the right fuel for it to be a long and bright fire.

To the extent we can remove the “bad fuel” from the good, we can circumvent the burnout process altogether. To do this, we must make an accurate assessment of the fuel we bring to the fire. We must honestly evaluate our expectations, beliefs, attitudes and fears and be willing to make some changes.

There are really two good ways to honestly evaluate whether we are bringing burnout fuel to our endeavors. One is to look at our actions. We may deny that we believe we must be all things to all people, and yet find ourselves wearing fifteen different hats on any given day, trying to accomplish twenty different tasks under each hat. We may say that we don’t feel the need to be doing *something* all the time, and yet, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, from the morning alarm to the evening lights out, we are constantly on the move.

The other way to make a good evaluation is to listen to what others say about us. We may cringe at the possibility that we believe we must be in control at all times, and yet others may verbally bristle at our attempts

to control them or the situation, or even outright label us “control freaks.” We may say we believe in talking about our emotions, and yet those closest to us seem to continuously accuse us of not telling them what we are feeling.

However we make this evaluation, it is crucial that we make it. Often, simply being aware of these potentially self-destructive expectations, beliefs, attitudes and fears enables us to change them over time. Sometimes, though, we need help. Talking about these with someone safe can go a long way toward rendering them powerless in our lives. If we need more help, professional assistance can often facilitate change quickly and efficiently.

If we have not taken action this early, it is never too late to pull out of the burnout cycle. Make yourself familiar with the signs of burnout and be willing to act as soon as you see them. When you find yourself overwhelmed, stressed out, depressed, exhausted, irritable, resentful, restless and discontent, stop and inventory your life. Are you in role, responsibility or expectation overload? Are you experiencing power failure? If so, be willing to brainstorm with someone else about what you can do to change this. The solution may involve some external changes, but remember, if you don’t make the internal changes — if you don’t change the fuel — you will simply find yourself right back on the burnout cycle wherever you go.

Finally, if you find yourself in the final stages of burnout, professional help is almost always called for. It might be in the form of

treatment for the depression. It should involve some counseling to help you change the things that got you there. It might also involve some relationship or career counseling to help you

Whatever you do, the most important thing you can do is to take action. In working with burned-out lawyers, I have found that the hardest step to take is the first. Simply calling for help can often give you some momentum to follow through with acting on the recommendations. If you don't know where to go, call the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program. We can help you develop a plan of action to address your burnout. Our assistance is truly confidential and can be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-800-343-8527.

repair the damage the burnout fire has caused.

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