



PREVENTING BURNOUT

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Burnout is a serious problem. Over-whelming workloads, limited re-sources, bad work habits, and un-healthy workplace culture can lead to an increased risk of burnout. Some of us, however, have become so accustomed to being stressed and burned out that we might not even realize how much we're suffering and maintaining a healthy work-life balance may seem unrealistic. This paper looks at the difference between stress and burnout so individuals may better understand what they are potentially experiencing. It also offers practical recommendations on how to implement healthy stress coping strategies and boundaries to prevent burnout and increase one's work-life balance.

Burnout, Stress, and Work-Life Balance

Burnout vs. Stress

The term burnout has become so familiar that it's common to hear people casually say, "Oh, I'm so burned out," when they're merely referring to a bad day or a bad week. But for those of us who are truly burned out, it is much more than a bad day or a bad week. It's a problem that significantly interferes with one's health, happiness, and overall quality of life.

Stress, on the other hand is a general feeling of emotional or physical tension. It is a normal reaction in the body. In fact, the body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can even be a positive at times. For example, if you have something significant you are working on and you are approaching the deadline, a stress response might help the body work harder and stay awake longer. Some go as far as saying stress can even be good for us in small doses. When stress, however, continues without periods of relief, that is when it can be dangerous and lead to other emotional and physical concerns. Stress exists on a continuum, and it's important to know your place on it as you get more work, finish projects, set meetings, and generally go about your day. If not, chronic workplace stress can lead you down a path to burnout. Here are some of the [key differences](#) between stress and burnout:

Stress

Characterized by over engagement
Emotions are reactive
Produces urgency and hyperactivity
Loss of energy
Leads to anxiety disorders
Primary damage is physical
May kill you prematurely

Burnout

Characterized by disengagement
Emotions are blunted
Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope
Leads to detachment and depression
Primary damage is emotional
May make life seem not worth living

Knowing the difference between stress and burnout can be extremely helpful when determining how to respond to what you are experiencing and determining whether you are to the point in your journey where professional help is needed.

Causes and Symptoms of Burnout

The term "burnout" was coined in the 1970s by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. He used it to describe the consequences of severe stress and high ideals in helping professions. Helping professionals include fields such as medicine, nursing, psychotherapy, psychological counseling, social work, education, legal and other direct-service roles. These types of jobs often involve intense, interpersonal interactions that occur repeatedly throughout the workday. Often, given the nature of their job, those in helping professions are

constantly extending themselves outward in the service of assisting others. As a result, those in a helping profession find themselves at high-risk for burnout.

At its core, burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It can negatively affect both your work and your life. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place.

There are many contributing factors that can lead to burnout. [Work-related causes](#) of burnout can include:

- Feeling like you have little or no control over your work
- Lack of recognition or rewards for good work
- Unclear or overly demanding job expectations
- Doing work that's monotonous or unchallenging
- Working in a chaotic or high-pressure environment

Burnout is a gradual process, however, that occurs over an extended period. It doesn't happen overnight, but it can creep up on you if you're not paying attention to the warning signs. The signs and symptoms of burnout are subtle at first, but they get more pronounced as time goes on. Here are some of the [signs and symptoms](#) to watch out for:

Physical signs and symptoms of burnout:

- Feeling tired and drained most of the time
- Lowered immunity, feeling sick a lot
- Frequent headaches (migraines), back pain, muscle aches
- Change in appetite or sleep habits

Emotional signs and symptoms of burnout:

- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world
- Loss of motivation
- Increasingly cynical and negative outlook
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment

Behavioral signs and symptoms of burnout:

- Withdrawing from responsibilities
- Isolating from others
- Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done
- Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope
- Taking out frustrations on others
- Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early

As you may have noted, any one of these symptoms can also be something other than burnout. What you are really looking for is a combination of symptoms. Some experts suggest that if you see the big four—cynicism, fatigue, lack of concentration and a feeling of inefficacy, it may be time to seek help.

[What can I do if I think I am burned out?](#)

If you can relate to any of the above warning signs and symptoms and are wondering if you

might be suffering from burnout, here is an easy test you can try. The first step is to completely commit to treating yourself to a relaxing and stress-free weekend. Try to sleep in both days. Eat right. Occupy your time with relaxing activities that you rarely allow yourself to enjoy. Whatever you do, it is important that you fully commit to relaxing. If on Monday morning, you wake up tired and dreading your day, you may be suffering from burnout. The next step is to take more time off, remove all the stressors, and add stress reducers. If after you take a longer vacation—a week or even two weeks—and you are still dreading going into the office and are waking up tired, it is likely time you seek professional help and make significant changes for your well-being.

The key to dealing with stress and preventing burnout is to implement coping strategies that allow you to effectively handle stress when it comes your way. The following action plan has been adapted from The American Psychological Association:

1. Understand your stress.
2. Identify your stress source.
3. Recognize your stress strategies.
4. Implement health stress management strategies.
5. Make self-care a priority.
6. Ask for support when you need it.

From understanding how you stress and what causes your stress to determining the best coping strategies for you, it is all a process. Taking the time, however, to evaluate these areas will be key to better managing your stress.

Building your resiliency skills is also imperative to your overall wellness. Additionally, adopting healthy habits and practices are important. Lastly, setting boundaries can help you to achieve a better work-life balance, ultimately reducing your stress.

Work-Life Balance Harmony

Simply put, work-life balance is a state where a person equally prioritizes the demands of one's career and the demands of one's personal life. Obtaining work-life balance is important to help lawyers stay healthy and engaged in their work. Balance, however, can seem misleading at first. In fact, I don't even like the term work-life balance for this reason. Many of us see balance as 50/50 and that just doesn't always seem attainable. I prefer to call it work-life harmony. Balance (or harmony) can mean different things for different people. For some, work is everything. While for others work is good but spending time with family and friends is more important. Some of us want time to focus on activities that bring us enjoyment—such as reading, art, or music. Some of us want more time to focus on our physical health through exercise. Others may just need more time for rest and relaxation. Ultimately, it is important for you to figure out what's important to you before determining what work-life balance means for you.

Depending on where you are professionally, achieving a work-life balance may seem hard and unrealistic, but it is important. If you are teetering and fail to find some level of work-life balance, consequences may follow. Some of these consequences can include:

- **Fatigue** – If you are in a state of constant fatigue, your ability to work productively and think clearly may be reduced over time. Constant fatigue can also affect your ability to competently represent your clients, mistakes can occur, and it makes you at risk for burnout.

- **Lost Time** – If you are struggling to find balance, you might feel as though you have lost time with your loved ones. Maybe you have missed milestones with your children. You might also feel like you have lost time to participate in the activities that bring you enjoyment.
- **Increased Expectations** – Working extra or odd hours may lead to increased expectations or responsibilities. Keep in mind that once you have established a pattern, it is often harder to reverse course.
- **Physical Health Risks** – if you are struggling to find balance, chances are you are feeling stressed. You might also be getting less sleep since there is a direct correlation between stress and sleep. If so, your physical health can certainly be impacted. Studies show that stress and a lack of sleep can lead to conditions such as stroke and heart disease.
- **Mental Health Risks** – Just as with an increased risk to your physical health, a work-life imbalance can also lead to an increased risk to your mental health. Work-life imbalance can lead to stress, burnout, and an increased risk for depression and anxiety.
- **Negative Effects on Relationships** – In addition to feeling like you have lost time with your loved ones, a work-life imbalance can also lead to strains on your personal relationships.

Knowing that work-life balance is important for your overall health and well-being, you might now be thinking how do I *actually* achieve a work-life balance? My suggestion is to first start thinking about this in terms of work-life harmony, rather than balance. For most, 50/50 is not always going to be attainable and when it doesn't happen, we let our perfectionist brains take over and then we get disappointed and feel as though we failed. Then we give up as we start feeling it isn't possible. By thinking about achieving work-life harmony, we allow ourselves some room to breathe. Our schedules will ebb and flow. Some weeks will be better than others, but ideally, we should be in a state of harmony with our work and with our life outside of work. Additionally, identifying what work-life balance (or harmony) looks like for you is important. What it is for me, may be something completely different for you.

After we define what work-life balance looks like, then you start by setting boundaries, which should lead to taking back your calendar and most importantly your time. Once your boundaries are set, you must, however, then stick with them. Otherwise, your boundaries may quickly go out the window. For example, if you set a communication boundary establishing you will not answer emails after 7:00 p.m. on weekdays, but then begin to answer emails after 7:00 p.m. on a few select nights, those few nights can quickly become every night. Expectations will change and the next thing you know you have no boundaries with work. So, keep in mind, setting a boundary and then not enforcing it is the equivalent of having no boundary at all.

Boundaries

The first place to start establishing a work-life balance is to evaluate the boundaries you are currently setting at work and in your other professional relationships. For some of you, this means recognizing that you might not have well defined boundaries at all. To establish your boundaries, you will want to identify two specific categories—boundaries with others and boundaries for yourself.

Establishing Boundaries with Others

We have all heard the common phrase “communication is a key.” Not only does this apply to your personal relationships, but it also applies to professional one’s as well. Just as communication is the foundation for lawyers practicing law, communication is a foundation to establishing and keeping your boundaries. Keep in mind that you can also set office policies and procedures, and thereby boundaries for your staff as well. Some key areas to keep in mind include:

- What are the types of communication channels that will be used? Is there a channel that is more appropriate depending on the nature of the communication?
- How often should others expect communication and from whom?
- Who should someone contact if they have questions and is that different depending on the type of question?
- How long will you take to respond if someone contacts you directly?
- What are the office hours for communication? Does this include weekends and holidays?
- How long do you expect for a response from others?

These are just a few examples of the questions that should be addressed. Note, the questions not only establish your and/or your team’s responsibilities with respect to communication, but also the expectations for others.

It is important to establish boundaries for several different reasons, but one important consideration is the way we now operate in society with respect to communication. Communication nowadays is instant. Services and products can also be obtained instantaneously. An individual may expect the same level of response from you and your team as they get from say, Amazon Prime. As a result, discussing communication expectations is an important part of establishing boundaries. You will at least want to consider: 1) the communication methods to be used; and 2) what are the response times a person should expect. Here are a few methods of communication that should be evaluated:

- Phone Calls – When will you accept phone calls? If a phone message is left, how quickly will you return the call? Will you accept phones calls at both the office line and a cell phone?
- Emails – When will you check your email? How quickly will you return an email?
- Text Messages – When will you accept text messages, if at all? How quickly will you return them? Under what circumstances are text messages appropriate?
- Communication Portals – If you use a portal, under what circumstances can an individual expect it to be used?

In addition to looking at your boundaries regarding communication, I also recommend looking at how you set your appointments and meetings. Do you make yourself available anytime an individual wants you? Have you found yourself offering late last-minute after-hours appointments? If so, it sounds like this might be a boundary area to work on.

With respect to appointments, the most important thing is to stick to the schedule that you set. Afterall, it is *your* calendar. It is understandable that you may want to accommodate an individual who is not able to meet with you during normal business hours. Just make sure you are adhering to your schedule, and it doesn’t become a nightly thing. Additionally, when

evaluating your boundaries on appointments, you should consider whether you are willing to accept the random unexpected pop-in. The best practice is to have individuals call and set up a time to meet or select a time from your online appointment calendar. Online appointment calendars can be tailored to not offer appointments within a certain number of hours or days before the appointment. If it is an emergency, of course you can be willing to accommodate, but it is a best practice to have the person call or email first.

Establishing Boundaries for Yourself

Setting your own personal boundaries on how you will use your time is a useful technique for managing the stress associated with work and for giving yourself the opportunity to enjoy a reasonably balanced life. Boundaries will help you preserve time for vacations and activities other than practicing law that are meaningful for you. Boundaries on your time will also give you opportunities during the day to take breaks for reflection and rejuvenation. When setting your boundaries or accessing your current boundaries, here are some questions you should ask yourself:

- How often, and under what circumstances, will you bring work home with you at the end of the day? How often, and under what circumstances, will you work on weekends?
- How often, and under what circumstances, will you stay at the office late? How often and under what circumstance will you come into the office on the weekends?
- How frequently will you check email during the week? Will you check email in the evenings? Will you check email on weekends? When will you not check email?
- How much time do you want to set aside for vacation each year? Are you willing to have individuals and colleagues contact you while you are on vacation? If so, under what circumstances and how? For instance, will you answer email while on vacation? If so, how often.
- Will you block out time on your calendar for important family events? Will you block out time on your calendar for religious and non-religious holidays? Will you block out time on your calendar for things that are important to you? If so, what are those important things?
- Will you give yourself permission to take breaks during the day? If needed, will you give yourself permission to take mental health days?
- Will you block time on your calendar for self-care?

Once you set boundaries around your time, it is important to be willing to communicate those boundaries when needed to manage the expectations of outside individuals and your colleagues consistent with those boundaries. Unless you take affirmative steps to manage your time consistent with the boundaries you want to maintain, others will be more than happy to manage your time for you.

Establishing Boundaries for Your Mental Health

Let's be honest, no one really wants to be in a situation where they need to turn the courts. We tend to see people on their worst days or when they are going through the toughest of circumstances. This means you might get the brunt of all the negativity. Now, add into the pot the fact that the justice system is adversarial in nature. We are also constantly engaging in analysis problems.

All this coupled together leads to things like compassion fatigue and secondary trauma. It also makes the circumstances ripe for some of the highest rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse compared to other industries. Sometimes, we just need a break to take care of ourselves. In addition to taking a vacation—and I mean a real vacation with multiple days away—know that it is beneficial to take mental health days when you need them as well. Do not ignore fatigue, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, or a lack of motivation or ability to focus. These are often symptoms of a larger problem, like burnout. Allowing yourself permission to take mental health days will help prevent long-term burnout and will help you get in tune with your body and brain.

Also, give yourself permission to take time for self-care. Carve out time for things like exercise, reading for enjoyment, or other activities that bring you happiness. Simple things like making sure you give yourself time during the day to eat lunch and time first thing in the morning to get centered will go a long way in your own self-care.

Let perfection go. This will be one of your hardest challenges to setting boundaries for yourself. The sooner you learn that perfection is unrealistic and dangerous, the better and healthier you will be. As type A personalities, perfection is always the goal, but what happens when you fail? You may end up in a vicious cycle of depression, anxiety, burn out, and perfectionism. Allowing yourself permission to let go of perfectionism will break this cycle. This doesn't mean that you aren't going to produce high quality work or that you are going to fail your clients or ignore your ethical responsibilities. Instead, it will allow you to let go of the pressure of being perfect, so that you can perform without a constant internal voice of self-recrimination and shaming that characterizes perfectionism.

Finding More Balance

Here are some additional strategies for preventing burnout and maintaining a good sense of emotional well-being and balance:

- **Start the day differently.** Rather than jumping out of bed as soon as you wake up, spend at least fifteen minutes meditating, writing in your journal, doing yoga, or reading something that inspires you. When you are feeling stressed, simply changing the hand you use to brush your teeth can help you shift your brain thinking. Also, don't answer emails first thing in the morning, otherwise you are going to spend your day being reactive to others, rather than proactive on your tasks. Take the first hour of the day to get organized on work on something on your list of to-dos.
- **Adopt healthy eating, exercising, and sleeping habits.** Proper nutrition, sleep and exercise provides the energy and resilience to deal with the daily demands of a law practice. Getting restorative rest should be a goal.
- **Work on building your resiliency skills.** Resiliency is often described as the ability to respond to stress in a healthy, adaptive way that allows you to achieve your personal goals at minimal psychological and physical cost. The key building blocks to building your resiliency are thinking flexibly about challenges and framing adversity in an accurate way and building high quality connections with others to have a support system. The first step towards building resiliency is to start cross examining your own thinking and to start building your self-efficacy. So, when you feel negative thoughts starting to creep in, look for measurable and specific evidence to support the accuracy of your thoughts. Also, start capitalizing those small wins throughout the day.

- **Take a daily break from technology.** Completely disconnect from technology when you get home (or after business hours). Put away your laptop, turn off your smartphone and stop checking email.
- **Nourish your creative side.** Creativity is a powerful antidote to burnout. Try something new, start a fun project, or resume a favorite hobby. Choose activities that have nothing to do with work. As explained above, these activities in particular help nourish the limbic brain, which provides greater emotional resilience.
- **Align your values.** A reason that some lawyers experience burnout is that their core values are not aligned with their own behaviors. This problem reflects an internal psychological conflict, whereas at other times it is a conflict between the lawyer's values and those of the organization at which he or she works. Check whether there is a serious conflict between your values and your work and seek more meaning in your work. Remind yourself of the good you do.
- **Build awareness of your stress, your feelings, and your triggers.** Learn to recognize the signs that you are being pushed to the edge, whether they are headaches, anger, irritability, or something else. Try to identify precisely what is stressing you, especially if there is a chronic mismatch between demands and your resources. Are there activities you can cut? Can you hire someone to help you or delegate something?
- **Cross examine your own thinking.** Seek to quickly understand where you have a measure of control, influence, or leverage in the situation instead of wasting your time and energy on things they can't control. Look for measurable and specific evidence to support the accuracy of their thoughts. Look for the middle ground to diffuse black-and-white or all-or-nothing thinking styles. Think about what you would tell a friend in the same situation.

On the next few pages, you will find a few activities that you can complete to increase your well-being, handle stress, and determine where you may fall on the burnout scale.

Stress Control Activity:

- Consider any example of a difficult situation or event that is or has been on your mind.
- Mark two columns on your paper; in the first list all the things that matter about the situation that you have control over. This is not about the things you can do, or things you can try to influence. I will suggest that you cannot control anything that anyone else does says thinks believes, wants or choses.
- In the second column, list all the things that matter in the situation that you do not have control over.
- Now focus your time and energy on only the things in the what you can't control column.

What I can control	What I can't control

Values Activity

- Identify five values that are most important to you from the list provided below.
- Identify one way that you express/honor each value at work.
- Identify one way that you express/honor each value outside of work.
- On a scale from 1-10 (1 being not at all and 10 being as meaningfully as possible) ask yourself how well you are expressing/honoring each value in your life.
- Identify at least one new way you can commit to expressing/honoring each of your top values in the coming month.
- On a notecard, write a note to yourself as if it is one month later. Congratulate yourself for expressing/honoring each of your values over the past month. Be sure to reflect on how you now feel differently after satisfying your commitment.
- Keep your postcard in a special spot for motivation and self-accountability.

Sample Values

1. Accomplishment	24. Directness	47. Honor	70. Respect
2. Accuracy	25. Discovery	48. Humor	71. Resourcefulness
3. Acknowledgement	26. Ease	49. Idealism	72. Romance
4. Adventure	27. Effortlessness	50. Independence	73. Safety
5. Authenticity	28. Empowerment	51. Innovation	74. Self-Esteem
6. Balance	29. Enthusiasm	52. Integrity	75. Service
7. Beauty	30. Environment	53. Intuition	76. Simplicity
8. Boldness	31. Excellence	54. Joy	77. Spaciousness
9. Calm	32. Fairness	55. Kindness	78. Spirituality
10. Challenge	33. Flexibility	56. Learning	79. Spontaneity
11. Collaboration	34. Focus	57. Listening	80. Strength
12. Community	35. Forgiveness	58. Love	81. Tact
13. Compassion	36. Freedom	59. Loyalty	82. Thankfulness
14. Comradeship	37. Friendship	60. Optimism	83. Tolerance
15. Confidence	38. Fun	61. Orderliness	84. Tradition
16. Connectedness	39. Generosity	62. Participation	85. Trust
17. Contentment	40. Gentleness	63. Partnership	86. Understanding
18. Contribution	41. Growth	64. Passion	87. Unity
19. Cooperation	42. Happiness	65. Patience	88. Vitality
20. Courage	43. Harmony	66. Peace	89. Wisdom
21. Creativity	44. Health	67. Presence	
22. Curiosity	45. Helpfulness	68. Productivity	
23. Determination	46. Honesty	69. Recognition	

My five values:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How I will honor my values the next 30 days at home and at work:

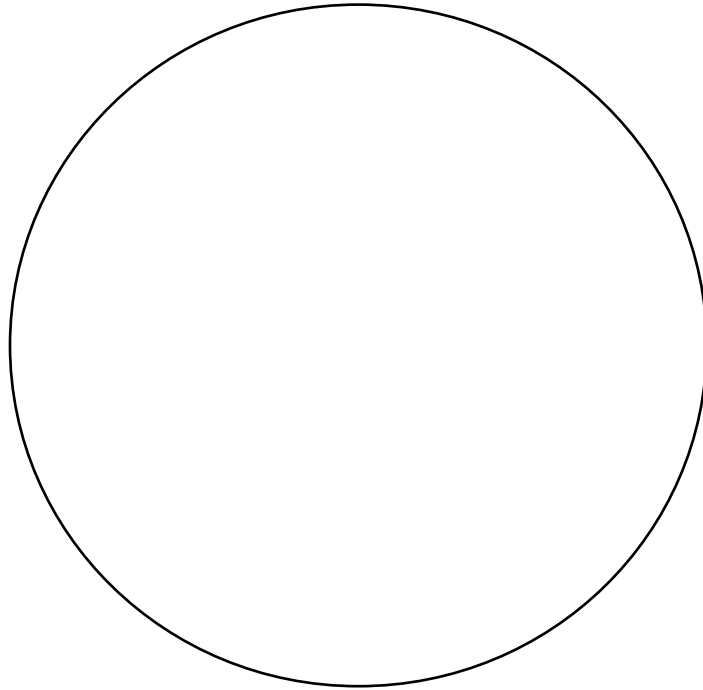
Mindfulness activity in times of stress:

This quick activity will allow you to slow your brain down in times of stress by tuning into your senses. Spend at least one minute on each:

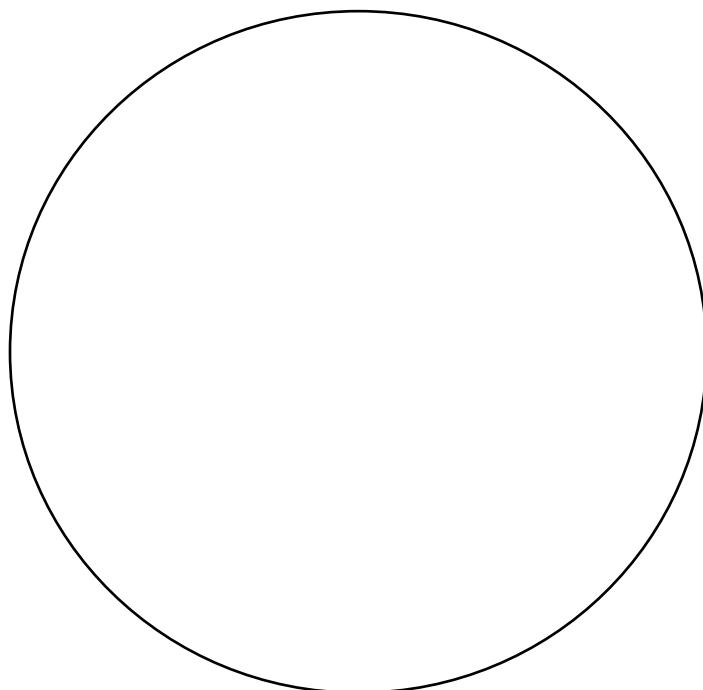
1. What can you see?
2. What can you hear?
3. What can you taste?
4. What can you smell?
5. What can you feel?

How Do You Want to Spend Your Time? Part One

In the space below, draw a pie chart showing the percent of time you spend on yourself, your job, and your relationships during your waking hours every week.



Are you happy with the arrangement you drew above? If you could change anything, what would it be? Draw your ideal time breakdown in the pie chart below.



How Do You Want to Spend Your Time? Part Two

Write down your answers to the following questions:

1. What about your current time breakdown works for you? What doesn't work?
2. How is your ideal breakdown different from your current one? Why is it better?
3. What are some things you can do to help achieve this ideal breakdown?
4. How would giving up on perfection help? In what area of your life would it have the most impact?
5. Is there anything you can ask for at home or at work that will help? If so, how will you do this?