

Lawyer Burnout Syndrome: It Blows Your Mind

By Pamela Woldow, Partner, Edge International



You may have seen – and recoiled – at the recent news item about the 32 year old Skadden associate who died of a heart attack. Those who knew her put it differently: “she worked herself to death.” Apparently she was an extreme-case workaholic who remained glued to her desk, billing huge amounts of hours, even as her nerves unwound and her hair began to fall out. It’ll never happen to you, right?

We all think we know about burnout: you work too long and too hard, so you get tired and a little crabby and impatient, and it’s nothing that can’t be cured short term by a

couple of Manhattans or a good night’s sleep, or longer term with a week in Belize (NB: it’s one week vacation now, isn’t it? -- not two or three).

As I meet with lawyers in firms and legal departments, they report feeling a little frazzled recently, the flipside of a full-speed, sure-I’ll-do-it practice. The legal business has gotten increasingly demanding – with 24/7 global clients, tighter budgets, fewer support staff, and increased firm profitability targets.

Most say they can handle it, in phrases like “I’m tough, I can take it.” “I can always catch up – on my sleep, on my social networking, on business development, on the pyramiding stack of emails clamoring for response.” This reminds me of a partner I met recently to discuss how his team could work more efficiently. As we talked, he opened a desk drawer jammed with little bottles of 5 Hour Energy Drink, of which he consumed four per day. When I suggested that more sleep might help, he said he had no time for that.

Edge partner, Doug Richardson, who focuses on things like lawyer motivation, incentives, engagement and battle fatigue, gives this warning: *Be careful, the path between occupational stress and flamed-out free-fall can be short indeed.* Doug points out that it is important to distinguish being *stressed out* from being *burned out*. There is a tendency to label every type of fatigue as “burnout,” regardless of cause. This overgeneralization may lead to ineffective approaches to self-restoration.

Stressed Out

Being stressed out comes from having your fight-or-flight button pushed so constantly that your ability to recharge, reload, refresh and reframe gradually corrodes and shorts out.

The fix is to remove oneself from the stressors -- whether by sabbatical, vacation, avocational activities, exercise, meditation or yoga. Or even changing jobs. Of course, throwing oneself back onto the same hot stove after a temporary cool-down period will produce increasingly short periods of relief. When lasting relief is not available, it may be time to rethink your career priorities.

The best prescription for stress fatigue may not be simply altering external events, but some serious reflection about the way you interpret life and work events. For some people, introspection, self-help or self-study can improve the ability to reframe stressful events. In others, the support and perspective of a therapist, counselor or coach is the best way to reset one's fight-flight or "veg" reflex.

Doing nothing is not the cure: the mere passage of time may deaden the immediacy of a stressful event, but it doesn't eradicate its reverberations. The stress simply goes underground, planting the seeds for the re-experiencing of stress over and again.

Burned Out



Burnout is "consistently making choices for the benefit of others at the expense of your own needs." It is a pervasive, self-imposed guilt trip, exacerbated by everyone reminding you of everything that you owe them.

Burnout will not go away with rest; in fact it will tend to make you feel worse on your vacation (or, these days, "staycation") as you debate whether you are fundamentally selfish, egocentric, lazy or irresponsible.

Who Gets Burned Out?

"It tends to hit the best employees, those with enthusiasm who accept responsibility readily."

According to Dr. Herbert J. Freudenberger, who first coined the term "burnout," victims of burnout are often "dynamic, charismatic, goal-oriented people." Burnout, he says, "usually has its roots in the area of your life that seems to hold the most promise." For most professionals, that area is work. Sound familiar, lawyers?

What's the Cure for Burnout?

The key is to pursue "an *acknowledged* state of systematically putting your own interests ahead of others." This is not a prescription for selfishness; it is a call for learning to assert one's right to a healthy dose of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Overcoming vulnerability to burnout is usually an extended process that requires *mindfulness* -- that is, active and conscious reframing of the self-imposed forces that wear you down. Rest, denial and withdrawal will not rewire the underlying circuits to produce relief. However, if you can learn to focus steadfastly on the *causes* of your burnout, to your surprise you may find that the results take care of themselves.

Of course, being stressed out and being burned out are not mutually exclusive, and folks with a pronounced calvinistic work ethic or masochistic tendency toward martyrdom may find themselves falling prey to an ever-escalating workaholism. We all see it happening in others – and we often turn away in denial. The lesson of the associate's tragic demise is for each of us to pause long enough to see if we ourselves stand at the top of a slippery slope.

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