

*Managing by the Book . . .**

Battling Burnout**

Jean M. Holcomb***

Over time, the demands placed on law librarians to meet the expectations of their users put many of them at risk for career burnout. Recognizing warning signs and developing coping strategies will help limit the personal and institutional impact of burnout.

¶1 An outsider asked to rank professions on a scale reflecting the stress inherent in performing a job's requirements would be unlikely to characterize law librarianship as a high stress profession. Yet to be successful, law librarians must be ready to address new challenges on a daily basis. Over time, the demands placed on us to meet the expectations of our users put many law librarians at risk for career burnout, the loss of meaningfulness in one's job.

¶2 Managers who recognize burnout warning signs and help employees develop coping strategies will limit the personal and institutional impact of this debilitating condition.¹

¶3 Employees suffering from burnout often exhibit such characteristics as chronic fatigue, cynicism, withdrawal, self-criticism, and a sense of being besieged.² While any one of these symptoms taken alone may signal the impact of stress or even depression, the individual suffering from burnout exhibits a deep underlying malaise of spirit. This translates into a lack of joy, enthusiasm, or motivation for the tasks to be performed.³

* *Editor's Note:* "Managing by the Book" is a regular feature of *Law Library Journal*. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

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1. See Steven Berglas, *How to Keep A Players Productive*, HARV. BUS. REV., Sept. 2006, at 104, 106 ("Far more common are people . . . who are striving to satisfy an inner need for recognition that is often a sign of irrationally low self-esteem. If you do not carefully manage the often unconscious needs of these A players for kudos and appreciation, they will burn out in an way that is damaging to themselves and unproductive for you. Certainly, managers aren't therapists or executive coaches, and they don't have to be. But it will help your organization if you try to understand what makes your A players tick.").
2. Claudia H. Deutsch, *Winning the Battle Against Burnout*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 27, 2006, at BU 5.
3. See Harry Levinson, *When Executives Burn Out*, HARV. BUS. REV., July/Aug. 1996, at 152, 154.

¶4 Unchecked, job burnout leads to absenteeism, loss of productivity, and employee turnover. Employee turnover costs institutions in both tangible and intangible ways. When employees leave, time and money will be spent to find and train their replacements. Leadership efforts, workplace morale, and corporate memory suffer.

¶5 Where can individual librarians and library managers concerned about the impact job burnout can have on their lives and their libraries turn for help?

¶6 Dr. Beverly Potter outlines a step-by-step approach for addressing burnout in *Overcoming Job Burnout: How to Renew Enthusiasm for Work*.⁴ She presents her strategies using an easy-to-follow page layout with bold-faced type headings and cartoon drawings. Many of the real-life examples contained in the text come from the legal field.

¶7 Reflecting her training in vocational rehabilitation and counseling psychology, Potter's approach begins with a definition of the burnout syndrome. She provides a twenty-five question self-test to help readers assess whether they're at risk for or experiencing burnout.⁵ She warns that the burnout syndrome doesn't happen overnight, often takes on a life of its own, and rarely stops by itself.⁶

¶8 After setting the scene with this introduction, Potter theorizes that although burnout has physical and psychological effects, it is not a physical ailment or neurosis, but rather a motivational problem.⁷ Everyone needs positive consequences to sustain high motivation. The heart of *Overcoming Job Burnout's* message is that feeling you can control the things that influence you builds motivation.⁸

¶9 Potter acknowledges that every job has devastating aspects. She stresses that burnout is not the consequence of personal weakness.⁹ She believes that employees can increase personal power through skill-building activities and devotes the balance of her text to detailing a series of steps to develop a personal self-change program.

¶10 Anyone familiar with behavior modification programs will recognize Potter's approach. She articulates her method for shedding old habits and programming new ones from a four-step framework.¹⁰ First, focus on identifying the exact behavior you want to change. Next, analyze the behavior by keeping an encounter diary to help develop an understanding of how your behavior pattern is

4. BEVERLY POTTER, *OVERCOMING JOB BURNOUT: HOW TO RENEW ENTHUSIASM FOR WORK* (3d ed. 2005). The author's Web site, Docpotter's Pathfinding Books & Useful Information (www.docpotter.com), offers self-scoring quizzes on burnout-related topics.

5. *Id.* at 10.

6. *Id.* at 22.

7. *Id.* at 24.

8. *Id.* at 27.

9. *Id.* at 53.

10. *Id.* at 56.

programmed. Then change the behavior program prompts and manage the events that follow these behaviors. Finally, continually evaluate progress.

¶11 Does such a detailed approach sound like just another way to add stress to your life? Anticipating resistance to the amount of commitment required to master behavior-changing skills, Potter devotes a chapter to suggestions for managing stress. She highlights the importance of teaching yourself new behavior-coping skills and provides tips on how to develop mastery over your own emotions and responses.¹¹

¶12 Recognizing the role of the workplace as a social environment, *Overcoming Job Burnout* calls attention to the way a sense of community at work operates to modulate the stress of repetitive and high pressure jobs. Because the roots of workplace success lie in productive relationships, the skills of building a social support system and cultivating allies must be fostered. Since every job has some leeway in how it can be performed, Potter advises taking steps to tailor how you work to alter your personal focus. Self-acknowledgement plays an important role in fostering job satisfaction.

¶13 As a part of *Overcoming Job Burnout*'s emphasis on building self-awareness skills, Potter credits the attractiveness of the flight part of the normal human fight or flight response to discomfort. No examination of burnout would be complete without addressing the possibility of changing jobs as a cure. Potter warns that changing jobs without careful analysis of the possible root causes of dissatisfaction will not guarantee an end to the burnout syndrome.¹²

¶14 The book's final chapter focuses on what managers can do to prevent burnout and includes a diagnostic tool to help managers determine if their staff faces burnout. Being a good manager requires complex skills and doesn't happen by accident. Potter points to poor supervision as the single largest source of employee burnout.¹³

¶15 A very different perspective on burnout comes from Joe Robinson, a social activist and founder of the Work to Live Campaign.¹⁴ In *Work to Live: The Guide to Getting a Life*,¹⁵ Robinson offers a roadmap for breaking out of the burnout trap and getting a life. While Potter's book describes how to combat burnout, Robinson's work paints a picture of life without burnout, including a compelling argument as to why this goal should be attainable.

¶16 Robinson believes that American workers have very self-destructive illusions about work.¹⁶ He argues against what he describes as commonly held beliefs

11. *Id.* at 101.

12. *Id.* at 158.

13. *Id.* at 215.

14. To learn more about the campaign, see Joe Robinson, Work to Live, <http://www.worktolive.info> (last visited Apr. 26, 2007).

15. JOE ROBINSON, WORK TO LIVE: THE GUIDE TO GETTING A LIFE (2003).

16. *Id.* at 6.

that the quantity of hours on the job and the degree of pain suffered doing the work equals the quality of the performance and therefore your self-worth. He structures his book around a series of counter commandments. Each is designed to help workers take back their time, take back their life, and stop stress in its tracks before burnout can develop.

¶17 To sell his story, Robinson employs a very light touch backed up with piles of quotes, statistics, and an extensive bibliography. *Work to Live* first describes the consequences of an unhealthy work culture. Burnout becomes the last act of a cycle after chronic stress has stripped an employee's emotional resources away until nothing remains to counter this drain.¹⁷

¶18 Robinson depicts burnout as a three-way mind-body shutdown characterized by emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and cognitive weariness.¹⁸ His central thesis revolves around learning to deal with what he describes as unreal guilt, that is, guilt that lives only in your head and derives from anticipatory anxiety. Guilt triggers include unrealistic expectations, perfectionism, busyness, anger, and low and no self-image.¹⁹

¶19 After grabbing attention with this grim depiction of the American workplace, he argues that healthy workplaces make more sense for both people and the bottom line. He defines a healthy work culture as one where people's leisure and time are respected.

¶20 To help readers achieve a healthy workplace and a healthy life, Robinson devotes the balance of his text to his series of counter commandments. Not unsurprisingly, a reoccurring theme in *Work to Live* is the need for longer times away from work.²⁰ The author offers suggestions on how to say no to overtime, take a break and get more done, negotiate fewer hours and more time off, set clear boundaries between work and home, fully utilize your vacation time, and avoid working yourself sick. He provides tools to achieve these goals and reminds readers that negotiation skills will be required.

¶21 In addition to the strategies suggested in *Overcoming Job Burnout* and *Work to Live*, an array of helpful information about the work/life balance exists in publications ranging from your Sunday newspaper magazine supplement to lifestyle publications devoted to healthy eating, leisure travel, and hobbies and sports activities. With an awareness of burnout symptoms and an understanding of the risks of ignoring warning signs, law librarians and law library administrators can develop personalized approaches.

¶22 For administrators, the challenge begins with the need to be a good role model for the practices Potter recommends. Working through lunch, staying late,

17. *Id.* at 30.

18. *Id.* at 31.

19. *Id.* at 85.

20. See also Kelly Holland, *You've Earned a Vacation. But Do You Dare Take It?* N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 25, 2007, at BU 18.

and forgoing vacations sends an unfortunate message to the rest of your staff about expectations in your particular library work culture. Failure to coach employees to set realistic goals and to monitor progress toward goals hurts efforts to develop a healthy work environment. Managers must make a conscious effort to recognize achievements and offer praise in a timely, sincere, and specific way. They must review work assignments and foster a work culture that supports individual risk taking.

¶23 For every law librarian, an effort to build a defense mechanism against burnout syndrome begins with self-reflection. Take time to ask yourself some probing questions. Do thoughts of what you will face when you reach work on Monday dampen your enjoyment of your time at home on the weekend? Are you working longer while feeling you've accomplished less than you should? Do you think that no one at work appreciates the contributions you make? Do you find that most of your time at work is spent on routine tasks that provide little challenge or sense of personal achievement? How you answer questions of this nature will point to your current risk level of exposure to burnout syndrome.

¶24 Because we're a profession whose members often spend decades in the same workplace, the challenge to keep work fresh accelerates. Opportunities for professional growth and development exist within the profession at local and national levels. Consider volunteering to head a new initiative or offer to cross-train for a new assignment. Remember Potter's emphasis on the importance of social networks. Keep in touch with colleagues outside your library. Develop informal peer networks. Make and keep an appointment to meet a colleague for coffee or a meal on a regular basis.

¶25 Don't forget the link between health and performance. A recent study found that 46% of those surveyed reported a weight gain since starting their current jobs.²¹ Understand your own biorhythms and plan your work and leisure activities to match the peaks and valleys of your own energy cycle. Create a buffer mechanism to separate work from home, and coach others to help you respect your transition time.

¶26 Another key for combating burnout involves devising a program of self-acknowledgement. Take a clue from *Overcoming Job Burnout's* behavior modification approach. Create a "reward" jar for yourself—think "tip jar." Take a minute to cut out some paper tokens. Set a goal. Remember that goals need to be realistic, time-based, and measurable. Each time you make a step toward your goal, drop a token in the jar. Determine how many self-reward acknowledgement tokens you'll need to know when you've reached your goal. Then the fun part arrives when you determine what your goal will buy, thinking of "buy" in terms of "earn."

21. Rosemary Haefner, *Survey: Almost Half of Workers Have Gained Weight on the Job*, <http://www.careerbuilder.ca/JobSeeker/CareerBytes/Articles.aspx> (follow hyperlink to article included under Workplace heading) (last visited Apr. 30, 2007), reprinted in SAVANNAH MORNING NEWS, Apr. 8, 2007, at E1.

¶27 While burnout as a syndrome might be open to multiple definitions and just as many cures, those who suffer from the emotional exhaustion and cynicism that frame this loss of joy at work need help. The old saying that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure properly addresses the balance needed when considering developing burnout strategies. Individuals feeling the draining pull of burnout can fight back. Savvy managers with a good feel for the emotional climate of their law library can take positive steps to put the spring back into the steps of those they supervise.