

## **Burnout Prevention; or how to be healthier, happier and perhaps even more profitable in 2023**

When you think back to starting out as a sole practitioner, what motivated you?

Was it the desire to do things on your own terms, to not deal with the friction and noise of a big firm with rigid rules? Perhaps it was so you could work with less clients and feel better compensated for your time and expertise. Maybe the change was so you could have a better work-life balance and not need to ask for a half day's holiday to deal with your children's illness or to take the dog to the vet.

If you look back over 2022, how did the year match up to those goals? Did you end the year feeling energised, engaged, proud of your work; or did you feel exhausted, unproductive and beginning to wonder if it was worth it?

If you fall into the latter camp, you are far from alone.

### **What is Burnout?**

The World Health Organization defines burnout as an occupational phenomenon that arises as a result of chronic workplace stress that is not successfully managed. It has 3 key dimensions.

- Exhaustion and depletion
- Negativity, cynicism and increased mental distance from one's work, and
- Reduced professional efficacy

Or as I described it above, 'feeling exhausted, unproductive and beginning to wonder if it was worth it.' Burnout is a much lower threshold than you might think.

### **Why are lawyers at risk of burnout?**

Lawyers are at significant risk of burnout for a number of reasons; we feel a keen sense of responsibility (backed up by significant regulation!) and are often perfectionists and overachievers. The nature of our work means interacting with people at some of the most difficult times in their lives, soaking up their stressors whilst trying to maintain our own professionalism. As for 'chronic workplace stress that's not successfully managed;' when was the last time your to do list was completed, with nothing hanging over your head and no interruptions on a day off?

If this is all feeling a little too familiar, you are not alone. In 2022 Deloitte found that 77% of workers had experienced burnout in their current job, and in 2021 LawCare's Life in the Law study found the average lawyer to be at high risk of burnout, scoring particularly high for exhaustion.

### **What does burnout really look like?**

Whilst the symptoms of burnout can feel all-too familiar, one of the most common misconceptions is around what it means to be burned out. In training sessions delegates tell me they think burnout means being signed off sick, not being able to work, needing medication or having to quit their job; but this really isn't the case.

I cannot count the number of times I have been approached by a potential client with the words 'I don't think I'm burned out yet, but I am feeling exhausted and I'm struggling to keep up with my work, which is affecting how I feel about the job.' What follows is an awkward yet ultimately relieving conversation about the nature and impact of burnout; that burnout is not an end point or getting to a state of non-functionality.

Habitualised burnout, a state of living in fatigue, struggle and feeling less and less engaged with one's work is far more common than you might think and can go on for years, decades even, without your ever breaking down fully.

### **What is the impact of burnout?**

Burnout impacts your productivity; this means a reduction in the amount of work you can produce and bill, how profitable that work is; how often have you written off time because you think you should have been more efficient?

Deloitte estimate that presenteeism, being present yet ineffective or inefficient at work, to cost UK employers in the region of £35 billion each year and it's the single largest cost of poor mental health to employers, equalling the cost of employee turnover and absenteeism altogether. Having been both an employed lawyer and a self-employed coach and trainer, I believe those figures to be broadly similar in self-employed life (but perhaps we feel the pressure of our presenteeism even more keenly?)

Then there is the cost of keeping up with burnout, otherwise known as maladaptive coping mechanisms. These are things we do to keep us functional, without fixing the deeper issue; the extra cup of coffee to keep us going, the wine to help us relax at the end of the day, the holidays needed to help reset, the small treats to reward ourselves, improve our mood or make up for having been difficult at home...!

### **How can burnout be prevented?**

I think it's important to know that burnout is not a matter of personal failing, a lack of resilience or an inability to do the job; in fact, the opposite is often true. I argue that burnout happens to brilliant, bright professionals who care deeply about doing a good job and often go above and beyond – helping others before themselves. In the Deloitte study I referred to earlier, whilst 77% of workers had experienced burnout in their current job, 87% of those people still had passion for their work. It's often that engagement that keeps us coming back time and again.

Burnout symptoms are manageable and even reversible without needing to stop working, go back to employment or giving it all up to live on a beach somewhere (unless you really want to!)

Remember that burnout arises as a result of chronic workplace stress that's not successfully managed; if we can manage the stressors coming in and more effectively manage their impact, burnout symptoms can reduce.

### **The buffet plate**

Often our to-do lists look a bit like a plate that's been overfilled at the buffet; stacked with stuff we don't have room for and didn't even really like to begin with, with the good stuff hiding at the bottom. What can be taken off your plate; the to-do list equivalent of brussels sprouts, what are the things on there because you think they ought to be done, rather than needing to be done. What in there is good but you've taken on too much of it to fit in (every type of potato!), versus the stuff you really wanted and enjoy but haven't left room for?

### **Sharing the load**

Self-employed life is brilliant, but it can also be lonely. Who do you share the bad news with as well as the good, or are you the person that everyone else comes to for support but struggle on alone? Therapists are required to have their own therapy and supervision, vicars have mentors and peer

supervision, but who do sole practitioners share the stress of PII renewals, difficult clients or bad technology days with? I firmly believe that all lawyers need, deserve and do their best work when they have the ability to offload, to defuse difficult emotions and not deal with the strains alone. This goes double for any sole practitioner; it isn't a sign of weakness to get support, it's about building long term resilience and sustainability to do your best work.

### **3 questions**

Finally, here's the 3 questions I ask every client to consider at the end of their working day; what went well, what didn't go so well, and what one thing do you want to improve tomorrow? As lawyers we are often so caught up in the big picture of files, billing and getting results that we miss the smaller yet incredibly rewarding work; the thank you from a client, the conversation you were dreading that ultimately went well, or the recognition of your growth, development and expertise. If we can get into a pattern of noticing the wins, identifying issues earlier and iteratively changing and developing, we have a better chance at managing and reversing burnout, and living a healthier, happier and more profitable working life for the long term.

Leah Steele is a former solicitor turned coach, trainer and consultant working with both private individuals and law firms to help them build sustainable working practices. Her key focuses are burnout prevention, understanding imposter syndrome and building effective resilience, to help brilliant professionals do their work better, without it feeling like a form of self-harm. Follow her on LinkedIn or find out more about her work at [www.searchingforserenity.co.uk](http://www.searchingforserenity.co.uk)

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