

IDENTIFYING AND PREVENTING BURNOUT

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Working in a small, rural library can be a tough gig. You may be a one-person show with no staff to lean on, or maybe you are not part of a library system and are geographically isolated. You are tired, stressed, and drained, but you still have to serve your community—it is hard to muster up enthusiasm for your job when you are running on empty, and you cannot aid in improving your community's social wellbeing when you are consistently stressed out and overwhelmed.

The work we do can easily end in job burnout, a type of work-related stress that is physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting, and that can lead to lots of serious health problems. We are especially susceptible because we are working with limited budgets, staff, and time, and all responsibilities often lay on one person's shoulders. But don't despair you are not alone! Burnout may be avoided if you learn how to recognize its warning signs and use some simple self-care strategies.

What is in this tool?

- Self-reflection quiz
- Self-care tips and guidance to create your burnout prevention plan

IN THEIR WORDS

"I'm stretched so thin being only two of us here, which is kind of typical for a rural library, that I haven't had time to devote to getting that project done... Sometimes I have to go without some training and have to kind of wing it...So I kind of struggle with that sometimes."

--Jason
interview #3-2-18a

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT?

Irritability:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
I feel myself losing my patience/temper more than usual.					
I feel that I can't count on anyone.					
I dread going to work and am always eager to leave.					
Lately, I haven't enjoyed the things that used to bring me joy.					
I often feel useless or bad at my job.					

Lack of energy:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Lately, I have to drag myself out of bed and to work.					
I feel more sluggish and unmotivated than usual.					
Lately, I find it difficult to concentrate.					
I often feel physically and emotionally exhausted and drained.					
I tend to procrastinate a lot lately, more than I typically do.					

Unsatisfied with accomplishments and work:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
I always find a lot of joy in receiving positive feedback.					
I welcome and enjoy interactions with people.					
I return calls or messages quickly.					
It's rare for me to call in sick or come in late to work.					
I feel like the work I do matters, and I am confident that I am making a difference.					

Physical symptoms:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
My sleeping/eating habits have recently changed.					
I have trouble focusing lately.					
I feel more anxious or depressed than usual.					
I have often felt physically ill lately for seemingly no reason.					
Sometimes it feels like my heart is racing or I can't catch my breath.					

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Job expectations:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
All or most job responsibilities are solely on my shoulders.					
My training did not properly prepare me for most of the things I do at work.					
I work with the public and interact with many people.					
I feel like I work too much and am not paid enough for what I do.					
Because of budget constraints, I often volunteer my time.					



Lack of job-related support:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
I work alone.					
My library is not part of a system (I don't work alongside other libraries).					
I don't have people to turn to with questions about my job.					
There is no money in the budget for me to attend conferences or join associations.					
It feels like no one notices or appreciates what I do for the community.					

Work environment:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
I get along well with my coworkers and boss.					
My work environment is pretty peaceful, and I feel satisfied with the amount of work I'm able to get done.					
I have my own desk or office.					
My work is exciting, and I am rarely bored by it.					
I feel very safe when I'm at work.					

Home life:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
I do not really take work home with me and find it very easy to "unplug".					
I get a lot of help with chores or childcare at home; it doesn't feel like it's all on me.					
I have good sleeping/eating habits.					
I feel like I have enough time for "me time".					
Money is not a very big stressor for me.					

Personality:

<i>Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5</i>	1	2	3	4	5
I find it hard to delegate and hate asking for help – I want to do things myself.					
I have a hard time saying no to people and worry about disappointing others.					
I worry a lot about what others think of me and get upset by negative feedback.					
I am a perfectionist or have a type A or high-achieving personality.					
It wears me out to work with the public all day.					

If many of these sentences rang true to you and you scored on the high end, you may have come to the conclusion that you are indeed on the fast track to burning out.



WHAT NOW?

With a few self-care tips and strategies for balancing work and home, it is possible to avoid burning out completely and bring yourself back from the brink of meltdown.

A note on the term self-care:

These days, when you hear the word “self-care”, you might think of fancy face masks, spa retreats, and massages. Although this can be part of self-care, it doesn’t have to be. Self-care doesn’t have to cost any money at all; it can be as simple as eating a green leafy vegetable, turning off your phone, or getting 8 full hours of uninterrupted sleep. All of those things are important self-care methods that don’t cost anything. While pampering yourself with skin-care products or going on a beach vacation are great ways to unwind, it’s not all about spending money on frivolous things, and it’s far from a selfish act. Self-care is, quite simply, putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others, and it’s something that anyone who works in a service profession should be practicing on a day-to-day basis.

TIPS FOR AVOIDING OR PREVENTING BURNOUT:

Not everything will work for everyone, pick the tips that resonate with you.

Separate library from home

When your work and home life become too enmeshed, it can be highly stressful. Set a time when you “unplug” from work, and stick to it. Boundaries are important, and no one is going to die if you don’t immediately respond to an email.

Find your people

Trying to do everything yourself is a surefire way to get burned out. Find others in your field that you can lean on and ask for advice, whether it’s another staff member, a librarian from a different branch, or a friend from a library-related Facebook group. Also, collaboration is key - partner up with other local nonprofits, businesses, or groups for programming and beyond. When you have others to share the work with, it doesn’t seem so overwhelming. Your community will benefit when you don’t bear every burden yourself.

Focus on the positive

Try keeping a positivity folder or document on your work computer where you collect quotes, positive feedback from community members, cute dog photos, anything that makes you smile. Keep newspaper articles about you and your library’s accomplishments, positive Facebook reviews, whatever makes you feel proud of your little library. Look at your collection when you’re feeling down, and know that you are doing a great job, and your community is lucky to have you!

Get outside

Get out in the fresh air for at least a few minutes every day or spend your lunch break outdoors instead of behind your desk - it’s amazing what a little vitamin D can do for your well-being. Speaking of lunch breaks, TAKE THEM - don’t work through lunch - and if you’re lucky enough to get vacation days, take those too. Everyone needs to take a step



back sometimes, and there is no shame in needing a break. In today's society, "hustling" or "living at work" seems like more of a brag than a complaint, but it shouldn't be the norm to prioritize work over your health.

Tidy your workspace

You just can't feel zen and ready to be productive when you're surrounded by clutter. Take a few minutes each day to clear your work area, and you'll be surprised by how much better you feel.

Find your "thing"

Find a hobby that you love that has absolutely nothing to do with work. Make time for it; pencil it in as if it's an appointment. Find something that you love and are passionate about - besides the library - and pour yourself into it whenever you can.

Give yourself permission to do less

You are not a superhero. You can't do it all; you don't need to even try. Allow yourself to take less on at work - you don't have to visit every preschool classroom, just visit one. You don't have to have after-school programs every day - why not weekly? Prioritize and don't hesitate to put some things on the back burner. You don't need to make personal sacrifices and drive yourself crazy in order to serve your community as best as you possibly can. Your community doesn't benefit when you are working yourself to death trying to be everything to everyone.

Find inspiration again

If it seems like you have no passion or enthusiasm for what you do, maybe you just misplaced it and need to find it again. Keep a list of favorite library-related blogs, websites, and Instagram accounts, and go to it when you need inspiration. Visit local bookstores and other libraries, and take note of what exciting, unique things they're doing with their decor, programs, and displays. Take in all the webinars you can, and attend conferences if you're able. Remember your "why" - what made you want to be a librarian in the first place? Revisit that reason whenever you need to, and search out the things that make you feel excited about your job - sometimes all it takes is one spark of inspiration to get your library mojo back.

Visit a professional

The symptoms of burnout can very closely mirror those of other serious health issues, including clinical depression. Though the above quiz can be helpful for assessing burnout, it cannot diagnose it and should not replace medical care. If you are experiencing these symptoms on a regular basis, it is important that you visit your doctor to rule out other problems. There is no harm in seeking out help for your mental health, and self-care does not replace mental health care!