Your Burnout Warning Signs

Will you burn out in private practice? The question reveals a hidden assumption that burnout is a dichotomous variable: either present or absent. But it isn’t. Burnout exists on a continuum. Consequently, you can use your own signs of burnout as welcome warning signs that you need to adjust something in your work life.

So: Think of a time when you have been closest to burnout: exhausted, disliking your work, not wanting to go in to the office. In fact, think of two. When did they happen, and what was the job?

1. ____________________________________________

2. ____________________________________________

Now do some analysis. What seems to have led to the feeling of being overwhelmed and unmotivated? What were the external factors? Too many committees? Too many clients in a week? Troubles at home? Too much of one type of work? Use the occasions you listed above, and consider other times when you felt yourself sliding. List as many as you can. (Use additional paper if necessary.)

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Perhaps your previous brushes with burnout were caused by internal, personal factors as well as external stresses. What were they? Back pain disrupting your sleep? Too much alcohol? Grief? Clients' problems that mirror your own too closely? No exercise? Come up with as many factors as you can.

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Now go back over these two lists of risk factors. Put a “1” beside the most significant factor on either list. Then find the second most damaging factor and give it a “2.” Continue until you run out of factors or get to at least “10.”

Now: How many of these factors are an issue for you right now? Write their numbers here:

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If you are new to private practice or if your work now involves situations that didn’t apply on the occasions you were considering above, perhaps you have new risk factors: worry about referrals, stress about completing reimbursement forms, or lack of collegial consultation. What are your new factors?
In the past, how have you managed to get your energy back? What helped to alleviate the sense of burnout? Include both the things that you did for yourself (sought therapy, cut back at work, hired an accountant) and the things that simply happened outside your control (summer arrived, your nasty boss quit, you got laid off).

What additional strategies might be helpful? Include things you haven’t tried, but suspect might assist you given your current work and life situation. Hire babysitters more often? Take up tai chi? Start a consultation group? Take Fridays off?

When you catch yourself showing some of the initial signs of burnout that you have identified, welcome these as helpful messages telling you to implement an anti-burnout plan. Don’t wait for it to become unbearable or try to “just tough it out.” It’s always easier to create change before things get to the crisis point.