

# Avoiding Burnout—Being PALS with Yourself

By TANYEE CHEUNG



**I**n our last column, we discussed the phenomenon of burnout in the legal profession and the need for both organizations and individuals to find ways to mitigate the situations in our profession that can often lead to chronic stress, unreasonable workloads, capricious deadlines, challenging clients, and lack of control, resources, and appreciation. Much more than the late-night demands of a deal about to close or a case going to trial, burnout is the unsustainable constant and daily demands that legal professionals are often faced with. In this follow-up to last month's article, we examine concrete actions that we can engage in to help us avoid burnout.

The first step we must take is to take a step back, breathe, and ask ourselves if we might be on the path to burnout. For many, our work consumes us so that we

do not even recognize we are headed in that direction. As you read this article, I invite you to take a pause and ask yourself the following questions:

- **How is my energy level?** On a scale of 1-10, where would I put myself?
- **How do I feel about work?** Do I have enough direction? Am I engaged? Do I find it satisfying? Do I feel appreciated?
- **How do I feel about the job I am doing?** Am I doing a good job? Do I feel I have adequate control over my work environment? When was the last time I felt overwhelmed?
- **How do I feel physically?** Am I constantly tired? Do I have constant headaches or stomach aches?
- **When was the last time I did something fun for myself?**

## ■ How are my relationships, both at work and outside of work?

There is no answer key here, no score that can tell you where you are on the burnout scale.<sup>1</sup> The good news is that no one knows you as well as you know yourself and from your answers, you know whether you can skip the rest of this article or if you need to read on.

If you are still reading, take another breath and consider how you can be PALS with yourself. PALS is a Practice of Awareness, Love, and Self-Care. Congratulations on taking the first step and becoming more aware. This first step cannot be over-emphasized. Taking this single moment to recognize that you may need to take action to avoid burnout deserves a pat on the back. Give yourself a little love for it!

“... recognize that self-love and self-care are the foundations to a whole, healthy you and a whole healthy you is better not only for you but for your organization and your relationships.”



Images credit: Olga Strelinkova/Getty/Image

The next step is to recognize that self-love and self-care are the foundations to a whole, healthy you and a whole healthy you is better not only for you but for your organization and your relationships. A daily practice of affirmation —“I am worthy of self-care”— can serve as a reminder that spending the time now to avoid burnout will reap benefits for all.

Beyond self-affirmations, there are concrete actions you can engage in to move you off the burnout train. New research on burnout recovery provides insights to possible solutions. According to a study published in the *Applied Psychology Health and Well-Being* journal, activities on vacations or weekends or which provide more opportunity to get away from your work, connect with others, and experience effectiveness, can help reduce burnout and increase your energy.<sup>2</sup> To reignite your brain and body, take the opportunity to get away and reset. Conversely, when people did work-related activities on the weekends, they detracted from their well-being and energy levels. Taking the time to build strong relationships within and outside of work can also help prevent burnout. Below are a few ideas to help you on your way.

### Vacation PALS

One of the definitions I like best for vacation is “a time of respite from something.” A vacation is a time to “take a break.” This allows us to re-energize and is a must for sustainability. We might feel that it’s impossible to just “disappear” but often we haven’t set ourselves up well for this. One of the ways we can prep for our respite is to master the “hand-off.” Take the time during the week (or two) prior to vacation to start looping in others who will be taking over for you. Create a rough outline of the different aspects of the deal and the status of documents, etc. Taking the time in advance to craft a detail hand-off can give you a relatively work-free vacation. Let your team know that you won’t be checking emails but that they should call you if they really need you. This allows you to turn-off emails and still be responsible to the needs of your team and client. This is great behavior to model for others and I am always happy to do this for oth-

ers knowing that they will be doing the same for me when I head off.

When planning your vacation, know that there is no “perfect” respite. Often, vacations are thought of as slowing down and getting away. For some, these might be perfect ways to relax. But consider what relaxes you, uniquely. If you relax by reading a book, great. But if you relax by socializing with friends or working hard on a building project in your community, go for it. While it might seem counter-intuitive to relax by climbing a mountain, physical activity can be one of the greatest relaxation modes for people and is correlated with recovery. The key is to re-charge yourself, so consider your own energy levels and do what works best for you.

### Weekend PALS

On weekends, find ways to get away and be diligent about doing things that are different than your day-to-day. Turn off your devices, silence notifications, and resist the urge to check your email or even your LinkedIn feed at least for one day. If you have anxiety that others will be upset if you don’t respond within 24 hours, consider an out-of-office notification letting people know that you will respond to their email on Sunday/Monday. (Truly, has there ever been an emergency over the weekend that couldn’t be solved on Monday?) I know of people who have the one day out of office on the weekends to align with religious customs, but I wonder if more of us should do this to promote mental health and productivity. For full disclosure, outside of imminent closings/signings, I often take a day off from checking emails on the weekend and I don’t have an out-of-office. And, I have not had any one question my timing of getting back to them the following day. I encourage folks to talk about the benefits to co-workers, bosses, and clients. Often, people are unaware of the real, evidenced-based benefits that can come from a re-charge and the gentle reminder through conversation can help people become more conscious. If you don’t have a well-being committee in your office, consider forming one and/or ask management about bringing in someone to present on the benefits of self-care.

All of this can bring greater awareness to the need and the benefits of allowing people to detach and re-energize.

### Daily PALS

What if I have a deal closing or a trial coming up? I am by no means suggesting that you ignore the needs of your team or your clients, but thinking of ways to give them accessibility without tying yourself to your phone is imperative. When I have a deal that is fast-paced and someone *might* need to reach me, I still turn my phone to “Do Not Disturb.” A neat trick on the iPhone is that even if it is on DND, you can set it so that if someone calls you twice in a row, it will ring through (or you can have VIP numbers where it will ring through). I let my team and clients know that so they can reach me if they must. Often there is no need for an immediate response, and it was fine for me to read the email in the morning. I get my rest and time to re-energize and the next day is better for everyone. A fully rested me also allows me to tell my team to sleep in if at all possible. Divide and conquer allows us to be most efficient. Two zombies are never as good as one rested person.

The above are just a few of the ways you can build up your resistance to burnout. Remember that these are suggestions and that you are the expert in you. Practice Awareness, Love, and Self-Care and find what works best for you. ■



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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For organizations that want better insight to the likelihood of burnout across their organization, there are resources, such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) that can be helpful.

<sup>2</sup> [www.researchgate.net/publication/350945031\\_What\\_did\\_you\\_do\\_this\\_weekend\\_Relationships\\_between\\_weekend\\_activities\\_recovery\\_experiences\\_and\\_changes\\_in\\_work-related\\_well-being](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350945031_What_did_you_do_this_weekend_Relationships_between_weekend_activities_recovery_experiences_and_changes_in_work-related_well-being)