avoiding burnout

SELF-CARE IS IMPORTANT FOR BOTH YOU & YOUR CLIENT.  By Amy Roberts, LMT
In order to avoid burnout, you must be able to recognize the symptoms. When you can’t identify what is happening to you, the chances you'll be able to protect against the effects of burnout decrease.

Recovering from this condition can be difficult, so understanding what some of the signs and symptoms are—as well as what can be done to alleviate them—is a good place to start the battle against burnout.

ON THE LOOKOUT
As you get more comfortable in your business and find ways to effectively market your services, your client list will grow. Taking on more clients will demand more of your time and require you be able to sustain your energy and mental stamina.

Massage therapists can quickly become fatigued with the continual demands of a growing massage business, particularly if you are a sole practitioner who attends to the multiple aspects of the business above and beyond massage, including marketing, office management and accounting tasks. Such demands can seem relentless, particularly at peak periods. There is risk of losing motivation as these stressors dilute your original passion for the massage therapy profession.

Letting these feelings build can lead to burnout—a deep exhaustion caused by prolonged periods of excessive stress. If you experience burnout, problems can seem insurmountable and everything looks bleak. You may have a hard time drumming up the energy to feel concerned or take interest in daily activities. Many times your perception...
of things changes, too, making tasks that were once easy and interesting more difficult. Unfortunately, once these symptoms set in, many massage therapists feel it is easier to simply walk away from their business.

As you might imagine, burnout can reduce your productivity, and you might find yourself letting important details slip. You might also begin feeling depressed. Other psychological and physical symptoms of burnout include: helplessness, desperation, emotional tiredness, indifference, loneliness, irritability, annoyance, feeling trapped, anguish, pessimism and apathy.

GETTING A GRIP
When you begin feeling overwhelmed, a good place to start taking back control is by determining how you are spending your time. When you force yourself to account for your time, you might find your days are out of balance and you are expending more energy than you realize.

In today’s busy, fast-paced work environment, many people feel pressure to do everything themselves and are left with the feeling that there aren’t enough hours in the day to get everything done. Being constantly busy; however, most often means you aren’t using your time effectively, or giving yourself enough downtime to regenerate and revive your spirit.

A simple way to get an overview of how you spend your days is to fill in a timetable (see examples on pages 102 & 104). Use different colors to represent different activities. For example, purple for hours dedicated to work; green for relaxation; put day-to-day tasks in blue; mark time you spend on personal or business relationships in yellow; health and fitness is dark blue; and orange for activities that promote self development.

If accounting for your time in such great detail seems daunting, you can also diagram your time using broader life categories (see examples on pages 106 & 107). The point is to get an idea of how you are spending your time and where you might need to make some changes in order to bring yourself into balance.

Once you’ve completed the exercise, analyze how you spent last week and pay close attention to how your time is distributed. Then, think about these questions: Are you seeing a pattern emerging? Do you find your time is spent heavily geared toward one aspect of your life? Are there aspects of your life that you might be neglecting?

This exercise can be very helpful when you find you feel “under the gun” a lot of the time. Having a visual representation of where your time is going will quickly make clear where you might need to improve

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balance. For example, if your timetable is covered in red, you’ll know it’s time to take some moments for yourself and find enjoyment away from your work.

**TAKING THE TIME**

Once you’ve taken inventory of where you are spending your time, there are a variety of things you can do to create more balance in your life. First, you should make a list of activities you know are pleasurable for you. My own list includes reading a good book, seeing a movie, playing music, going for a walk, meditating and doing something creative.

The possibilities are endless, and these activities don’t have to be complicated. Sometimes restoring balance can come by getting outside for a few minutes and breathing fresh air or simply sitting under a tree letting your worries wash away.

If you work out of your home, this timetable exercise might reveal that you need to spend more time with people who aren’t your clients. Remaining socially active can help you stay happy and keep your energy positively focused on your massage practice. Maintaining connections with good people is a great way to raise self esteem and reduce feelings of isolation. The key here is to completely break the routine and do something that’s in no way related to massage therapy. By doing this you’ll completely dust away the cobwebs and refresh yourself.

I would suggest getting out of the house at least three times a week. Do something completely different from massage therapy, helping to promote a freshened mind and stemming any frustration you may be feeling. Don’t wait until you feel overwhelmed. Instead, plan ahead and keep these activities a regular part of your schedule. For example, I love nature and physical activity, so I joined a bush walking group. I was able to break from my routine, as well as have the opportunity to network and meet other great people. During this time, I am able to clear away any mental lethargy that might be building.

**Stress or Burnout?**

Burnout may be the result of merciless stress, but it is not the same as “too much” stress. Broadly, stress involves too many pressures that demand too much of a person physically and psychologically at a given time. Stressed people can still imagine, though, that if they can just get everything under control, they’ll feel better.

Burnout on the other hand, is signified by “not enough.” Depletion of energy, motivation, will power and hope for positive change are all characteristic. If stress is like drowning in responsibilities, burnout is being too depleted to give any more. While a therapist may be well aware of operating under stressful conditions, they can usually see an end in sight. Once burnout enters, though, that end is no longer perceived as a realistic possibility.

**GOOD PRACTICE MANAGEMENT**

Good practice management begins with having an organized, clear set of principles as the foundation for your massage business. These principles should run through every aspect of your practice, from administrative tasks and business goals to ethics and client service. Defining and separating the roles you have as a massage therapist and business owner will help streamline how you...
perform daily operations.

Keeping an operations book helps track and improve these important organizational issues. The operations book is simply a book of written goals and procedures for your practice. Functioning like a very detailed calendar, this book incorporates your mission statement, how things are done in your practice and when each goal is to be completed.

For example, you may have a strict rule about your massage supplies being ordered at the end of each month from a specific vendor. Making a note of all similar rules in an operations book maintains consistency in your practice and creates a good working system for you to follow.

You should also include the basics, such as opening and closing hours, when the business is closed for holidays, safety procedures and a code of ethics. Also write down future goals, plans you have for marketing and where you’d like to see the business go.

Keeping this information in one place lets you easily assess your progress and gives you a general overview of where you stand. You’ll be able to pinpoint busy times, times of growth and expansion, and times you might need to hire additional help. Formatting a clear guideline of operations will almost always bring consistency to a practice. This clarity will give you the ability to focus.

**LETTING GO**

A common difficulty we have as massage therapists is the self-imposed need to do everything. We are a “one-man band” and even though this can sound quite appealing in the beginning, the long-term reality

*When you don’t give yourself time to relax, you might find your energy levels plummeting. When you take time out from work to let yourself revive and replenish, the time you spend practicing massage therapy will be more productive.*
is very different. Being a one man show loses its appeal if we operate like this long term.

The danger with doing everything yourself is that you might be slow to recognize when you need to reach out for help, instead falling back on the false belief that everything is up to you. When the number of clients you are seeing reaches a peak, you need to start delegating some tasks. You may want to start with some of the everyday activities you do, such as cleaning the towels or answering the phone. You could hire someone to perform some of these tasks, or you may outsource the work. Perhaps you send the towels out or direct calls to a professional service instead of having clients leave messages on voice mail.

You might also consider hiring a bookkeeper to balance the books. Having an employee or outside service take care of some of the business basics may free up enough time for you to see a few extra clients as the business grows. You should be prepared, however, for the possibility that as you continue to expand you might need another massage therapist on staff to help handle the additional work load.

Hiring another massage therapist might seem like a big step, especially if you are used to working alone. The time you'll gain, though, can be used to do work that is imperative to your success, such as developing or refreshing your marketing program. Delegation can certainly empower the massage therapist with time and focus for better decision making and continued enthusiasm. Remember, reducing your stress to a workable level promotes a longer, healthier massage career.

### OUT OF BALANCE

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**COLOR KEY:**
- Working in the business – purple
- Relaxation/Fun – green
- Day-To-Day Activities – blue

In this timetable, where purple indicates all of the time spent working, you can clearly see there is not enough balance. Only three hours of this busy person’s schedule is dedicated to relaxation, not enough to truly give her time to unwind and replenish her energy. Being busy can make people feel productive, but taking time for rest can actually help us get more done and sustain our energy levels.

If, when you do your own timetable, you find you have a great deal of blue and purple filling your chart, evaluate why you’re spending so much time working, either at your own business or as an employee. What are you currently doing that might be handled by another employee? Are there day-to-day activities that you could delegate?

When you don’t give yourself enough time to relax, you might find your energy levels plummeting, making getting everything that you’ve committed to doing more difficult. Also, if you aren’t careful, a schedule that isn’t balanced may lead to burnout, which can be hard to recover from if not discovered in a timely manner.

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In Real Life

About a year ago, a client of mine, Mary*, came to see me because she was stressed and exhausted but didn’t really understand why. A successful massage therapist for about five years, she just felt she needed extra help in managing things. She explained to me that she was feeling quite “stretched” all the time. We sat down together and carefully examined how she was spending her time. While doing this exercise, what became almost immediately apparent is how much work she was taking on beyond caring for her clients.

Mary was in the middle of renovating her house while also keeping up with her busy massage practice. As we mapped out how she was spending her day, Mary was surprised to see that working with the various contractors doing the work on her home was taking nearly two and one-half hours per day. This work included activities that you might not think to count, such as making and fielding phone calls, and returning home quickly to meet with workers when they arrived.

She questioned why she hadn’t been able to see this imbalance before, and I explained that filling out a timetable simply gave her a bird’s-eye view of where her time was going. Nobody plans for their time to slip through their fingers unnoticed, especially when they own a business. People often underestimate, however, how much time can be spent doing simple tasks. The old saying goes: “Time flies when you’re having fun.” But you could also easily say: “Time flies when you’re absorbed in day-to-day activities.”

For example, Mary made all the arrangements for work to be done at her home. Add to this the hourly massage appointments she kept with clients of her massage practice, as well as answering phone inquiries, bookkeeping, marketing and managing her staff. For Mary—and nearly everyone else in the world—the list of everyday activities goes on and on and on, but we don’t often account for how much time each task is taking from our schedules. Many of these items are placed under the generic heading of “getting things done.”

In order for Mary to slow down and work productively on her massage practice, a goal she set when she first came to see me, she needed to learn how to manage her time more effectively. I could see that she was indeed working very well as a massage therapist. She was highly productive in the hands-on work.

But some of the other work at her practice could be handled by someone else. For example, I suggested she hire a bookkeeper and enlist the help of current staff members to answer phone calls and book new clients. Letting go of some of these simple jobs would free up at least two hours a day for Mary to do other things.

To help Mary learn how to better delegate some of the work she’d been doing herself, I suggested she create a working list. On this list, I asked her to write down the tasks that needed to be delegated so she could have two hours of her day back. Beside each task, I asked her to write how much time she spent completing the activity. As she successfully delegated a task, she crossed it off of the list. With every successfully delegated task, she also made note of how much time she was able to add back to her own schedule. Noting her progress gave her a daily update on the time she was gaining from delegating things she didn’t have to absolutely do herself.

The very same week we worked together, Mary hired a bookkeeper and asked a staff member to take calls when she was out. She previously forwarded the clinic phone to her cell phone so she wouldn’t miss a call. Though a seemingly small change, Mary was now able to move through her day without being tied to the phone every second, giving her the freedom to focus some of her energy on the temporary project of renovating her home.

The beauty of the time management exercise was that Mary began to understand where she was spending her time. Being able to take back some of her time by delegating a few tasks gave her a sense of achievement and increased her confidence. She felt better, both personally and professionally.

In the few months following our session, Mary’s clinic began growing faster than ever. She was feeling more energy and more motivation, a result of her newfound time management skills. She continued making positive changes that helped free up more of her time, including hiring a part-time massage therapist to work in her clinic at night. A win-win situation, as the massage therapist needed the experience and Mary wanted to spend more time growing her business.

Taking a close look at how you are spending your time offers you a unique view of where you’re expending your energy, as well as the places you might be able to regain some of your control. Mary valued her business immensely, and yet also valued a quality home environment. You too can apply these things to your life, giving you a better look at your working methods and making changes where necessary.

*not client’s real name
BY THE NUMBERS

Giving massage, even with all the correct and ergonomic procedures, is physically demanding. When in the start-up phase of my own massage business, I had 40 clients respond to one editorial, and they all wanted massage the same week.

For someone taking her first enthusiastic plunge into the massage profession, the great response was a dream come true. At the same time, this sudden level of increased clientele could have become overwhelming if I hadn’t watched and managed my energy levels closely.

Leaving 15 to 30 minutes between bookings can give you enough breathing space and a good even pace so you can maintain increasing client numbers. Building up gradually to a larger client intake maximizes your ability to sustain your business.

You should also set limits on the number of clients you see per day. Having a working knowledge of your clients and their preferences will give you a good idea of how your week might look. You may know some days and times are more popular than others, which will go a long way in planning so you can keep your energy levels up.

Limitations can also be set around these times so that client preferences are not overly compromised. A question to continually ask yourself: “How many people can I massage per week without feeling too tired?”

Once you have a good idea of how many clients you are comfortable seeing each week, go one step further and try to determine how many years you think you might be able to

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- Day-To-Day Activities – blue
- Relationships – yellow
- Health/Fitness – dark blue
- Self Development – orange

A timetable that is balanced encompasses both work and other activities that give you the opportunity to rest or enhance yourself in ways not directly connected to your job. Here you can see the purple indicating time spent on work-related activities doesn’t overpower the chart. Spending time on personal relationships, your own health, self-development and relaxation are important aspects of keeping yourself balanced. When you take time out from work to let yourself unwind and replenish your reserves, the time you spend practicing massage therapy will be more productive, for you and your clients.
maintain this pace.

To stay in balance, set limits for yourself and your massage practice, but keep a narrow margin of flexibility for when changes need to be made. Having an idea of how much you can handle before fatigue starts to set in will help you remain active in your practice and better recognize when you might need to back off and take a rest. If these boundaries are not firmly set in place, then stress can increase because of too much demand on personal time. The objective for these strategies is to maintain your passion for massage.

MENTAL HEALTH

Our mental constructs often become our reality. When you have an attitude of being kind to yourself, creating and maintaining a healthy self-care regimen becomes natural. Not all stressful events can be controlled, but implementing healthy methods for managing these events will empower you and help you defend against burnout.

There are many effective ways to relax. Depending on what your body and mind respond to, you may find mental relaxation very effective. An excellent form of mental relaxation is hypnotherapy. This is a great way to let go of stresses, promoting deep mental and emotional calm and stillness. Hypnotherapy is geared toward unwinding negative thoughts by offering positive suggestions in a safe environment. This method of treating the mind is a gentle way of bringing back a feeling of wholeness again.

Remember, nobody is a machine. People cannot sleep, eat and breathe massage therapy 24 hours a day. In our high-pressure culture, you might feel as though if you aren’t working long hours and pouring every ounce of energy you have into your profession, you won’t be successful. The exact opposite, however, is true. Quiet time away from your work and its sometimes all-consuming absorptions for reflection or meditation increases your chances for success. Remember, its all about a healthy balance of time and energy placement.

The healing and repair of deep sleep is also necessary for mental health. Anxieties often intrude upon deep sleep, so upon waking you may not always feel refreshed and rejuvenated, making finding ways to relieve the stressors in your life especially important. When you are able to sleep deeply and allow your brain to rest, maintaining higher energy levels will be less difficult.

Also, remember the healing power of what you do and then think about getting on the receiving end on a regular basis. Getting a good massage after giving them to others all week can restore deep relaxation and a sense of self-worth. All the known benefits of massage therapy can apply to therapists themselves.

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EXERCISE

Exercise is a great stress alleviator. Pressures can be relieved through physical activity, releasing endorphins, increasing muscle function, aiding digestion and boosting circulation. Exercise also relaxes the brain and promotes a more effective rest. Chi energy flows are increased and blockages released, shifting stagnant energy in the body.

Aerobic exercise at least three times a week is preferable. Walking, swimming, yoga, tai chi and gentle bicycle riding are recommended for improved mental alertness, confidence and sense of well being. Not only does exercise provide many benefits which I am sure you are aware of, but you also get out of the house and have a chance to mentally unwind. Don’t make the activity complicated. If the weather is good, put on your walking shoes and head out the door for a brisk walk for 30 minutes.

EATING AND DRINKING

Natural foods convert to natural energy and are generally absorbed most efficiently. Fresh fruit and vegetables, healthy, unaltered carbohydrates such as brown rice and whole grain breads, will sustain energy levels for longer periods of time. Conversely, refined foods and artificial stimulants manipulate energy unnaturally and cannot last, inducing unnatural peaks and troughs. Refined sugar and caffeine are a great example of this.

Refined sugar such as chocolate is perfectly acceptable to the body in small quantities. To sustain a good energy level, however, natural foods...
are preferred by your body. A body that has too much sugar for extended periods has the tendency to raise your blood sugar levels and then let them fall just as rapidly in attempt to equalize again. The ideal energy levels are maintained by foods that sustain you, such as protein and some carbohydrates. You should seek the advice of a professional when making any serious dietary changes, however.

Avoiding dehydration is also essential. You can become dehydrated quickly, even when the weather is cool. Lack of water in the body is a major cause of fatigue and the inability to concentrate. Serious errors of judgment can occur. Think of how a plant wilts and loses vibrancy when depleted of water. Fluid intake requirements correlate with physical activity and concentration, and both these attributes are required for every massage treatment. You will be surprised to discover how much clearer you think when you are adequately hydrated.

Taking time for self-care sometimes means finding more time in your day for yourself. Often, we get caught up in the day-to-day of our personal and professional lives, unaware of how much time we are spending on little tasks, as well as the energy we are using and not adequately replenishing. Having a good idea of everything taking up time in your day, and how long each activity is actually taking you to complete, will help you create a plan to manage your time more effectively.

Though having every aspect of your life come in at just the right amount might be idealistic, this diagram illustrates what you should strive for when scheduling your time. When you find the number in one area is continually creeping up, take time to realign your schedule. Again, some people have the false expectation that spending more time at work makes them more successful, but that isn’t really the case. When you can balance your life among all of the important areas, the downtime you enjoy will give you more energy and mental clarity to pursue business and professional opportunities that can push you forward.

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