

Avoiding Burnout

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1. **Know that burnout is real:** Burnout is defined as physical or mental collapse by overwork or stress. It is the loss of meaning in one's work, coupled with physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. It can affect anyone but it is becoming more prevalent in PR. [The Winona State University burnout study](#) really helped me understand what burnout is, how it impacts your body and how you can change behaviors to more effectively manage stress.
2. **Recognize typical symptoms:** This is critical. You can't know if you are heading towards burnout if you don't know what to look for. Chances are you are showing symptoms, but may have pushed them off as just "normal side effects of a demanding job." Typical symptoms include loss of appetite, finding ways to "numb" yourself to feelings (ie. drinking more than normal), getting sick frequently, detaching from personal relationships, a pessimistic outlook, physical exhaustion, over-reaction to minor things and a general lack of joy in your work. A great resource for me was the Reignite Project through www.thisiscalmer.com, which details the 5 stages of burnout and accompanying symptoms. If you can identify your issues early in the continuum, it is faster and easier to correct behaviors and move towards health again. I thought I was just run down a little, wasn't sleeping well and couldn't really think clearly. But I didn't realize that all together that spelled more than just a crazy job.
3. **Do an honest assessment of your physical, mental and emotional health:** Your mental health is personal. Every person handles stress differently. You need to take a frank look at how you are really doing, not just the face you put on at work or home. If you feel off or see physical changes, listen to your body and mind. You know yourself best. When I actually looked at all my symptoms and did a full assessment I realized I was a classic case of burnout and didn't even know it. Once you have an honest assessment, you can get help and start to make changes.
4. **Set boundaries:** This is the biggest step. You need to recognize what your constant stress factors are and set limits on them. For me, answering emails at all hours became my first boundary. I started not answering my phone during dinner and not answering emails after 10 p.m. (unless it was a true emergency). And guess what? The sky didn't fall, I didn't get in trouble for not being "responsive" and some positive outcomes resulted. Additional boundaries for me included turning on the "do not disturb" function on my phone from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m., not doing the work of other departments because "it made my job easier" and delegating tasks when possible. Yes, these are all major changes to typical school PR work behavior. But for me, I realized being superhuman wasn't healthy, enabled poor work habits in others and was slowly killing my heart, mind and body.
5. **Find what works for YOU:** This is a personal journey that only you can create. What works for others may not work for you. When I was first diagnosed with clinical burnout, my doctor told me western medicine couldn't help me. So I researched lots of eastern medicine practices for stress management/adrenal fatigue and ended up cobbling together a system of both proactive and reactive remedies including acupuncture, herbal teas, relaxation radio on Pandora during my daily commute, what my husband called "hammock time" (30 minutes in my hammock with music where my kids couldn't bother me) and dietary changes. Some folks thought I was crazy and called my new lifestyle "hocus pocus." But it worked for me. I gradually started to feel better. Three years later and I still have to manage my stress daily. But now I can recognize when I am getting out of balance and quickly correct behavior so I am on the right track again.

This was my path from burnout to recovery. But the wisest course of action is to be proactive in self-care to build your mental resilience. **You** are the key to avoiding burnout.