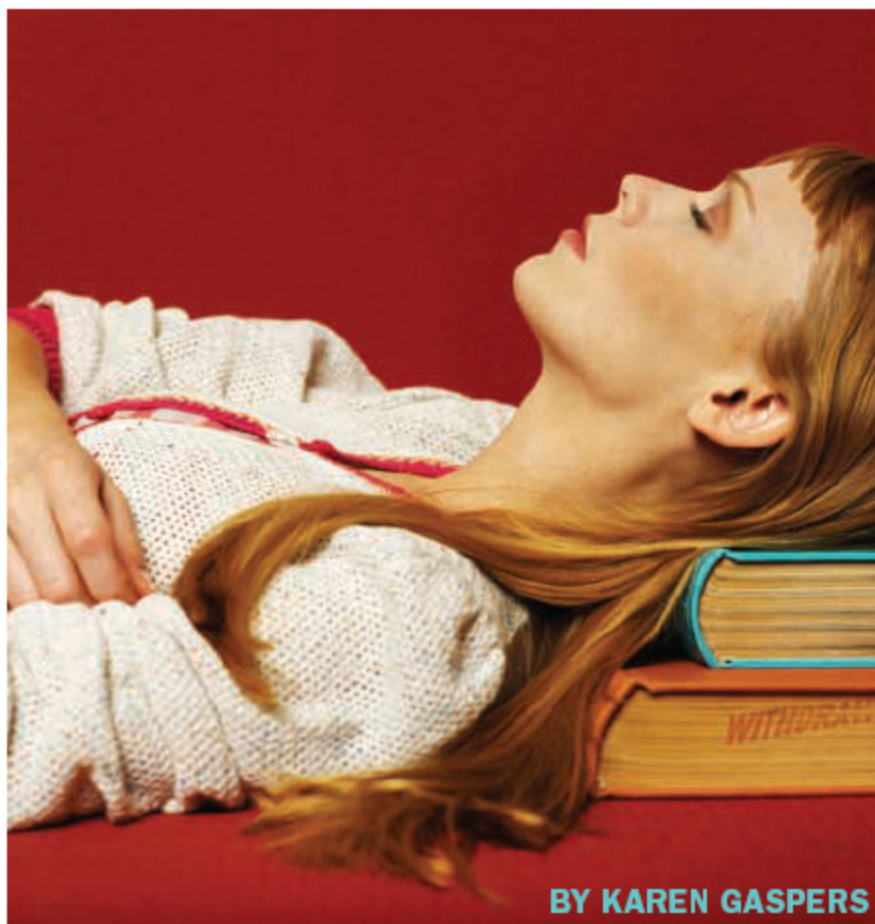


burnedout

WORKING AS A THERAPIST CAN QUICKLY LOSE ITS LUSTER IF YOU AREN'T
PREPARED FOR THE OBSTACLES THAT COME WITH THE TERRITORY.
HERE'S HOW YOU CAN AVOID COMMON PITFALLS AND AVOID GETTING BURNED OUT.



BY KAREN GASPERS

Seven years ago,

Donna Blumrich was thrilled to begin her massage therapy career at an elite spa in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "I wanted to work in the spa industry," she says. "I love the atmosphere, the whole bit." The schedule was intense, though, and she found herself working 10-to-12 hour days, often putting in 36 hours in three days. "We would work the whole day, thankful for any no-shows, then spend our day off recovering," she recalls. "That was really intense. I'd get home at 7 or 8 at night, then the next day couldn't function."

Eventually the frenetic pace took an even greater emotional and physical toll: Twelve months into the job, Blumrich began experiencing panic attacks. While driving to work, or driving home afterwards, she would suddenly be unable to breathe. "I realized I was giving so much and feeling so bad the day after," she

says. "It became not worth it to me. I quit the spa."

Blumrich had succumbed to burnout, an all too common experience in today's workplace. Among the general population, a 2006 survey by CareerBuilder.com found one in four workers claim burnout on the job—and massage therapists are considered at higher risk for burnout than the average office worker. In fact, a 2005 State of the Industry survey by the American Massage Therapy Association found the average massage therapist lasts less than 8 years in the industry.

what gives?

Jack Blackburn, a licensed massage practitioner who specializes in body-centered spiritual growth and healing in Seattle, believes the burnout rate is high among massage therapists for several reasons. One

burnout basics

Exactly what is burnout? Researchers describe burnout as a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion brought on by chronic on-the-job stressors. Studies show it has three key dimensions: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and a sense of futility and lack of accomplishment.

"Think of it as job depression," says Beverly Potter, a psychologist who specializes in workplace issues and the author of *Overcoming Burnout: How to Renew Enthusiasm for Work*. Potter explains that burnout happens when you feel powerless about your situation. Sure, on any given day enthusiasm for the job may wane. But when the condition is chronic and you can't rally your spirits, it's not just a bump in the career road—it's burnout.

is that massage therapists may not be well prepared to deal with clients who either unload their problems during a session, or directly after the massage has ended.

Also, there are few requirements for massage therapists to receive bodywork themselves or to receive psychotherapy. Therapy is particularly important, says Blackburn, because it gives practitioners a place to work out their own issues. He believes many practitioners come to massage therapy with a history of caretaking—a need to fix people's problems for them. "I think many practitioners, when they start to discover that they have the same fears, same issues and same way of dealing with things as when they were younger, the profession they are making money at really becomes a burden for them."

Finally, Blackburn says a lack of ongoing supervision contributes to burnout. "We are in a caregiver

profession, but there is no support," he says. "Issues come up between clients and themselves, and themselves and their practice, but there is no place to go and talk about it."

Diana Herec, a massage therapist for more than 30 years, believes burnout has much to do with a lack of preparation for the business side of the coin. Herec teaches massage technique as president of S.O.M. Therapy & Associates, Inc., a continuing education provider based in Lantana, Florida. She says participants in her classes, usually the ones who have been in practice five to seven years, will often express a desire to quit the business. "They'll come to me complaining about being tired, how their hands and wrists hurt," she says. "But if you go deeper into the conversation, you find it's the realization that a massage career is beyond a labor of love, it's actually a business."

Herec also says the causes of burn-

Even when you love your job and burnout isn't on the horizon, your work still can be a major source of stress in your life. Clients who are late or don't show up at all, insurance companies haggle over payment, or coworkers don't mesh—all these can drain your energy and affect your health. To better understand how stress affects you, take the Stress Smarts quiz from the American Psychological Association at www.apahelpsonline.org/quiz/index.cfm.

Massage therapists would do well to take the same advice they give to their clients: Exercise, eat right, get plenty of rest & schedule regular massages.

out fit into one of four categories: inadequate income, lack of professional respect, work-related injuries and pain, and difficult clients. The culmination of stress from these factors can wear down a therapist.

In the end, although burnout has to do with many factors, both Blackburn and Herec say it boils down to one thing: The inability to get to a place where the massage therapist is happy in his or her career. "The practice is not giving them what they thought they were going to get," Blackburn says.

preventing burnout

It took Blumrich several years to recover from burnout and overcome her anxieties. When she did, she knew how important pacing would be to her career. "You must honor yourself and your own limits," she says. She now works 15 to 20 hours a week operating a private practice out of her home in Gonzales, Louisiana, and working part-time at a spa. She also teaches occasionally at a massage therapy school.

Blumrich says it's often new practitioners who struggle with workload issues—"they want to get out there and work, work, work." Instead, therapists should start slow and build up their hours. "Don't start at a maximum number of hours and work down, but start slow and build up to where your comfort level is," she says. "That way when you go over your limit by one, you'll immediately feel the difference and know that's over your maximum level."

A rule of thumb is three massages per session, Blumrich adds. That's a typical pace at massage schools, so recent graduates should be accustomed to it.

Blumrich acknowledges this is difficult to do in many settings, such as a spa that wants its massage therapists to work a fixed number of hours. She suggests finding a spa that's just opening where you might have a better chance of negotiating hours or where you can start out slow while the clientele is being built.

For Julie Onofrio, a licensed massage practitioner in private practice in Seattle, peer supervision can address every issue thrown at body workers. Onofrio experienced her own burnout in 1999 after taking several years of intensive workshops.

"I got really sick and could hardly work—that was the culmination of being burned out," she says.

An introduction to supervision turned things around for her. "I realized that what I was going through was normal," she explains. Onofrio started her own peer supervision group with friends, where she says she is able to talk about all the feelings that come up when working with clients. But she stresses it's not about advising. "It's about trying to mirror each other and learning to listen to each other." That skill can then be taken back into your practice. "Therapists want to give advice; I still struggle with it," Onofrio admits. "This teaches you how to be present to the client, to just listen and not bring yourself into it."

Both Blumrich and Onofrio say the biggest lesson burnout taught them was the importance of taking care of their own needs. "In order to work on any client, you have to first take care of yourself," Onofrio says.

To that end, massage therapists would do well to take the same ad-

am i burning out?

You may be headed down the road to burnout if you experience these common signs:

- 1 **Fatigue**
- 2 **Frustration**
- 3 **Feeling your work is not enough for clients**
- 4 **Feeling ineffective or not useful**
- 5 **Feeling drained**
- 6 **Feeling unable to give any more**
- 7 **Not taking classes or not wanting to learn anything new**
- 8 **Isolation**
- 9 **Calling in sick often or wishing clients would cancel or not show up**
- 10 **Feeling life is meaningless**

List courtesy of Julie Onofrio, www.massagepracticetoolkit.com.

vice they press upon their clients: Exercise, eat right, get plenty of rest and schedule regular massages.

Rom Origlia, a massage therapist in Sydney, Australia, also adds regular baths with Epsom salts and the use of objects, such as tennis balls, to release trigger points. "Self-maintenance is the best advice you as a therapist can give yourself," he says.

be business-minded

To Herec, preventing burnout means becoming business-minded. "Therapists who knew enough to seek out a business consultant early on or had a background in business before starting their massage career do not have the career obstacles for burnout," she says. Luckily, many general business protocols can be adapted to a massage therapy practice. Practitioners just need to think of themselves as small-business owners. Learn more about business presentations, work-related practi-

es and procedures, marketing, business plans, and the related psychological dynamics of the profession, Herec says.

It's also worth seeking counsel from someone who has proven long-term success in the industry. "Find someone who has a lot of experience and a lot of years behind him or her to consult you," Herec advises. Ask them for advice on how to improve your business.

In fact, Blackburn says seeking out a mentor in general is a good idea. "It would be really helpful for those who are young to find an older practitioner or several older practitioners to help them mature in their work, in their profession."

Avoiding burnout also means avoiding stagnation, Herec says. Attend seminars or take continuing education classes at which you can learn new techniques. Learn to specialize in certain pathologies, and learn more about client conditions.

What you learn won't help if you

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don't incorporate it into your practice, Herec says. She acknowledges this can be difficult; it's hard to get clients to change their massage pattern. She suggests slowly incorporating what you've learned into the routine to make it less of a jolt, and educating the client about new techniques along the way. Not only will you become a better therapist, but new techniques will allow you to alter your routine and avoid the repetition that leads to boredom.

going deeper

Discovering why you want to help others and what you expect to get out of a career in massage therapy is key to avoiding burnout, Onofrio says. "Be aware of the underlying issues that brought you here," she says. When practitioners try to get all their needs met through their practice, such as a sense of fulfillment or recognition, they end up giving much more than they ever gain in return, both physically and mentally. "As you become more aware, your work can be more about being of service, not about trying to fix or advise people, because that is what drains you," Onofrio explains.

Part of dealing with burnout is about looking at your own expectations as well as your client's, says Blackburn. Massage therapy is commonly perceived, both by clients and massage therapists, as being about fixing people. Consciously or

not, some clients believe the massage therapist will fix their symptoms, and if the therapist wants to satisfy the client, he or she will buy into that, Blackburn says. "It's also what we put in our marketing, 'Come to me to for that pain in the neck,' for example."

But if the focus is on symptomatic relief, the work can become never ending and unsatisfying for the body worker, Blackburn points out. There would always be another symptom, another problem to address. "The practitioners who last are those who realize they have to move from fixing the client to being with the client through their journey in a way that's helpful," Blackburn says.

Ongoing psychotherapy is one way to learn more about who we are, Blackburn says. "If you have a good handle on your issues and have a good support group, you won't take on the extra issues of the client." Therapy can help you avoid that situation. "What can easily happen in therapy is that an issue that comes up with a client can be brought to therapy as a personal issue, such as 'what is it that causes me to be so uncomfortable with this client?'"

In general, learning more about clients would be helpful, Blackburn adds. A counseling course, for example, could help massage therapists better understand clients in terms of people's personalities. Classes that address issues such as situations practitioners find awk-



One way to avoid career burnout is to find career support. For tips on how to find it, check out the Summer issue of *mij*. Just go to www.amta-massage.org/journal/summer06_journal/mijSummer06.html and click on the "Get Career Support" link. You'll find information about how you can meet other therapists in your area as well as links for further reading on the subject.

taking care of you

Preventing burnout starts with taking care of you. Here are 15 suggestions for doing just that:

- 1 Get a massage once a week.
- 2 Make your days off, your days off.
- 3 Take vacations.
- 4 Set boundaries with family and friends—have them set up appointments, same as your other clients.
- 5 Eat right, exercise, take time for yourself, rest.
- 6 Don't take work personally.
- 7 Realize every client has something to teach you.
- 8 Make sure your body mechanics are correct.
- 9 Take time for yourself each day—meditate, stretch, take walks or do movement exercises.
- 10 Practice meditation.
- 11 Try journal writing.
- 12 Consider counseling and/or psychotherapy.
- 13 Take retreats.
- 14 Become more aware of who you are by learning about psychology and understanding the impact you have on clients.
- 15 Participate in supervision and peer supervision groups.

List courtesy of Julie Onofrio, www.thebodyworker.com.

ward, the ongoing client relationship, and the makeup of message clientele would also give insight.

Although burnout can seem an uphill battle with no easy fixes, don't give up hope. If you are already experiencing burnout, Herec cautions against any sudden decisions to leave your career behind. Instead, she suggests asking yourself two questions: 1) Am I leaving for the right reason, e.g., is it really

too physically demanding for my body, and 2) Would my time and money be better spent improving my existing career rather than embarking on a new one?

"You already have the tools you need—the experience, the license—so it might just be that doing your business in a different way is all you need to inspire excitement and productivity for an enjoyable, long-term career," she says. ■