

BE WELL

Healing from Burnout with Mindful Practices

It was February 2024, and I was in a horrible physical place, despite being a yoga teacher, a mindfulness instructor, relatively healthy and active, with a job full of purpose, meaning and stability. I was in denial for many months about the decline of my overall health and wellbeing. What could possibly be causing the failure of my body to function at an optimal level? My life included all the ingredients that should create a healthy and happy life and lead to optimal wellbeing. But, my body was shutting down and the seemingly disconnected symptoms were confusing my primary care physician: (1) insomnia – both unable to fall asleep and then stay asleep, so I would awake exhausted every morning, with an accompanying sense of dread for the day ahead; (2) extreme nerve pain in my back, arms, and hands caused by cervical spine impingements, which also caused extreme muscular pain in my neck and upper back (a long term consequence from being hit by a speeding truck while on my bike in a triathlon training race in 2008), which prevented me from being active and doing the things I loved in the winter months; (3) my digestive system was failing and I thought I was allergic to all foods and drinks that research said were “inflammatory,” which essentially made me scared to leave my house and return to work in the office as I never knew when the debilitating digestive issues would arise; (4) my immune system was malfunctioning as I was sick so frequently, it was negatively altering my life and my ability to work and have enjoyment in life; and (5) I was both anxious about the future as I felt and knew there was something seriously wrong with me, as well as depressed about where I was in my life. I

felt like a failure and an imposter at work and in my relationships.


These were the darkest days in a Valley I had ever walked. I didn’t know what was wrong and how to find healing. Ultimately, my doctor, therapists, holistic healers – chiropractic, acupuncture and Chinese herbs, my supervisor and then myself realized I was suffering from Burnout caused by chronic stress that had manufactured an excess of debilitating stress hormones in my body over time. Luckily, as a state worker I had access to hundreds of hours of accumulated sick time and the ability to use them with a medical provider’s note through Family Medical Leave. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allowed me to take up to 12 weeks of leave time (sick, personal or annual time) in a calendar year. I did not even know that FMLA was available to me and felt a lot of guilt and shame around even using my sick time for my own healing and well-being. That was maybe for the first month when I didn’t do the best job of doing less. I wasn’t working at my legal job but was still quite “busy” with French language classes, guitar lessons, ski trips, telemark skiing, as well as my medical and healing appointments.

And I learned that one can burn out doing the things you love, if you never give your body and chance to pause, reset, and heal. It was a hard lesson to learn in my second month of not “working”: to do nothing. To clear space in my schedule and life and keep it clear. To spend a day with no plans, just open space, and see how it unfolds. But, I also realized, the more I did it, the better I got at it! The more inspiration and amazing things occurred in those boring down-time spaces with no plans. And

I started to intuitively create the space for the necessary healing, that I was craving at a deep level. I felt like the saying, “when the student is ready, the teacher appears,” actually, for me, became, “when the sick are ready to heal, the healing appears.” And the healing really solidified when I read the book, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, by Emily Nagoski, Ph.D and Amelia Nagoski, DMA. The theories they advance, when combined with my symptoms and then the things I was intuitively doing to heal myself, inspired some deep mental, physical and emotional healing for me, which continues to this day. And because I started to feel better than I had felt since 2000, when I went to law school, I realized I needed to share what I was learning with others in my mindfulness teachings. So, now is your chance to see if you are ready to use these theories and lessons and combine them with your own self-awareness to bring some healing into your life as well.

First, stress can be a positive. It is our automatic sympathetic nervous system activating to keep us alive. It’s our survival mechanism. And we need it to survive in this crazy world, so please embrace your stress reaction. Those stress hormones really help motivate us to take action and get things done. Honestly, if I did not have stress-inducing deadlines, I do not think I would ever get anything done. They also help us truly feel alive – nothing like almost getting in an accident to really stimulate the energy throughout your body. Try parachuting out of an airplane if you are unsure what maximizing the stress reaction really feels like. Additionally, when anyone is under stress and asks for assistance, both the stressed individual and the person providing the help both generate the hormone oxytocin, which contributes to relaxation, trust, psychologic stability, and reduction of stress responses, including anxiety. It induces an emotional sense of safety, connection, and high levels of social sensitivity.¹ (see diagram on page 24).


The type of stress leading to burnout is chronic stress that evolves well past the “good stress” area where performance is increasing. It starts to devolve into the distress side of the above graph, where not only is human performance diminishing, it leads to fatigue, exhaustion, and eventually a total breakdown of the overall body. What causes chronic stress? Our reaction to “stressors” which are either actual or


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(Adapted from P. Nixon: Practitioner, 1979)

perceived threats that activate the stress/sympathetic nervous system response in the body. Essentially, it is anything you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, or imagine (memories) will do you harm. Stressors can be coming from outside or inside of you.

When we state we are “stressed” or feel “stress,” what does that mean? The feeling of “stress” is the neurological and physiological shift that happens in your body when you encounter a Stressor (discussed above). Essentially, the stress response is synonymous with stimulating the sympathetic nervous system, which is our flight, fight, freeze, faint, or fawn survival mechanism. And depending on the stressor, we may use a variety of these stressed manifestations to “survive” the stressor. This cascade of neurological and hormonal activity in the brain and nervous system initiate the following physiological changes to help you survive your sabre tooth tiger at-

tack/stressor: (1) Epinephrine pushes blood into muscles; (2) Glucocorticoids keep you moving (natural steroids, artificial versions – cortisone and prednisone); (3) Endorphins help you ignore how uncomfortable being “stressed” is; (4) Heart beats faster, blood pumps harder, blood pressure increases, and you breathe more quickly; (5) Muscles are activated and tense; (6) Sensitivity to pain diminishes; (7) Attention is alert and vigilant – focused on short-term, here and now; (8) Senses are ALL heightened; (9) Memory shifts to focus on experience/knowledge most relevant to current stressor; and (10) All other organ systems get deprioritized, including: digestion; immune function; growth; tissue repair and healing; and reproductive function.

However, just because you have dealt with the stressor does not mean you have dealt with the accumulated internal stress within the body.² Burnout occurs when the

body is stuck in a chronic stress/sympathetic nervous system reaction, never cycling through the parasympathetic system back to homeostasis. Homeostasis is when the biological systems maintain stability while continually adjusting to changing external conditions³ (see diagram below).

If you are wanting more clarity around how chronic stress/burnout wreak havoc on the body and mind (in addition to those I outlined earlier as my symptoms), I have included a non-exhaustive list below.

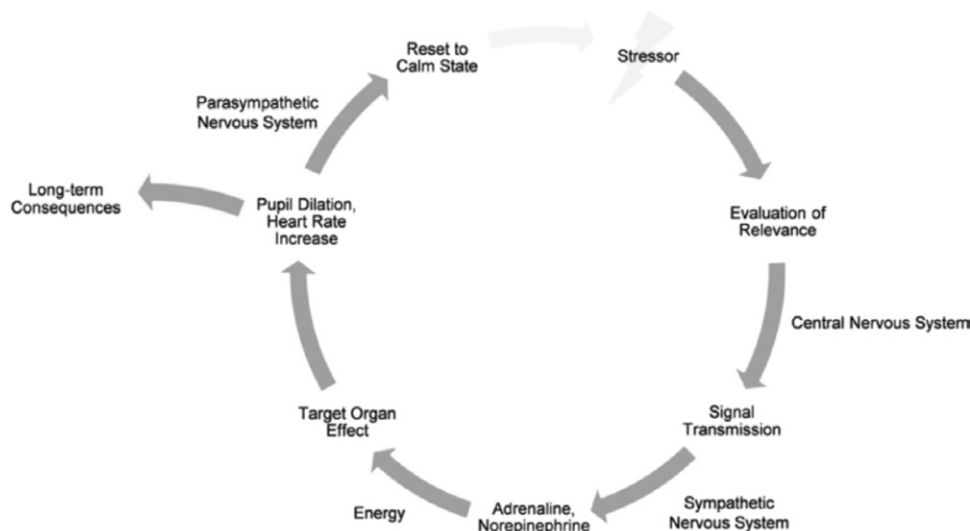
There are many negative **physical** effects of chronic stress/burnout, including: (1) Accelerates disease in our “weak areas”; (2) Mobilized energy to muscles causing muscular pain, tension and spasms; (3) Increases heart rate, narrows the arteries in the heart, and leads to cardiovascular disease; (4) Lowers metabolism; (5) Lowers immunity; (6) Decreases collagen, so skin loses its elasticity; (7) Headaches; and (8) Gastrointestinal effects.

There are many negative **mental** effects of chronic stress/burnout, including: (1) Damage to short-term memory because gray matter is reduced; (2) Unable to focus, looking for distractions; (3) Muddled thinking; (4) Impaired judgment; (5) Negative attitude; and (6) Highly reactive and emotional.

There are many negative **behavioral** effects of chronic stress/burnout, including: (1) Accident prone; (2) Loss of appetite or overeating; (3) Loss of sex drive; (4) Poor Coping Mechanisms Used – Drinking, Smoking, Disassociating with Social Media Scrolling or Binge-watching Netflix more to numb the pain/feelings; (5) Insomnia; (6) Restlessness; (7) Anxious; and (8) Depressed.

The most important aspect of this article is that there is hope to heal from burnout, and it is relatively simple to implement. Essentially, you must DO something to signal to your body that you are safe, so the nervous system can shift into the parasympathetic response where the body can rest, digest and heal. Your body can **ONLY** heal when it is in the relaxed parasympathetic state. Since the body stores stagnant energy and trauma,⁴ all of the accompanying stress hormones build up in the bloodstream and must be purged/released. Thus, most of us lawyers (and other stress humans) are walking around with decades of incomplete stress response cycles simmering away in our chemistry, just waiting for a chance to complete.

NOTE: It DOES NOT work to just tell yourself that everything is okay now. It is **NOT an intellectual decision**, it is a physiological shift. Thus, I offer you a few simple and fun mindful practices, which all embody three traits: (1) On Purpose; (2) In the Present Moment; and (3) Without Judgment. Since mindfulness both acts as a



brake for your sympathetic nervous system and triggers your parasympathetic nervous system, these practices will help complete the stress cycle and allow you to come back into homeostasis.

1. **Most Efficient Method is Physical Movement:**

literally anything that moves the body enough to get you breathing deeply (ideally 20-60 mins/day). Movement tells your brain that you have successfully survived the threat and your body is safe. Two very simple practices you can do in your office setting include: (1) **Standing Tension Activation:** Take a deep breath, tense all muscles (hold tension for 20 seconds and your breath if you are able to), then shake it out with an exhalation out of the mouth; and (2) **Somatic Shaking:** Pick your favorite dance song. Plant two feet on ground, bonus if barefoot on earth, but keep feet grounded during entire practice. Start shaking entire body to the music. Ideally do this practice for 3-5 minutes every morning or after a stressful situation/event.

2. **Laughter:** find something or someone that makes you laugh and engage in a giggle as much and often as it is appropriate. This is a simple practice you can do in your office setting, ideally get others to join you: **Laughter Pose:** stand up and take a wide Stance; Inhale – Arms Up; Exhale – Arms Down, saying “HA” Once, twice, three times, etc. Every squat add another “HA” until you are organically laughing. I have been unable to get past 5 laugh squats without organically laughing.

3. **Deep, Slow Belly Breathing:** Many of us are shallowly breathing and using our secondary breathing muscles in the neck and upper back to breathe, when we should be using our diaphragm, which extends down to our abdominal cavity. Here are some office-friendly breathing practices: (1) **Simple Breath Awareness:** take 10 deep conscious breaths where you feel your belly extend on the inhalation and you gently pull your belly button to your spine on the exhalation (if you get distracted you can use some simple mantras inside your mind to help you focus: “Breathing In”/“Breathing Out”/“Thinking Again”; (2) **Lengthen Exhales by 2 counts:** Inhale 4, 5 or 6 counts; Exhale 6, 7 or 8 counts, respectively (complete 3 rounds); (3) **4-7-8 Breath Practice:** Inhale 4 counts; Hold breath 7 counts; Exhale 8 counts (complete 3 rounds); and (4)

5/5/10/5 Breath Practice: Inhale 5 counts; Hold breath 5 counts; Exhale 10 counts; Hold 5 counts (complete 3 rounds).

4. **Listening to Bird Songs:** Birds will not sing when there are predators around, so when they do sing it means no imminent danger is nearby. This connection to safety makes us feel relaxed and at peace. **Outdoor Practice:** Go out into nature and find a place to just be, sitting or standing, and listen for the birds.

5. **Hearing and Seeing Wood Fires:** Historically, fires have meant many things to humans, but safety from danger is the main attribute our nervous systems feel as fires keep both large and small predators away. Also, many times being around fires indicates social connection, warmth and the ability to obtain nutrition. All things that help us feel safe and grounded. So, make a fire and just observe the healing effects.

6. **Positive Social Interaction:** Casual, but friendly social interactions reassure the brain the world is a safe place and you can be safe when you are around others.

7. **Affection that Comes from a loving and beloved person or animal, where there is mutual like, respect and trust:** As mentioned above, oxytocin is a neurohormone that motivates us to either seek or receive help when we are under stress, and it physically counteracts negative stress hormones. Oxytocin is also anti-inflammatory, keeps blood vessels relaxed during stress, and helps the heart cells heal from stress-induced damage. Just as a side note, reducing inflammation is one of the most powerful ways to improve your overall wellbeing and health. New research has shown that Ozempic and other drugs like it may have something of a medical superpower: lowering inflammation in the body.⁵ These are some practices to help stimulate the release of oxytocin within you and the person you practice them with: (1) Six Second Kiss with intimate partner; (2) 20 Second Hug with someone you love and trust, both standing over your center of balance, supporting your own weight; (3) Show affection for a loved one or cuddle a pet (if you live with one); (4) Do something kind for a neighbor or stranger, even from a distance; or (5) Reach out for support, build and maintain social relationships - social media.

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8. **Crying:** Listen to a sad song, watch a sad movie. There is a reason sad songs and movies are popular!

9. **Creative Expression:** Literary, visual, and performing arts of all kinds give us the change to move through big emotions and feel a release!

I hope my experience of burnout and subsequent healing will prove to be helpful to the legal community. There is no shame in asking for help, and as you have learned, it actually decreases your overall stress hormone levels and can start the process of completing your stress cycle. I have personally found that the combination of the above mindful activities and working with my medical primary care physician, my professional supervisor and employer, physical therapy, chiropractic, acupuncture, Chinese herbs & supplements, and mental health therapy have all helped me feel better than I have felt in over 20 years! Now that I think about it, I have not felt this good since the year 2000, interestingly enough, right before I started law school. Thus, I am living proof that even when you hit rock bottom physically and mentally, there is hope for not only returning to equilibrium, but for me, exceeding my baseline wellbeing. And because I feel so amazing, I do not

plan on stopping any of my holistic practice. I do hope many of you will join me in the future on this path towards improving overall wellbeing, no matter where you land on the burnout continuum.

Samara D. Anderson, Esq. is a Technical Regulatory Compliance Advisor for the Department of Children and Families, a Registered 200-hour Yoga Medicine™ Yoga Teacher (completing her 500-hour certification), a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Teacher-in-Training, and a social entrepreneur teaching mindfulness to stressed professionals while creating a non-profit community farm in Vermont to use therapeutic animals, nature, and mindfulness to heal people. She also co-chairs the VBA Lawyer Well-Being Section. If you want to continue practicing mindfulness with Samara to continue to cultivate becoming a Super Lawyer or Super Hu-

man, there are many virtual and in-person options available: (1) join the VBA Mindful Moments for Lawyers that she teaches every other Tuesday at noon for 30 or 60 minutes (Note: not teaching in July and August); (2) Attend free 30 minute mindful sessions Samara teaches through the Agency of Human Services on Mondays and Tuesdays, 12-12:30 via Zoom (email to be added to the meeting notification samara.anderson@vermont.gov); or just contact for private 1:1 or group mindfulness instruction.

¹ A Novel Role of Oxytocin: Oxytocin-induced well-being in Humans, Etsuro Ito, Rei Shima, and Tohru Yoghioka, published online in Biophys Physicobiol (August 24, 2019).

² Adapted materials on healing from burnout from the book, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski (2019).

³ *Homeostasis: The Underappreciated and Far Too Often Ignored Central Organizing Principle*

of Physiology, George E. Billman, appeared online in *Front Physiol* (March 10, 2020).

⁴ Two amazing resources for trauma and stress in the body are: (1) *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.(2014); and (2) *When the Body Says No*, Gabor Mate (2003).

⁵ This research was discussed in *The Morning: The promise of Ozempic*, New York Times digital edition (June 24, 2024). "Inflammation is a key part of the body's defense system. When we sense a threat, such as one posed by a pathogen, our cells work to help us fight off the intruder. But chronic inflammation contributes to heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, and a host of other major illnesses. If new obesity drugs really do reduce inflammation, that could explain their effect across such a wide spectrum of diseases." Currently, the research has shown that these weight loss medications "target the areas of the brain that regulate appetite. But there are questions around what else the drugs do to the mind," as these drugs have been shown to curb other compulsive and potentially negative behaviors, like drug, smoking and gambling addictions. 🧠



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