

## My Flame is Burning Low

**Dear Dianne,**

*I feel like I am burning out! I no longer have enthusiasm for my work. I actually dread going to work. Many things about my practice seem to bear down on me, plus I'm trying to raise children by myself. I do the same old thing all day long, day in and day out. My staff members and patients are great, but the problem is me. Do you have any advice for a worn-out dentist who is struggling physically, mentally, and emotionally?*

*Sincerely,  
Burned Out in Boston*

**Dear Burned Out,**

I sense many negative emotions that are robbing you of joy. What is burnout? Here's the Wikipedia definition: "Burnout is a psychological term for the experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest, usually in the work context. Burnout is often construed as the result of a period of expending too much effort at work while having too little recovery, but it is sometimes argued that workers with particular personality traits (especially neuroticism) are more prone to experiencing burnout. Health care workers are often prone to burnout. Cordes and Doherty (1993), in their study of employees within this industry, found that workers who have frequent intense or emotionally charged interactions with others are more susceptible to burnout."

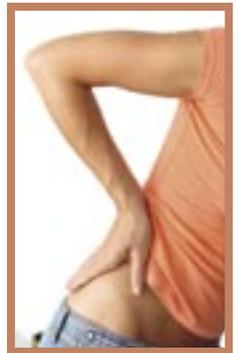
While you did not reveal any specific issues, allow me to address some of the major ones that cause professionals to suffer burnout.

### **Physical pain**

Many dentists suffer ailments arising from work itself, such as chronic neck, back, hand, and arm pain. Incorrect positioning and posture causes musculoskeletal damage on certain body areas that are difficult to correct or manage, and dealing with daily physical pain is a harsh reality for some clinicians.

Avoid those issues by using ergonomically designed equipment, especially magnification, a headlight, and an operator chair with armrests. Also, keep your weight within normal limits and exercise regularly.

Stretch often after sitting in one position for a long time. Clinicians who experience the least neck and back strain use microscopes.



### **Dianne Glasscoe**

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### **Practice-management issues**

You mentioned that practice concerns are "bearing down" on you. I wish I knew the specific problems you are experiencing, but even without that knowledge, I see some of the same issues in many practices. Many practice-management problems come from inadequately trained staff members at front desks who have never seen their written job descriptions and do not know what doctors expect. Some are hired and thrown into positions that must be learned on the fly from other staff members who are not well-trained, either. If you have problems at

the front desk, identify the weakness, whether it is phone skills, insurance coding and filing concerns, schedule control, or financial coordination. Advanced training courses in these areas are available, and practice-management consultants can give your staff members one-on-one, on-site training.

You mentioned that your staff members are not the problem, but staffing can be a serious practice-management concern in some practices, including being properly staffed (not over-staffed or understaffed) and having the right person in each position. Excessive staff turnover is costly in dollars and morale. You must hire good people, pay them well, give them feedback (praise in public, criticize in private), and provide an environment for continual growth and learning.

Another ongoing practice-management concern is overhead control. The costs of doing business keep rising while third-party benefits have remained the same for years. If your fees have not kept pace with your costs, the bottom line suffers and affects your ability to take care of yourself and your family. Again, you might benefit from some objective help to get your overhead under control if that is a problem.

### **Personal problems**

Probably most important to your personal happiness is the quality of your home life. Your work as a dentist is physically and mentally demanding, and when you go home at day's end, your home should be your sanctuary. You need a peaceful, loving place to rest and recharge for the next day.

Having raised two rambunctious boys myself, I know that home can be anything *but* peaceful and loving. You need support in the form of extended family or even a nanny. Many of our male counterparts do not understand the demands on their female staff members who leave work at day's end only to go home to their second full-time jobs — being mothers.

### **Cleaning out closets**

Our lives are like closets. From our childhood forward, we continually add things to our closets in the form of life experiences. Those experiences shape us and make us who we ultimately are. But not all things we store in our closets are good; we put a lot of junk in there, too.

Now, I don't know a thing about your personal life, but I'd be willing to bet there are, or have been, some major problems. These problems become junk (negative emotions) that we

sometimes pack into our closets. Sometimes, our closets get so packed full of junk that we can't find the good stuff. We just keep packing more and more junk until we can't close the door. Finally, the junk spills out.

Here's your solution: You need to clean out the closet of your life. Get rid of all the negative things you've packed inside your closet. Discard your hurt feelings, ego, anger, resentment, deception, and strife, for starters. Also, you probably need to rid yourself of some negative acquaintances.

Your greatest challenge will be deciding to get rid of some junk. Sometimes we want to hold onto things that are bad for us. Don't be fooled. If it's junk, get rid of it! The good stuff — joy, zest for life and profession, laughter, peace, fulfillment, harmony, love — is hidden under all that junk.

Also, remember that what we do as dental professionals goes beyond only providing excellent dental care for patients. We have the opportunity to be positive forces and caring friends to patients each day we work. These relationships with patients often keep us going when times get difficult at work. When we forget this, our jobs can become boring, meaningless, and without purpose. We need to see each day as an opportunity to make a difference for good to those who trust their care to us.

Get busy cleaning out your closet. I call you back to thankfulness for what you have: your family, profession, staff members, and most of all, patients. Get some help at home and enlist the services of a trained counselor, consultant, or pastor if you need an attentive ear to help sort your difficulties.

I'd like to leave you with some wise words from Dr. Ted Thibodeau of Norwell, Mass.

"During your day, you do good for a lot of people. You relieve pain, and you make it possible for people to eat comfortably and enjoy the process. You make it possible for people who haven't smiled in a long time to lay a big healthy grin on the world and be seen as they really are. You change lives in many, many ways — most of which you will never know. But occasionally you will get a heartfelt 'thank you' that makes you glow all day. And once in a while, you may even get a hug and a teary eye that let you know you are earning your place on this planet. For that, you can take honest satisfaction."

I couldn't have expressed it better.

**Best wishes,**  
**Dianne ■**