

# Feeling burned out? Start being good to yourself

RHONDA RABOW

SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Time-related stress has been rising dramatically since the 1990s. As far back as 1998, the last time Statistics Canada did a survey on the topic, 38 per cent of working mothers said they were "severely time stressed," putting in 74 hours a week of paid and unpaid work.

We can only imagine how much the percentage has increased since then.

Adverse health effects have been linked to long working hours, too, including markedly increased rates of depression, smoking, weight gain and alcohol consumption, and decreased levels of physical activity. This comes from a StatsCan study done in 1999 (again, the most recent information it has). That study showed long work hours carry increased risks of cancer, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and other serious illnesses. Those numbers, also, have only increased over time.

With unemployment rising, and an unstable employment market, few of us have the freedom to say "no" to longer hours and increased work duties. But we also

must consider the cost or consequences of accepting the demands made on us. What is the tipping point that will send us into burnout?

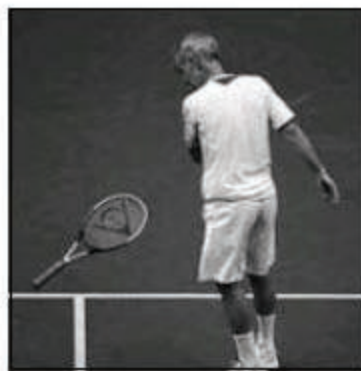
The average working mother is stressed and overwhelmed at work, and then feels guilty she isn't doing enough for her family, leaving her feeling discouraged and sometimes depressed. Some of the most frequent problems I encounter in my practice – after couples' issues – are burnout and depression. It is most often the hard-working women who pride themselves on doing a good job, who have difficulty delegating and saying no, who want to please and do everything perfectly, who end up on this list.

Burnout occurs when a person feels overwhelmed by work and/or social circumstances and is unable to cope due to high levels of stress and emotional and physical exhaustion.

## Who is at risk of burnout?

■ People who are dealing with a stressful environment on a daily basis, expected to fulfill certain objectives and under pressure because of time limits, financial or employer constraints.

■ People whose jobs have



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Frustration and aggression can signal burnout. Exercise, especially with a friend, is one way to deal with the problem.

become too demanding and who are feeling that they are not being recognized and appreciated for their efforts.

■ People who have very high standards. Their belief system holds that anything less than perfection is not acceptable, so you can imagine the pressure and stress it puts upon them to manage life and its challenges. Know anyone like this?

## What are the symptoms of burnout?

■ State of mind: Forgetfulness, lack of concentration, moody, feeling sad, fatigue, poor short-term memory, impatience, feeling rushed, easily frustrated, becoming more aggressive, isolating

yourself, negative outlook on life, feeling empty, lack of energy, making more mistakes at work, difficulty getting to work on time.

■ Physical symptoms: headaches, pain in back and shoulders, inability to sleep, lowered immunity to colds.

StatsCan reports 43 per cent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress. Seventy-five to 95 per cent of all doctor visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.

## What are effective ways of dealing with stress?

■ Know your stress triggers: Keep a feeling and behaviour diary where you can jot down the times you are feeling ex-

hausted, powerless or out of control. This can help you pinpoint patterns of feelings, and then you can find tools to help deal with them before they overwhelm you.

■ Monitor your self-talk. The average person thinks 60,000 to 80,000 thoughts per day. How often do you have negative self-talk? Catch yourself and then find outlets and tools to distract yourself from these thoughts, focus on your present and write a list of the things you appreciate in your life today.

■ Have a buddy system. Call each other when stress rears its head. You'll feel less alone, more accepted and it will help you relax if you know you are being supported.

■ Work on changing your expectations. Move from perfectionism to "it's good enough."

■ Learn to delegate. Ask for help. It is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of good time management strategies. There are people who are able and willing to help, but sometimes you have to just ask.

■ Take a deep breath and count to 10, s-l-o-w-l-y.

■ Focus on the solutions, not the problems. We all have stuff to do and there will always be more, and that's okay. Put your energy into

finding the solutions.

■ Ask yourself: "How important will this be in five years?"

■ Take regular breaks.

■ Get counselling. Speak to a solution-focused professional who can teach you the tools you need to manage your specific stress effectively.

■ Meditate or listen to guided visualizations.

■ Speak to your boss and ask for a clear understanding of your work duties and task priorities.

■ Other stress management techniques include exercise, good diet, sleeping well and social interaction with positive-minded friends.

## Does it take time and effort to follow through on these stress management strategies?

Absolutely! See it as an investment in yourself and in your future. You see the dentist and the doctor for prevention, don't you? Surely, your teeth and body are not more valuable than your mental health? It's a small cost to pay to avoid burnout, but the choice is always yours.

Rhonda Rabow is a Montreal psychotherapist. For more information, visit her website: [www.rhondarabow.com](http://www.rhondarabow.com).