

This is a chapter in progress from my upcoming book: A Clinical Handbook for the Treatment of Lyme and Its Co- infections with Case Studies. This particular chapter is about burnout.

**THERE WAS A DAY
THAT I ALMOST DROVE OFF THE MESA AT 80 MILES AND HOUR**

Julie McIntyre

The human mind, body and soul can only operate in crisis mode for so long before it crumbles and burns to ashes. Nik Redman

Archaeology of Burnout

I didn't really consider that I might be taking my life as my foot slowly squeezed down on the accelerator. Wild Horse mesa is a stretch of flat section of paved road that circumvents the Gila valley over a thousand feet below. There are no guard rails on this stretch of road. I watched the speedometer inch up to 60, 70...80...miles an hour. I also watched my thoughts...memories, voices of loved ones, I saw all their faces...there would be nothing left after my 4-Runner hit the valley below and exploded...it would be a horribly unkind thing to leave them with...I just wanted how I was feeling to stop. I felt stuck, unable to move or change how my life was feeling, all claustrophobic and meaningless. I watched myself thinking these thoughts, felt my foot depress further, thinking I would need to swerve sharply and head for the edge soon or this moment would pass...why wasn't I cranking the steering wheel to the right...I hate my life...it was full of despair.

I had lost meaning and thoughts of death were never far from me. Death *can* be chosen, it is a real human possibility that I am certain each of us has considered to some degree. Vaclav Havel in *Disturbing the Peace*, says this about it, “Of course I’ve thought about it—many times—and in fact I still do, but probably only the way everyone who is capable of thought thinks about it.” He goes on to ask, “But what do we know about it? Do we have any right at all to take such a high and mighty attitude to something we haven’t known? (By this I don’t mean the act of suicide itself, but the particular grief that came before it, the depth of the suicide’s unhappiness, the depth of his inability to live with this unhappiness.)”

I saw the window for driving off closing as I approached the forest. I was growing increasingly numb and dissociated from the approaching decision and then...my foot eased off the accelerator. Voices of loved ones...all that I knew about the will to live and the meaning of life began to replace the feelings of stuckness and a way through began to emerge. I arrived home and sat with my love and told him. It was important to say it out loud. To expose the would be secret. To remove the option and begin to do something different.

The brush with suicide, I now know, was a desperate stirring from my psyche. Soul, it seems, always speaks to us from the depths. Its question for me was: what the hell have I been doing? Not listening that’s what. All that I was not was staring back at who I had become. What does it matter to be a very good clinician if I abandon myself in the process? If I lose contact with my soul what will I become but I despise.

Burnout is a result of prolonged stress: it’s characterized by three main states: exhaustion, cynicism and feeling of reduced professional or personal ability. In other

words if you start to despise your job, feel constantly exhausted as if you are dragging your body through the day, you begin to feel less capable at work and doubting your abilities you are showing early signs of burnout. It does not discriminate, discern or care about class, race, sex, age or political orientation. And it doesn't seem to be limited to any one profession.

It happens to social workers, doctors, nurses, new parents, executives, writers and publishers, environmental and social justice activists. And it happens to clinical herbalists, too, just like me.

Healers who work with the chronically ill are always at high risk of burnout. It's because of the intimate, passionate and committed relationships we have with those who are suffering. We tend to be high achievers, perfectionists, 'I can do everything' personalities and because of these traits, we rarely see the train wreck heading our way.

Burnout is a growing and serious problem in nearly all areas of health care and this is especially true when working with those who suffer serious, chronic conditions. It comes from the long hours of work, all the research, being with clients who are and have been ill for years. And then there are all the things they bring to each consult. They are afraid, terribly ill, often in a good deal of unrelenting pain. Too often they come to herbalists as a last resort, after they have been turned down, mis-diagnosed, lost much of their resources, been told their illness didn't exist because testing showed no infections or reasons for their symptoms, and yes it's all in their heads. This group of people takes all we have to give in order for us to companion them with our caring, our deep listening, and our best protocols. Even then there is the near constant monitoring of how they respond to the protocols, the new symptoms that appear, the emotional difficulties they

go through, and the many responses they have to parts of the protocol that are uncomfortable.

It is a high stress and demanding area to work in. As a practitioner, I spent hours going over the client's history, physical symptoms and current protocols. I had to explore in depth all the pharmaceuticals they were on, the potential interactions and side effects they were having with each other and with the herbal protocols that were being used. I spent countless hours educating my clients about all these things so that they would be empowered in the healing process.

A good practitioner spends time getting to know their client; their beliefs about their ability to heal, what kind of support system they have with family and friends, their spiritual or religious orientations; digestive health and diet, sleep patterns, emotional and psychological health. Then there is all the time needed to design a protocol that is specific to each client that takes into consideration all those things. The healing intervention we create has to match the person we're working with –there is no one size fits all protocol.

Many nights I lain awake trying to figure out how best to help. It wasn't unusual for me to send an email to a client at two in the morning, partly so I could get it out of my head just so I could sleep, partly so they would find it the next morning and feel companioned. It was important to me; I knew how lonely and afraid many of them were. I vowed to not be like all the physicians and practitioners I had heard stories about. I would not betray my clients. Nevertheless, all this took a toll.

By the time I closed my practice (after fifteen years of working with people with Lyme disease and co-infections) I barely recognized myself, I was so severely burned

out. Over the years I had developed very unhealthy ways of coping with the high levels of stress and anxiety that had become a way of life for me. The stress I was under had put all my relationships at risk; friends were low on my list of priorities. I could work with clients because I was able to shift into being in service to them. I enjoyed the challenges and I deeply cared for each person I worked with. But when I wasn't working I was in complete survival, a state of hyper-vigilance; everything felt like a potential threat. I couldn't hear what loved ones said to me since everything they said went through the filter of survival and burn out. Everything and everyone seemed dangerous and threatening. Arguments ensued. When confronted, I argued feverishly for my right to work as much and as long as I wanted to. My love sat me down and told me in very calm, loving words that "this is an intervention." I think he only had to do so about six times before I could really hear him, see what I was doing and then finally decide to do something different. Coming that close to really hurting myself shocked me into awareness. But changing? That was excruciating.

When a friend, casually but with care, told me I was a workaholic I was severely offended and argued passionately against it. "No, no I just have a really strong work ethic." Still, I couldn't get their comments out of my head. Finally, after some deep reflection and looking up the definition of workaholic, I humbly had to admit it to myself. My being a workaholic expedited burning out. I just could not stop.

I couldn't stop working, I felt an obligation to help everyone who asked for help. It took nearly three years of inner work to understand that saying no to someone, to say, I'm sorry I can't help you, did not mean I was a bad person. It did not mean I did not have a right to be alive. Ultimately I understood that saying no was often the kindest

thing I could do not only for myself but for potential clients. It was, I finally realized, impossible to be of service to someone who needed all of me when I had nothing left to give.

Burnout is a difficult teacher. It taught me what my limits are, where I repeatedly exceeded them and the cost of doing so. See, working non-stop, the way I was, was not a conscious choice; it came from beliefs and behavior set down long before I started working as a clinician. Those are very hard things to change, they were in the core of me. And the struggle to step away, to do something different, was a long one.

Normal interactions with loved ones sent me into a tail spin; I felt like everyone wanted a piece of me. I continually started incoherent arguments with my partner just to get some space. I had no energy for intimate conversations that were real, that demanded I access feeling states I had been sequestering. I don't recommend this, it never worked out very well and it cost me a whole lot more energy cleaning up the mess and repairing the relationship. It's exceedingly unpleasant.

Sometimes what set me off was a simple request for a coffee date. I would imagine sitting in a coffee shop across from a friend and then be overcome with fatigue and tension; I'd get mad at them before I even agreed to the date.

A new voice started talking inside me; continually saying: I can not take care of another living thing. Anxiety attacks waited for me every day I sat down to my computer. I would take deep breaths and pray nothing bad showed up, that this day would be easy, that clients would write saying they are feeling better. Some personal version of shell shock took hold every time I saw a subject line: Please help, or urgent. I could no longer bear to read emails telling me of how awful their life, how much pain they were in, how

their partners and children had abandoned them and that I may be the only who could help them.

I knew someplace inside me that I had to make a decision but I did not want to make it. I procrastinated like a pro. It was too hard, too painful and difficult a decision to make. Because my office is in the loft of my 820 square foot cabin it was far too easy to slip up there and check messages just because you know, someone might need me to respond. In hindsight I was hoping to have some sense of accomplishment that never came at the end of a long day. No matter how hard I worked I never felt I had done enough, never satisfied or complete.

Having two psychotic breaks in the middle of large groups of people helped convince me it was time to do something radical. For an introvert like me, having a meltdown in front of a group of people was a bloody nightmare. Fortunately they were depth workshops so to most people it looked on the surface that I was having an intense emotional response to something that had come up.

I had innumerable conversations with myself while preparing to close my practice. Conversations with people I trust helped clarify my decision and were good reality checks. I needed outside confirmation because I was continually doubting myself. I had terrible fears about closing my practice and I continually gave in to them. So, the closing had to happen slowly, in stages so I could get used to it, to what I was doing. And all through it I had to look my neurosis in the face and get to know it. I had to do something completely different, to really recover, not simply continue symptom management which I was failing at miserably anyway.

The first movement was to stop taking new clients. Not as easy as it sounds. I was terrified of what it would mean. I believed people wouldn't find the help they needed. I felt I would be responsible if they didn't. I had to continually work on trusting they would eventually, somehow, find someone who would be able to companion them into and through their suffering. I was worried about my loss of income. How would I make that up? How would I survive? I learned, slowly, to adjust but it wasn't easy.

Eventually it became easier to peck out e mails telling people I was no longer taking new clients. With each email I sent I had to pay close attention to my internal responses of fear, doubt, hope, excitement in order to make sure what I was writing was clear and uncontaminated.

And...nothing bad happened. I didn't die (part of me always felt that I would). It didn't make me a bad person which I believed it would. Interestingly I began to feel I had some conscious control over my life and decisions.

Recovery will take time. Still, I get impatient sometimes in the midst of the awkwardness and discomfort that recovery from burnout causes. I would like to not feel fatigued but at least it is fatigue now and not exhaustion. I'm still irritable and feel socially awkward. I have anxiety after conversing with people—though I limit it as much as possible. Still, the voices in my head: did I say the right thing? Did I make eye contact? Did I make sense? I tuned out half the conversation and don't recall it.

I angst over social expectations and feel caught between the place I am in and the other person's expectations of me based on how I used to be. I'm keenly aware of my inability to take care of the needs I perceive in people though they are unspoken. I am

profoundly uncomfortable often. I'm often unsure of who I am, and more so of what shape and texture my life will take on and how I will re create my work. This is all made worse by my aging and the damage I did to my body and psyche from all those years of overwork; the psychological and emotional damage I caused by not tending to my own needs. I have grief about it that is with me daily, that will be with me for a long time. I get worn out easily still and often need to go to bed early and simply read a novel. It feels safe there wrapped in the heavy and weighted blankets that my nervous system needs to feel secure.

Because of the burnout, the damage to my nervous system, I experience sounds very differently than I used to. I'm overly sensitive to noise. The years of carrying hundreds of people, their symptoms, their voices, their protocols in my head caused a type of background noise that was always there, a non-stop reminder that I was never alone. Movies and TV shows seem too 'noisy.' My nervous system and psyche are in dire need of quiet daily.

Signs and Symptoms of burnout:

To call this burnout is accurate and but that comes from a psychological orientation. Mythically, it is a disintegration of the self so that a different self can come into being. Mythically, it is more about the journey of the soul, about the abandonment of meaning and the hunger to find it again. The necessity for deep meaning to living an inhabited life. And perhaps that is the point of it, for things to get so bad that I was finally willing to do the work to create a better life, one more in harmony with who I was in the depths of me.

Many of us experience symptoms of burnout from time to time. But it's when the symptoms become ingrained patterns and behaviors that they become warning signals that something is terribly wrong. They are telling us that the stress on our system has reached unsupportable levels.

Stress reaction begins with the release of adrenaline and this generates temporary bursts of energy. But the longer one pushes oneself to stay on the adrenaline high the more the stress impacts our physiological pathways such as the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. That is when the broad range of chronic stress-related disorders begin to manifest: migraine, essential hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia or neurasthenia. Also major depressive disorder (MDD) is generally considered a stress-related condition. In MDD depressed mood and loss of interest or pleasure are predominant. Burnout extends this in a particular direction, there is demoralization, overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, detachment, a sense of ineffectiveness, feelings of a lack of accomplishment and increased irritability.

Other symptoms are impatience, forgetfulness, a continual and growing sense of anger, starting arguments with loved ones, hearing a voice inside that responds to anything with "I don't fucking care" pessimism, cynicism, detachment and loss of joy or interest in life increases monumentally.

All these things became part of my life, including the stress headaches. For years I woke in the morning and fell asleep at night to stress headaches at the base of my skull. Head, neck and shoulder tension became part of my life. Sleep was disturbed; often I woke at 3 am unable to return to sleep. I overused caffeine and stimulants to have enough mental and physical energy to slog through each day. My OCD and ADD ramped up to

Olympian levels making concentration and retention problematic. The locks on my doors were wearing out from checking them a dozen times. My life became a ‘cut and paste’ montage holding myself together. There was an on-going monologue in my head, “I’m fine” while the empty bottles of wine and tequila accumulated in the recycling bin and my physical symptoms increased. I started to have accidents and temper tantrums over trivial things.

Then one day, near the closing of my practice, panic overcame me. I stopped in the midst of it, sat down and wrapped my arms around my shoulders and sobbed into my chest. I held tight squeezing my arms around myself. That was the moment things started to change; I said I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Held myself and wept. Soon, the shaking stopped. The sobbing stopped. A deep sigh left my chest. Finally, I had turned to the part of me that needed me to love her.

The Antidote; Ways to avoid going over the edge into burnout

There are ways to avoid burnout, but they all require paying attention to yourself, what you need and making sure you nurture yourself.

Know yourself well, pay keen attention to the voices you are hearing inside your head, really listen to them, they have wise guidance for you. We all have many parts to who we are and when they are in need, they talk to us, trying to get our attention. Our job is to notice, to turn toward them and listen. Ask them what they need and do your best to get the need met.

I ignored these parts of me far too often; I abandoned myself, which was the root cause of my anxiety. The longer I ignored them the greater the anxiety grew until it was

full on panic attacks that I could not stop. That lasted until the day I sat still enough to hear what was being asked of me until I was willing put my emotional needs first.

During this journey I found help in the words of teachers who knew this territory I was in, who knew something about compulsive neurosis such as mine. Carl Jung was one of them.

“The outbreak of the neurosis is not just a matter of chance. As a rule it is most critical. It is usually the moment when a new psychological adjustment, a new adaptation is demanded.” And again, “A neurosis...is not a disgrace...It is not a fatal disease, but it does grow worse to the degree that one is determined to ignore it.”

Re-evaluating our approach to our own mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health can play a large part in avoiding burnout but it is essential to creating a life that is personally fulfilling and deep and creative.

Those of us who decide to become healers must remain highly sensitive to our own state of health: physical, emotional, and spiritual. An essential element of this is learning to truly know ourselves, coming to understand our inner baggage, our neuroses and unexamined beliefs, those things that may be driving us toward burnout and disintegration. Nor can this process be entirely mental. If I had been paying closer attention to how I was feeling, what I needed and tending to myself I could have prevented a lot of this.

I think a continual imagining of how you want your life to look and feel is important. Then instituting a daily practice of putting those in place so that life remains full and meaningful. When things seem to be going off the rails, asking someone you trust for an objective assessment of your behavior is very useful.

Lean what you are truly capable of—and what you are not. Set limits on how many clients you work with each week. Work with others needs to be offset by greater time for yourself. For many years I refused to do this. I worked with clients five days a week then researched and answered correspondence on Saturday and Sunday. When I finally realized I had to change, I came up with a novel idea: to not work at all on the weekends. Then I reduced consults to three days a week, correspondence one day and gave myself a three day weekend while I was preparing to close my practice.

Recovery from burnout cannot be merely an intellectual exercise. Burnout is a feeling thing, not a thinking thing. A casualty of burnout and chronic stress is loss of the feeling sense, it gets sequestered away. This is part of our internal guidance system and it brings crucial information. Recall a time you walked into a coffee shop, stood momentarily still as part of you scanned the room and imagined sitting in each chair. It happens quickly and primarily below conscious level. Some part of you felt the most comfortable place to sit, the place you would be happiest in for your time there. Devotion to this kinesthetic sense is the foundation to creating a different way of being. Life, to be healthy, must also feel good much of the time.

So, every day do something just for yourself, something that is not work related in any way and it must take place away from your office. Ask inside yourself what is the one thing that you want to do this day that is just for fun? Doing this one thing, putting yourself first can derail an oncoming train of burnout. Get bodywork on a regular basis, as often as you can. Ask a friend or lover to rub your feet. Ask friends to cook for you. Have great sex. Soak in hot baths; be luxuriant in your surroundings and self care. Check in with yourself before committing to conversations with friends or lunch dates knowing

the amount of energy it will require when there is little to spare. Preface conversations with your limited time supply; I have about an hour's worth of energy – then monitor how you are doing. In the beginning of recovery you can't take your sense off yourself meaning how you feel and what do you need from moment to moment.

It's now three months since I worked with my last Lyme client I think I'm just starting to put myself back together in some new way. Many times in the last month I've attempted to write but after about three paragraphs it all goes south. What I had written was a jumbled mess of incoherent thoughts that refused to self organize. I had a lot of interesting thoughts but they were all independent leaves scattered on the forest floor with no ground to hold them together.

The early part of recovery was all physical. The only thing I was interested in or had energy for was physical work. I would spend hours cleaning up deadfall, creating a new under deck patio, trimming branches, raking, cleaning closets and cabinets all activities that felt especially good after being too sedentary for so many years.

The physical movement is important for a number of reasons; it gives my mind time and space to rest. I don't have to think much or figure out complex arguments, just move. The physical movement, creating all that order, gives me a sense of having some power over my environment. I hear the sound of my life slipping back together. Working among the trees, the smell of Pine resin in the air, Ravens talking each other up, the sound of Acorn woodpeckers hammering the oaks and pines and hearing the creek chattering away near by...this is rekindling my feeling and sensing and bringing me

home to myself. It is helping the process of putting my life back together and feeling a sense of 'normalcy' again.

It takes work and focus every day to pay keen attention to my inner voices, the needs of my deep self and to put these first and importantly to make daily decisions and negotiations with myself about what I can and can not do and primarily what I want to do. At least two days a week I am not working, not writing, and not producing anything unless it feels fun and interesting. But this is work I am excited about. And it is helping my recovery. It takes a long time to re- build trust in myself, to rekindle the relationship with an inner world that I so long neglected.

I have some distance to go to heal the physical damage and some will not heal completely. I am coming to terms with the meaning of that; I am integrating it with a grief woven in as fine and strong as silk. The pain is a constant reminder. Developing deep compassion for myself was hard fought but it is no small part in the healing. I am gaining resiliency and an easing of tensions. Encouragingly I have not panicked in recent memory. I'm still not able to spend much time in social settings. The day will necessarily come slowly when I feel able to join in. I'm keen to get to that day, to participate in my larger community once again.

For me recovery from burnout will take as long as it takes. The months it takes is of little consequence. The critical part is what I do with the time; how it is spent, how attentive and devoted I am to changing the patterns that got me there in the first place. I am encouraged by the knowledge that breaking my neurosis and doing something different is changing my neuropathways for lasting change is occurring.

I did not drive off the edge of the mesa. I've made the decision to be in this scenario and to have power over my life and rekindle the will to meaning. I take responsibility for my burnout, for not paying attention. No one else caused this. I take responsibility for my recovery by being attentive. This most difficult of teachers has walked me through the unseen forces of neurosis to liberation and autonomy. One day soon I will be able to work with people again. In the meantime I'm watching the leaf buds form on the Oak trees.