

LABORATORY

March/April 2022

STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES FROM AALAS

Animal Science

PROFESSIONAL

Strengthening Your Workplace

LAS Pros share ways to plan ahead, avoid burnout, and cultivate strong relationships

Preparing Your Animals and Employees for Unpredictable Weather

Refined Mice Handling Techniques

Prioritizing Employee Wellbeing & Connections





Improving your Work-Life Balance Protects from Burnout

By Heather Hersh, PsyD

“I’m so burned out!” You have certainly heard a colleague, relative, or friend say these exact words—or perhaps you were the one saying it. People say this to refer to many different things, from “I’m really stressed,” to “I’m exhausted,” to “I want to quit my job!”

Burnout prior to COVID-19 was quite high, and the pandemic has only made it worse for many of us, especially those in caring fields. Because lab animal professionals are essential personnel, they have spent the past 2+ years working in very stressful conditions and managing difficult circumstances, such as the euthanasia of animal colonies during the early parts of the pandemic. One recent study found that 62% of lab animal professionals during the pandemic were experiencing moderate burnout.¹

As levels of burnout are a real concern, especially in lab animal professionals, I want to help you understand burnout so that you can be more proactive.

What Is Burnout?

Burnout is related primarily to work and comes from your job and work conditions. You may be burned out, but your life outside of work, your mood, and your relationships may be fine. It is important to recognize that burnout comes on gradually, which can make it much harder to recognize. If you are slowly feeling worse over time, you may not notice that your mood and work function are deteriorating.

Formally, burnout is a state of chronic stress that leads to symptoms in three main categories:

1. Physical and emotional exhaustion: feeling a real lack of energy and an inability to recharge your personal “batteries”; feeling drained physically or emotionally
2. Cynicism and detachment: feeling negative about your job and work conditions; disengaging emotionally and personally from work and from your colleagues; feeling a sense of isolation from others and/or a lack of motivation at work
3. Feelings of ineffectiveness and a lack of accomplishment at work: feeling as if, no matter how hard you work, you are not as productive or efficient as you once were; having difficulty concentrating (For more useful reading on burnout, check out the book by the Nagoski sisters listed below.)

How Can You Tell if You Have Burnout?

It can be helpful to assess yourself regularly to determine if you are experiencing burnout. There are a couple of assessment tools that I recommend to clients. Both are short, free, and easily avail-

able online. The first one is the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory. It is a brief survey that covers two main areas of burnout: exhaustion and disengagement from work. The second tool that I really like is the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL). It looks at burnout, compassion fatigue (in a caring profession, the drain of empathy or compassion for your clients due to stress, trauma, or overload with your work), and compassion satisfaction (which is the pleasure you get from your work).

Take Symptoms Seriously

If you are experiencing many of these symptoms and/or receive a high-inventory score for burnout, use this as a wake-up call that you may be going in the wrong direction. Burnout is not like a cold; it does not go away in a few weeks unless you make some real changes in your life. Take some time to honestly assess the amount of stress in your life and find ways to reduce it before you move too far down the path of burnout. Doing this now will help you continue moving forward in work and in life.

One of the best ways to protect yourself against burnout and to help yourself is to improve your work-life balance and stress management. Good work-life balance involves taking good care of yourself and enriching your life outside of work to help you enjoy and engage in life more fully. Having good work-life balance will help improve your mental health and the quality of your life, while also protecting you from burnout. This is what I am going to address for the rest of this article.

How I Conceptualize Work-Life Balance

I have worked with clients for over 20 years, and I have had many conversations and thought a great deal about work-life balance. I have come to believe that work-life balance is a process, and I have developed categories that help my clients conceptualize and improve their work-life balance. Let’s talk about these approaches.

First, your optimal work-life balance will vary over time. It is a process, often daily. The right balance for you today may be different for you tomorrow. Additionally, what works for you at one stage of life may be different at another. For example, the right balance when you are single may be different when you are married or if you have children. And the best work-life balance is different for everyone because we have different lives and different priorities. Work-life balance is not static. Balance is fluid, so reassessing what you need and making changes over time is necessary.

Second, I find that having a template to conceptualize balance is helpful. Over time, I have developed a framework to assess the components that go into a healthy work-life balance. It consists of six different categories: work, play, time with yourself, time with others, taking care of your body, and doing things that feed your spirit or your soul. Let's talk about each category briefly. Reflect on how you are doing personally with each one currently.

1. **Work.** How do you currently approach work? Do you have clear boundaries between work and the rest of your life, or are the work hours bleeding into other times in your life? Do you have boundaries around work email and texts? How do you take care of yourself when you are at work? Do you take regular breaks to rest and improve your productivity? Do you take a real lunch break and eat a decent meal? Do you have time to connect with your colleagues? Can you leave work at work? How has the pandemic impacted all of this?
2. **Play.** In our culture, we (especially women) are not taught to value play; however, play is extremely helpful for our well-being and mental health. We need to have spaces and times in our life when we can be creative, play, laugh, and connect with others. Do you have time in your life when you do things just for fun? Do you have experiences where you laugh regularly? Do you make sure that you spend time with fun people? What did you used to do for fun? (Brigid Shulte's and Catherine Price's books listed below are great reads about the importance of having fun in our lives.)
3. **Time with yourself.** It is imperative to have downtime, time when we are alone and can relax and recharge. If we do not have time to restore our energy, we will become depleted and at greater risk for burnout. Do you have any "me time" in your life? What do you enjoy doing that helps you recharge your batteries?
4. **Time with others.** We are social creatures. Connecting with our family and friends, our community, and our teams bring joy into our lives and improves our mental health and mood. Our connections with our loved ones give meaning to our lives. I understand that spending time with others has been very challenging during a pandemic, but are you making space in your life to connect with people you care about (in person or virtually)? Who are you missing and have not spoken to lately? Who makes you laugh or feel understood?
5. **Taking care of your body.** Proper physical health involves some very basic and important self-care. Are you eating enough and consuming healthy food? Are you using good sleep habits and getting at least seven-to-nine hours of sleep each night? Do you have downtime that is not on a screen for at least one hour before bedtime? Are you drinking too much caffeine or alcohol? Are you drinking enough water? Are you moving your body enough to be healthy, fit, and support your

mood: at least four times/week for at least 45 minutes? Are you meditating or using any breathing techniques to help you keep stress at a lower level? Taking care of your body can also include things that are more pampering and may involve spending some money. Are you doing any more luxurious things to take care of your body, such as treating yourself to a massage?

6. **Taking care of your spirit or your soul.** What feeds your spirit or your soul? For some people, this is faith or religion. For others, it is spending time in nature or making/ being around art or music. Some people feed their spirit when they cook or bake, and others feel charged up when they do something physical, like taking a hike. Have you made time for any of these things in the last couple weeks?

Your Personal Inventory to Balance your Work-Life Balance

Take some time to reflect on these 6 work-life balance categories. How well are you doing with each category? Your "score" on this personal inventory is not meant to be shameful or have you feeling that you need to completely re-work your life. Rather, this inventory is an opportunity to reflect and to adjust your work-life balance. As I shared before, work-life balance is a process and having these tools to reflect periodically will be helpful for ongoing adjustments. When you realize which categories are currently light in work-life balance.

When you realize which categories are currently light in your life, think of small, realistic, and doable goals that you can set. Plan something that you can do in an hour or less. This could be reaching out to a friend to schedule a date or planning a hike in a local forest. Schedule this activity in your calendar, and then reflect on how it made you feel afterwards. Use my framework to continue to slowly, with small steps, make improvement in your work-life balance, and your life will feel fuller and richer. You will also find that burnout is much less of a problem. Good luck on your personal journey!

Heather Hersh, PsyD, is the founder of Thrive Well-Being in Philadelphia, PA.

RESOURCES:

1. Nagoski, E. & Nagoski, A. (2019). *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*. Ballantine Books.
2. Price, C. (2021). *The Power of Fun: How to feel Alive Again*. The Dial Press.
3. Shulte, Brigid. (2014). *Overwhelmed: How to Work, Love and Play when no one has the Time*. Picador.

REFERENCES:

1. Thurston SE, Chan G, Burlingame LA, Jones JA, Lester PA, Martin TL. (2021). Compassion Fatigue in Laboratory Animal Personnel during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *J Am Assoc Lab Anim Sci* **60** (6), 646-654.