Boundaries and Burnout:

The Hidden Crisis in Law

Marlo Lyons
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A little about me

Journalist

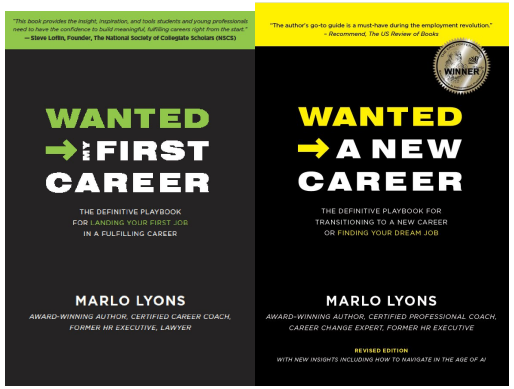
Entertainment Lawyer

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Podcast: *Work Unscripted*



Award-Winning Author



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Learning Objectives

- Define and recognize emotional labor in legal practice
- Identify early signs of burnout, fatigue, and trauma exposure in yourself and peers
- Understand the neurobiology and psychology of stress accumulation in high-pressure environments
- Discover practical boundary-setting techniques for clients, colleagues, and personal workload
- Learn energy recovery and wellness strategies tailored for legal professionals

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Landscape of Legal Burnout

- 92% of lawyers experience stress or burnout
- 60% of lawyers meet the clinical threshold for burn
- 52% of lawyers report feeling emotionally exhausted at work

Why?

- Hyper-competitive environment driven by perfectionism and long hours
- Billable hours and client demands that prevent downtime
- Culture that stigmatizes vulnerability and/or frowns upon those who seek help
- Continual emotional suppression and relentless intellectual demand

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What is Emotional Labor?

The effort involved in managing (suppressing) emotions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a job.

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Emotional Labor in Action

- Remaining calm when a client is in distress
- Delivering bad news to clients
- Suppressing personal feelings
- Staying composed during conflict
- Keeping personal matters to yourself

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Emotional Labor in Action

- Carefully wording emails to avoid misinterpretation
- Managing relationships with partners
- Knowing when to speak up in meetings
- Navigating the unspoken hierarchy
- Regulating tone, reactions

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The Cost of Emotional Suppression

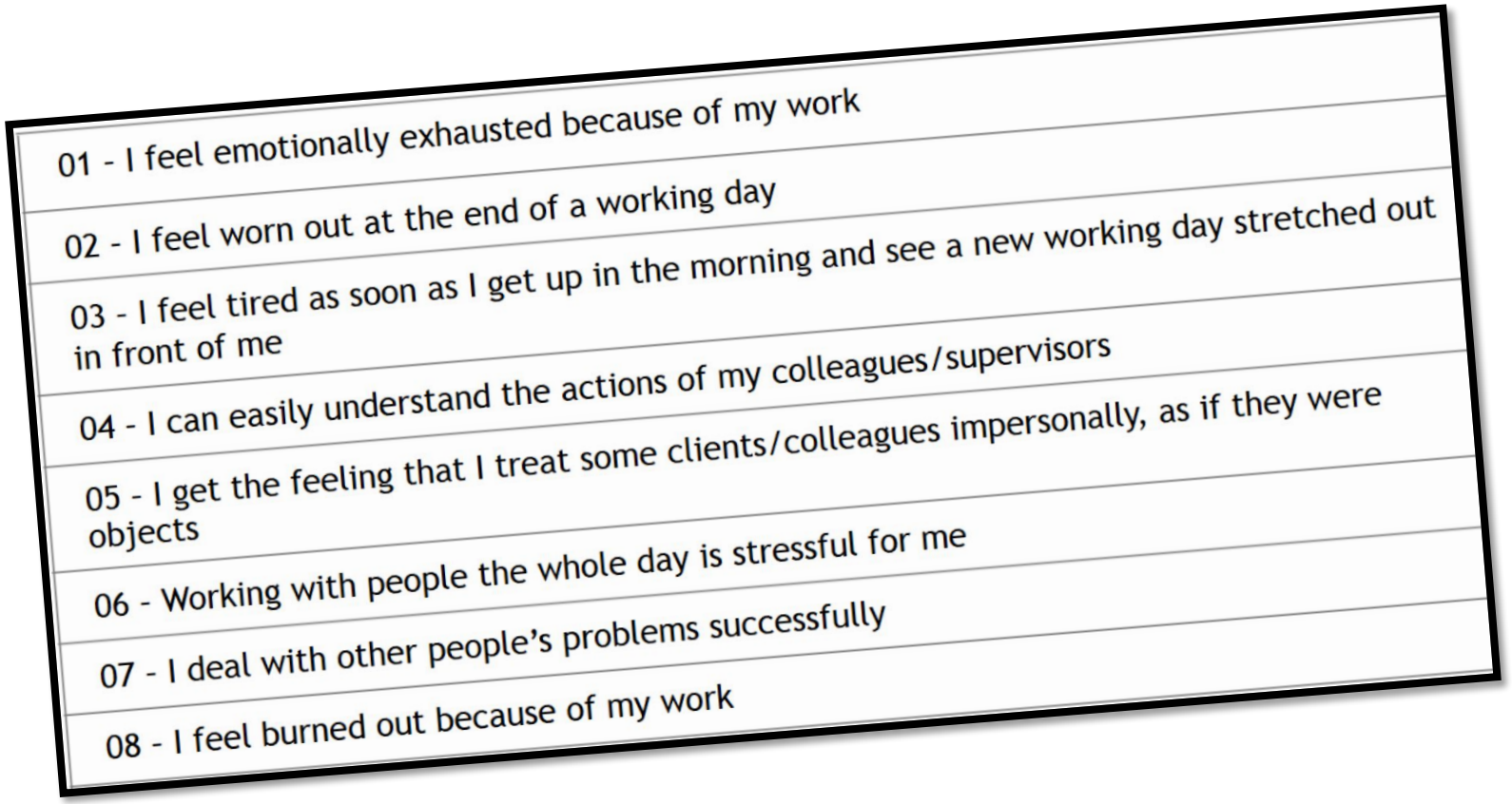
Burnout

Emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion due to prolonged stress and overwork.

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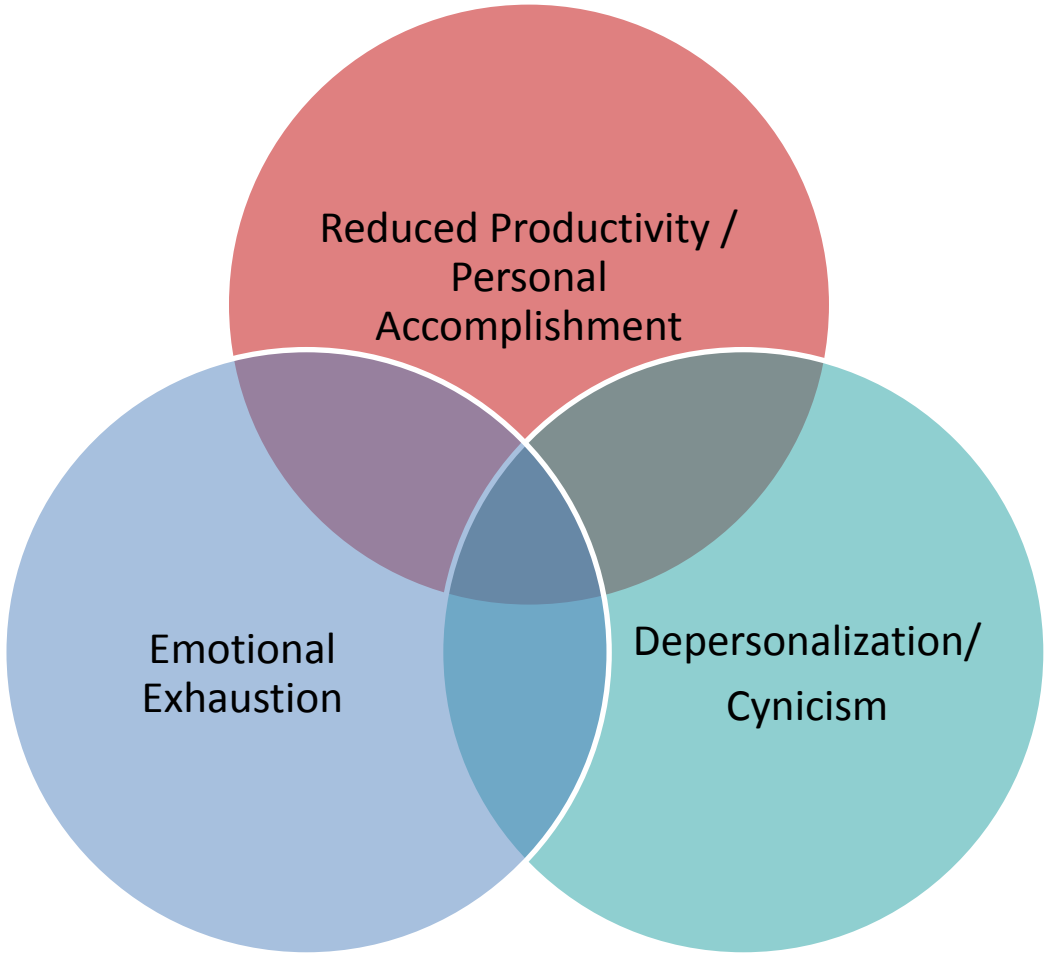
How Burnout is measured

Maslach Burnout Inventory



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The Cost of Emotional Suppression



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Signs and Symptoms of Burnout

- Behavioral: recurring mistakes, procrastination, absenteeism, errors in judgment
- Physical: fatigue, headaches, insomnia
- Emotional: irritability, detachment, sadness

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Burnout v. Depression v. Compassion Fatigue

Burnout: Work-related exhaustion and detachment

Depression: Clinical mood disorder affecting all areas of life

Compassion Fatigue: Emotional depletion from exposure to others' trauma

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The Science of Stress Accumulation

- Cortisol spikes under chronic stress
- Allostatic load: the wear-and-tear on the body from repeated stress
- Long term trauma exposure rewires brain and impacts overall function

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Trauma and the Law

- Direct Trauma: Firsthand exposure to traumatic events or environments
- Vicarious Trauma: Indirect exposure to trauma through clients
- Secondary Traumatic Stress: Emotional duress when hearing about others' trauma.

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Lawyers are Uniquely Vulnerable to Burnout

- Perfectionism and fear of failure
- Adversarial nature of legal work
- Long hours and billable pressure

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The Boundary Deficit

Over-identifying with clients

Difficulty saying no

Emotional leakage into personal life

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Setting Boundaries with Clients

Set clear expectations on availability

Avoid emotional enmeshment

Maintain professional distance

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Setting Boundaries in the Workplace

Create time blocks for deep work

Decline unrealistic demands

Limit digital availability

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Setting Boundaries with Yourself

Challenge the inner critic

Release guilt around rest

Address impostor syndrome

- ✔ Name the inner critic
- ✔ Replace guilt with gratitude
- ✔ Set internal benchmarks
- ✔ Practice cognitive flexibility
- ✔ Affirm boundary-focused success

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Framework 1: Boundary Setting Model (CLEAR)

Communicate the boundary clearly

Limit the problematic behavior with language that is firm but respectful

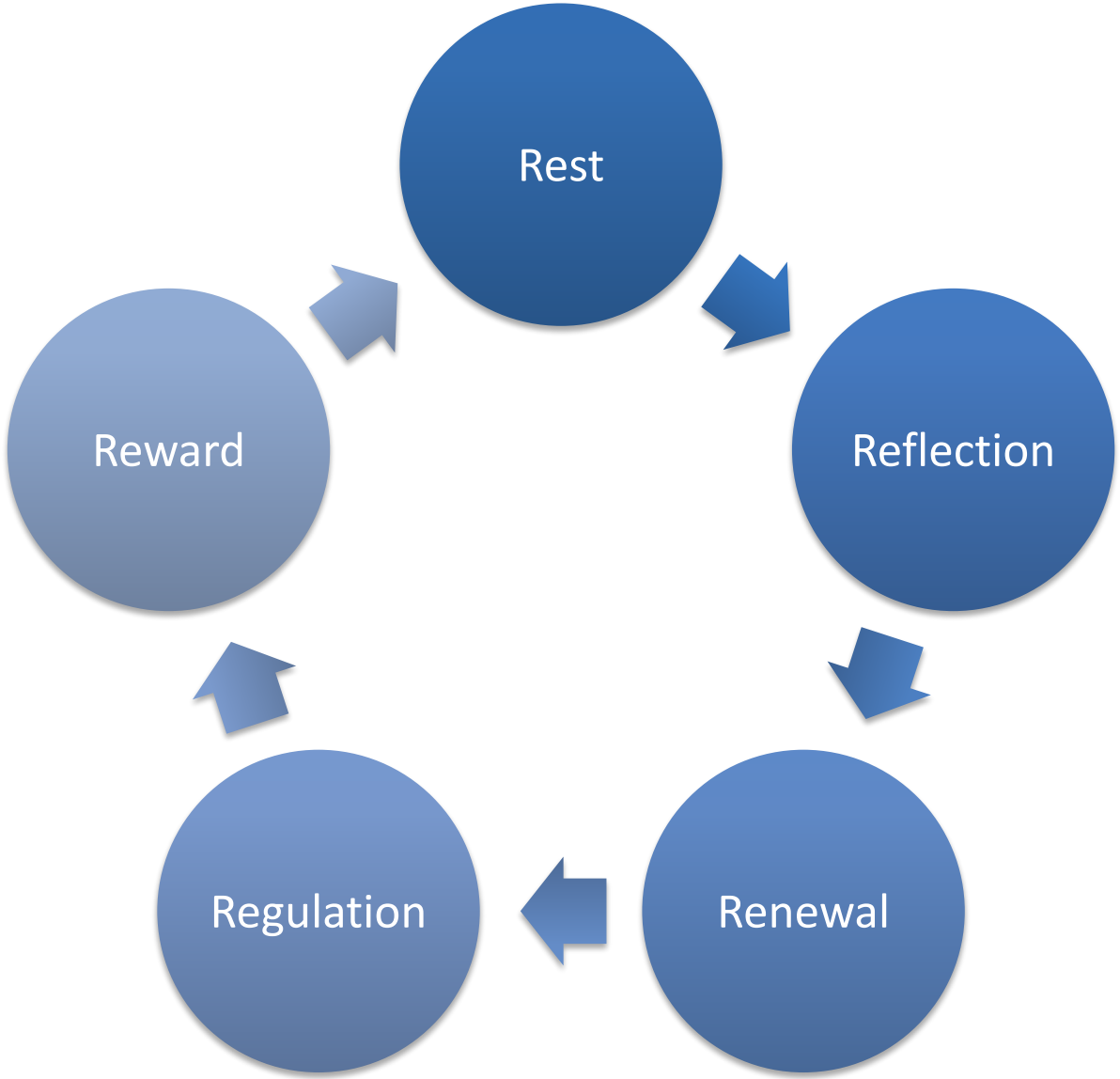
Empathize that you understand the other's needs

Assert your need confidently, without apology

Reinforce boundaries by upholding them consistently and call out when boundaries are crossed

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Framework 2: Recovery Reset Cycle



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Integration Daily Resets

Deep breathing

10 minute walks

Pomodoro breaks

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Case Study: Jane

Overwhelmed solo practitioner

Ignored burnout symptoms

Poor boundaries and emotional leakage



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Organizational Solutions

Normalize mental health days

Offer trauma informed training

Reduce the stigma around seeking help

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Legal Ethics and Wellness

ABA Model Rule 1.1 (Competence)

Comment 8: “Maintain mental, emotional and physical well being.”

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What You Can Do Tomorrow

Set one *new* boundary

Use CLEAR model to communicate boundaries

Schedule recovery time

Practice one recovery reset

Talk about burnout

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The Ripple Effect



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Boundaries and Burnout

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Work Unscripted Podcast

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