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Parental Burnout Primer for Legal Professionals

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As you have read elsewhere in this publication, burnout is often defined as a condition caused by a toxic and unrelentingly stressful work environment. Many researchers now broaden that definition to include a constellation of symptoms characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (losing our sense of who we are and our connection to others), and a lack of self-efficacy that can result from chronic exposure to emotionally draining environments across domains and outside of helping professions.

One such area receiving more attention in the research—especially since the pandemic—is burnout affecting parents. It stands to reason that any responsibility beset by too much stress and too few resources can overwhelm a person’s ability to cope—and parenting is no exception. Parental burnout is defined as “a prolonged response to chronic and overwhelming parental stress.”¹ Symptoms specific to parents include both emotional and physical exhaustion, as well as physical discomfort (somatic complaints like back or neck pain), poor sleep quality, emotional distancing from their children, a loss of one’s sense of self as a parent (especially in contrast with previously feeling connected to that role),

feelings of being “fed up” with the parenting role, and a sense of incompetence in their role as a parent.^{2,3}

Researchers at Ohio State University specifically studied the pandemic’s effect on working parents, and here is what they found:⁴

- Sixty-six percent (66%) of parents reported being burned out.
- Factors strongly associated with parental burnout included being female, the number of children living in the home, parental anxiety, having a child(ren) diagnosed with anxiety or ADHD, and concern that their child(ren) may have an undiagnosed mental health disorder.

- Burnout was strongly associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and increased alcohol consumption in parents, as well as the likelihood of engaging in punitive parenting practices.
- Parental burnout is also associated with an increased risk of children demonstrating signs of distress, such as internalizing (e.g., feels sad or unhappy, is down on themselves, worries a lot), externalizing (e.g., fights with other children, doesn't listen to rules, teases others), and attention behaviors (e.g., inability to sit still, has trouble concentrating, is easily distracted).

In addition to the factors mentioned above, other researchers have found that parental perfectionism increases burnout risk, as does chronic stress. In a profession that glorifies perfectionism, clings to a culture of overwork, and consistently ranks high in chronic stress and low in social support, it comes as no surprise that parents in the legal profession experience burnout at high rates. While no studies of parental burnout specifically address lawyers, a good deal of correlational research (including in the most recent Bloomberg survey) finds that women lawyers with children were the most burned out of all respondents.⁵ Race, culture, and country also affect burnout.

What can we do to prevent or mitigate parental burnout? First, we need to recognize the risks and symptoms. Building emotional competence and self-awareness allows us to identify and address these changes early and proactively. Second, a supportive community is vital for all parents, but especially those in the legal profession. Some of us are fortunate to have

deep and strong networks through supportive family, but many of us need to craft our own safety net. Surrounding ourselves with people who support our parenting selves is protective against overwhelm and thus burnout. Research shows that developing positive parenting skills and self-compassion practices can protect and intervene against burnout. Lastly, creating time for leisure and intentional self-care is crucial for our own functioning, as well as modeling for our children. If you need support, accessing one-on-one or group services is a great start.

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OTHER WORKS BY KYRA HAZILLA AT OAAP.ORG

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- Fostering Connection in a Lonely Profession (Winter 2023)
- Meaningful Connections at Work (Winter 2023)

Thriving Today

- Well-Being Week in Law: 2023 Preview (April 28, 2023)
- If You Aren't Feeling Buoyed by Resilience, Post-Traumatic Growth May Be on the Horizon (September 1, 2022)

ENDNOTES

1. Mikolajczak et al, "Parental burnout: what is it, and why does it matter?" *Clinical Psychological Sciences*, 2019 p. 1319.
2. Mikolajczak et al, "Exhausted parents: sociodemographic, child-related, parent-related, parenting and family-functioning correlates of parental burnout," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 2018
3. Roskam et al. 2018.
4. "Pandemic Parenting: Examining the Epidemic of Working Parental Burnout and Strategies to Help," The Ohio State University, Office of the Chief Wellness Officer and College of Nursing, May 2022 (https://wellness.osu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/03/OCWO_ParentalBurnout_3674200_Report_FINAL.pdf)
5. "Analysis: Female Lawyers Report More Stress, Burnout Than Males," Jessica R. Blaemire, *Bloomberg Law Analysis*, October 2, 2023 (<https://news.bloomberglaw.com/bloomberg-law-analysis/analysis-female-lawyers-report-more-stress-burnout-than-males>).

Parent Burnout Scale

Step 1: Check Yourself for Working Parent Burnout

The 10-item Working Parent Burnout Scale is a tool that can be used to help both parents and clinicians determine whether a parent is experiencing burnout. This scale is free for use and should be employed more readily in the clinical setting as part of routine visits, but especially if a child or parent is being seen for a mental health condition. This scale has demonstrated validity and reliability to detect parental burnout in the working parent population.

	Not At All	A Little	Somewhat	Moderately So	Very Much So
Item 1: I get/feel easily irritated with my child(ren).					
Item 2: I feel that I am not the good parent that I used to be to my child(ren).					
Item 3: I wake up exhausted at the thought of another day with my child(ren).					
Item 4: I find joy in parenting my child(ren).					
Item 5: I have guilt about being a working parent, which affects how I parent my child(ren).					
Item 6: I feel like I am in survival mode as a parent.					
Item 7: Parenting my child(ren) is stressful.					
Item 8: I lose my temper easily with my child(ren).					
Item 9: I feel overwhelmed trying to balance my job and parenting responsibilities.					
Item 10: I am doing a good job being a parent.					

Step 2: Score Each Item

For all questions except questions 4 and 10 on the scale, use these point values.

- Not at all = 0 points
- A little = 1 point
- Somewhat = 2 points
- Moderately so = 3 points
- Very much so = 4 points

Questions 4 and 10 use reverse scoring.

Use these point values for questions 4 and 10.

- Not at all = 4 points
- A little = 3 points
- Somewhat = 2 points
- Moderately so = 1 point
- Very much so = 0 points

Step 3: Calculate the Total

Add all points together for a final score.

Step 4: Interpret the Score

- 0-10 Points: No or few signs of burnout
- 11-20 Points: Mild burnout
- 21-30 Points: Moderate burnout
- 31+ Points: Severe burnout

Score 31+: Severe burnout – Ask for help from your healthcare provider or mental health professional; connect with family members and friends. Utilize available resources.

Score 21-30: Moderate burnout – Take action! Start interventions (e.g., take time out of each day to do something for your mental health and well-being), decrease stressors, use available resources and consider asking for help. If your level of burnout is interfering with your ability to function or concentrate, seek mental health help immediately. It is a strength to recognize when help is needed, not a weakness.

Score 11-20: Mild burnout – Start preventive interventions such as taking short recovery breaks each day to do something for your mental health and well-being, decrease stressors and identify resources to help.

Score 0-10: No or few signs of burnout – you should continue to do the things you are doing and remember to prioritize good self-care.

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