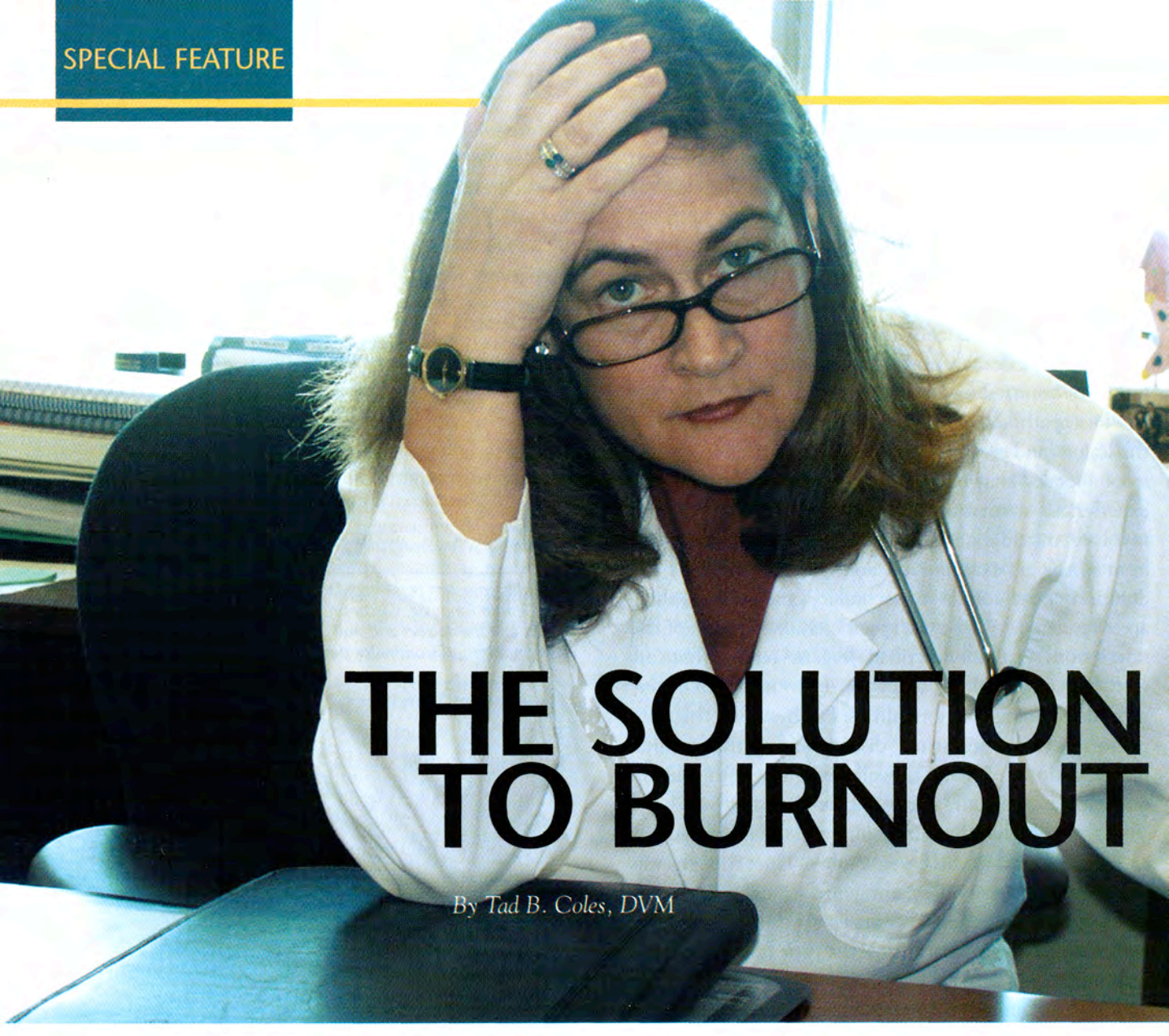

THE SOLUTION TO BURNOUT

By Tad B. Coles, DVM

Has practice lost the appeal it once had? Do you feel as if all your energy is depleted and the passion is gone from your life? Do you feel emotionally disconnected from your patients, clients, and coworkers, and does it seem like they simply bring you problems you are tired of having to solve? If so, you may be suffering from burnout.

The signs of burnout come on so gradually that most people suffer for a long time before they realize it. A sense of being overextended, drained, and unable to unwind at the end of the day may be the first sign. Alienation and cynicism logically follow, and ineffectiveness may seep in as detachment clouds your ability to relate to clients, patients, or coworkers. Resentment toward others is common, especially when they tell you that they notice a change in your demeanor, and you may be in total denial of any problem. It may feel as if the time has come to move on, yet you feel stuck and see no way out—short of the prospect of selling the clinic or finding a new job. On one hand, you want out, but on the other hand, owning your own practice is what you've worked your entire life to accomplish.

You do not have to go all the way down this path and find yourself standing alone at a dead end. There is immense hope. Burnout has been studied considerably in the past quarter-century, and there are many resources available to those who reach out for them.

A New York psychologist conceived the term "burnout" in 1974 to describe a syndrome of exhaustion, disillusionment, and withdrawal resulting from intense devotion to a cause that failed to produce an expected

reward.[1] He described the burnout-prone person as dedicated and committed. This condition does not happen to slackers. The best and brightest—those driven to achieve while investing time, effort, and emotion into their jobs—are most likely to suffer. That description sounds like the kind of individual who is drawn to veterinary medicine. In fact, veterinary schools often select people who are prone to burnout. It follows that many veterinary health care workers, devoted to the noble causes of saving lives and decreasing suffering, have an episode of burnout at some time during their career.

Christina Maslach, PhD, further explored this phenomenon as it applied to the caring professions and reported that burnout consisted of three main aspects: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.[2,3] She found that people suffering from burnout felt emotionally drained by their work, developed a callous attitude as a response, and were less effective when dealing with problems. She identified the following sources of burnout: 1) work overload, 2) lack of control, 3) insufficient reward, 4) unfairness, 5) breakdown of community, and 6) value conflict.[4] The veterinary profession provides an ample mix of exposure to these troublemakers.

Recent veterinary graduates are prone to suffering the effects of burnout. Our training has not prepared us for financial or personnel management when we are thrown into a real-world practice. Working long hours, sometimes neglecting family members in the process, we strive to pay off a mountain of college loan debt. There is little perceived control over this situation. This is a stage where many of us struggle to develop confidence. We work with clients who do not always make the decisions that we think are best for them or their pets. Sometimes we blame ourselves, thinking if we had only explained the situation better, they would have made a better choice. Sometimes we blame the client when they decide to skimp on diagnostics and a preventable disaster results. Clients may decide not to let us treat patients simply because of lack of money, and we are faced with the unpleasant task of having to decide if we are going to perform euthanasia at the client's request or send the client away. The whole discussion is unpleasant. The client feels guilty, sometimes rightfully so, and we are forced to balance between comforting the client and acting as an advocate for the animal.

This value conflict strikes at the core for many of us. The rugged individualist solo practitioner is particularly at risk when faced with this situation. We know we should just toughen up and get through it, but oftentimes all this leaves us with is unresolved issues and painful memories. Having colleagues who relate is helpful and venting can be therapeutic, but solo practice in particular may leave us without much of a support group when tough times hit.

Burnout Risk Appraisal

Questions to Ask Yourself*	Yes	No
Are your achievements your self-esteem?		
Do you tend to reject offers of support?		
Are you slow to ask for/accept help?		
Do you often make excuses, such as "It's faster to do it myself than to show or tell someone?"		
Do you prefer to work alone?		
Do you lack a close confidant with whom you feel safe discussing problems?		
Do you "externalize" blame (feel compelled to shift blame away from yourself)?		
Are your work relationships asymmetric? Are you always giving?		
Is your personal identity bound up with your work role or professional identity?		
Do you often overload yourself—have a difficult time saying "no?"		
Do you have few opportunities for positive and timely feedback outside your work role?		
Do you abide by the "laws": "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel?"		
Do you easily feel frustrated, sad, or angry with your regular work tasks?		
Is it hard for you to "establish warmth" with your peers and/or service (patients/clients) recipients?		
Do you feel guilty when you "play" or rest?		
Do you get almost all of your needs met by helping others?		
Do you put others' needs before or above your own needs?		
Do you often put aside your own needs when someone else needs help?		

*A lot of "yes" answers means you are at risk for burnout!

Non-Practice Pathways

For many veterinarians, it's the demands of daily practice that can cause high stress. Many idealistic young students graduate from veterinary school emotionally or physically unprepared for some of the realities of practice, such as difficult clients, economics-based euthanasia, or round-the-clock on-call hours. Student debt burdens alone can be enough to sour some graduates on veterinary life.

If you love the principles but not the practice of veterinary medicine, keep in mind there are many alternative career pathways available. Industry jobs have become less plentiful in the current economy, but they can be a perfect answer for some veterinarians, especially those with specialized knowledge of interest to a particular company. Industry jobs can also run the gamut from the high-profile marketing and technical service jobs at Fortune 500 animal health corporations to positions or consulting roles with any number of up-and-coming smaller companies. From software to pet wear, there may be an interesting position out there for you. Visit the trade show portion of a major continuing education conference and you'll meet many veterinarians who have made the crossover. Ask them for advice on what kinds of jobs might fit with your skills. Another good source of information is the American Association of Industrial Veterinarians. As stated in this article, the single best way to reduce stress is to realize you are in control of your life. You can change things. Spend time with a career consultant, and consider your options.

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Working in a multi-veterinarian practice can provide helpful camaraderie, but coworker relationships may provide their own unique set of stressors. A boss who establishes strict policies that counter employee values is just asking for complaints of unfairness driven by feelings of lack of control and value conflict. A strict policy concerning the selection of suture material for abdominal closure, for example, or choice of yearly vaccines can set the stage for disagreements as employee veterinarians fight with the owner for medical decision autonomy. Clinic staff usually end up caught in the crossfire.

The situation in a clinic is such that one individual suffering from burnout has a toxic effect on the rest of the workers. Overwhelmed by the apparent unfairness of it all and without control over the situation, a callous attitude can be projected to clients—and that costs money. The receptionist who wants to work only 30 hours per week to be able to see her children off to school in the morning but must work full-time may not have the essential cheery outlook it takes to keep clients happy. She will be prone to making snide comments when the boss takes a 3-hour lunch. It just snowballs.

Yes, veterinary health care workers are exposed to many of the sources of burnout. Wondering what your particular risk is for burnout? Take a look at the *Burnout Risk Appraisal* questionnaire on page 27 to assess your individual risk.

John-Henry Pfifferling, PhD, developer of the appraisal questionnaire, says that risk is evident when three items are checked "yes." Four or more "yes" items indicate that burnout risk is high and that a mismatch between an individual and the job is brewing. Blaming yourself or others for that mismatch is common but not very helpful. Hope comes with the realization that these items are not static and strategies that can reduce burnout by encouraging balance are available.

Taking an honest self-evaluation—looking at who you are and what you truly want from life—is essential to finding a balance that can work for you. This means asking yourself what qualities you want to develop, experiences you find rewarding, and talents you want to utilize. In short, what do you want to be when you grow up? What difference do you want to make in this world? Keep those things in mind as you look back at your burnout risk appraisal. Now think about what changes you can make

so you can erase some of those check marks. Keep in mind it is likely that many of the changes will involve systems that are already in place where you work. Nearly every article about burnout emphasizes "balance" as the answer. Many of these books or articles focus on such things as personal balance and changes the individual must make and give instructions on stress-relieving exercises. Yes, it is important to get plenty of exercise, achieve self-awareness through meditation, yoga, prayer, or journaling, find a spiritual advisor, or whatever support mechanisms you may find helpful, but doing any or all of these things without taking a hard look at the organization at work will rarely have any effect on the burnout-prone individual in a burnout-prone work environment.

The #1 strategy for reducing stress is to realize that you are in control. You must ask yourself hard questions, such as, Are you in the right profession? If not, then take stock of your skills, think hard about what it is you'd rather be doing, and then work toward making the change (see *Non-Practice Pathways* on page 28). If you

Dealing with Related Problems

Burnout is a problem associated with work. It is not a psychiatric syndrome and, as such, is not included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,[6] commonly known as the DSM-IV, although many of the signs noted with burnout can be found in the DSM-IV description of psychiatric syndromes, such as depression (many varieties), mood disorders (including seasonal affective disorder), adjustment disorders, compassion fatigue, and addiction.

It is not unusual for a person experiencing burnout to turn to alcohol or other drugs to deaden the pain. Does this mean you are an abuser or an addict? This is an excellent question and one best answered by a professional evaluation, for as we all know the doctor who self-diagnoses and self-prescribes has a fool for a patient. One of the hallmarks of addiction is an incredible level of denial, so you very well may not know if you are an abuser.

There are several other situations in which seeking outside professional help is essential. An example is depression of 2 weeks duration, with loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities. The DSM-IV classifies this as a major depressive episode. Obviously, thoughts of death, suicide, or murder indicate immediate contact of a psychiatric professional.

"You Know You're Burned Out in Practice When. . ."

- The phone rings at dinnertime, and you're glad it's a telemarketer.
- Your kids don't recognize you without your clinic coat.
- You decide to surprise your child by attending his little league game only to find out he's away at college.
- Your spouse threatens to take your sick dog to another veterinarian.
- You trash all your James Herriot books in a fit of rage.

Chip Mills, DVM, Cambridge, Maryland *(via email)*

My recipe for burnout avoidance came with much trial and error (three attempts to be exact). Here is the recipe:

Take one new graduate. Make sure to select for enthusiasm, moral character, and integrity in equal parts. Add encouragement liberally. May add constructive criticism to taste, but only in very moderate amounts. Stir in respect for the learning process. Add a dash of humor and a sprinkle of sage (wisdom). Allow time to rise, without a set timetable. You'll know when the recipe is done. Enjoy.

A veterinarian who prefers to remain anonymous

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Places to Get Help

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Durham, NC 27705
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Center for Professional and Personal Renewal
Peter S. Moskowitz, MD, Director
555 Bryant Street, Suite 160
Palo Alto, CA 94301
P: 800-377-1096 • **E:** pmoskowitz@cppr.com

Impaired Veterinarians Information Line (information on and referrals for assistance with chemical impairment sponsored by the AVMA)
P: 800-321-1473

are in the right profession but are too stressed to enjoy it anymore, then you need to do whatever it will take to get you energized, enthused, and excited about veterinary medicine again. Some ideas include:

- **Hire a practice manager.** We've all heard this one so much that we sort of tune it out, but this can be a very doable and concrete first step toward de-stressing your life. Worried about the expense? Work with a veterinary practice management consultant or veterinary accountant to help you figure out what kind of return on investment (ROI) you need to build into the new position. You can also consider starting a practice manager in a part-time position.
- **Refer after-hours emergency care.** Getting a good night's sleep will do wonders to help your frame of mind. If you don't want or can't afford to refer all your emergency care, try to set up an arrangement in which you only take referrals on weekends or on select nights.
- **Specialize your skills.** This can help in two ways. If you've always dreamed about pursuing a particular specialty, such as dentistry or exotics, acting on it may make your practice experience more rewarding. On a more practical level, developing a specialty practice may give you more control over your time and the kinds of cases you see.
- **Invest in training.** Better training of your technicians may result in their being able to take more of the workload.
- **Hire more staff.** Another technician or receptionist or a relief veterinarian even just 1 day a week may give you the break you need.
- **Clean house.** If you have a "bad apple" on your staff who is making the workplace unpleasant or ineffective, deal with it through better training, discipline, or dismissal.
- **Change the scenery.** Are you an employee in an intolerable situation? If repeated attempts to work things out with a boss or coworker aren't fruitful, seeking another position may be your best course of action.
- **Finally, don't forget the small stuff.** While it isn't a fix for a truly intolerable situation, reach out for temporary coping mechanisms when you can find them, such as making time for stress-relieving exercise or a yoga class, "taking 10" to calm yourself and get away from noxious personalities in the workplace, spending an extra few minutes with a hospitalized patient, and forcing yourself to leave work issues at work by focusing on friends, family, and personal interests when you're at home.

"You Know You're Burned Out in Practice When. . ."

- You have a really chatty client and rather than listen to any more blather, you just insert your stethoscope in your ears and pretend to listen to a heart murmur for a really long time.
- Fat dogs look like pillows to you. You lay down with your head on their bellies and take a nap while in the exam room.
- You walk into the exam room like it is the last client of the day, smiling your phony smile, giving your last, "Hello, my name is Doctor Blah Blah," and then the clock on the wall shows you this is not the last client, it is the first one.

P. Ridley, RVT (via email)

After a long week of irate clients, nonscheduled appointments, and scheduled patients arriving at their leisure, I was placing a catheter on a crowded treatment table when I hit my head for the umpteenth time on the IV tree hanging above me. With some gusto, I relocated the tree to the floor. My ever-helpful assistant tried to pick up the tree and save it from further abuse. I hollered at her to stop, leave it on the floor, that I had placed it in a "Down-Stay," and that it had not completed its required time. This broke the tension and reduced us all to giggling schoolgirls, and the rest of the day was completed with a lightheartedness that was much needed!

Stephanie Carraway, DVM (via email)

"You Know You're Burned Out in Practice When. . ."

And the Top 10 List of "You Know You're Burned Out When. . ."

10. You are reciting the "flea story," but there is no client in the room with you.
9. You start to call your clinic "home."
8. You come back from lunch a half hour early because you have nothing else to do.
7. Your spouse has given up making reservations for dinner out since you never get off work on time.
6. You look forward to visits from the drug salesperson.
5. Your work clothes are just fine to wear on your days off.
4. You run to the bank and you still have your stethoscope on.
3. Your kids look strangely familiar.
2. Everyone calls you "Doc" because they have forgotten your real name.
1. You leave "ashes" everywhere you go. . . but you do not smoke!

***Frank J. Grasse, DVM** (Willits, California)*

The path to the burnout solution can start with steps such as these. It's important to note, however, that the goal is development of an ongoing process to address organizational problems. You can start on this path alone, as either an employee or as the business leader, but you must get others on board for it to succeed and truly reduce the stress level in an intolerable work situation. Solving just one problem and getting a positive result can start the ball rolling, but plan on a long-term commitment. The process is outlined nicely in Maslach's and Leiter's book *The Truth About Burnout: How Organizations Cause Personal Stress and What To Do About It*.[4]

Professional organizations, veterinary practice management consultants, and career counselors can be invaluable in helping you start and continue the process of solving workplace and organizational issues. Ask around for a personal recommendation from a colleague in your area. If you talk with a career coach or counselor, be sure to find one who has some knowledge of the particular stressors and situations common to veterinary practice. They can help you sort out closely related problems (see *Dealing with Related Problems* on page 29), such as compassion fatigue or disorders with similar symptoms, including seasonal affective disorder. Getting help from the outside is especially important if you are an employee working on developing a burnout intervention strategy, a very tricky situation at best.

Whatever you do, don't sweep suspicions of burnout under the rug and just hope it will get better. There is no reason to waste any time and extend the period of misery. We all have one shot at life with no rehearsal. Find yourself in a rut? Don't pick out furniture and plan on moving in. Get out of there and have some fun!

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