

Sex Work & Burnout



Do you feel as though you simply can't face another client? Does the idea of getting up and going to work make you want to disappear back under your doona and not exist? If so, you could be experiencing burnout. This fact sheet will help you identify the signs, prevent it from happening and know what to do if you're feeling it.

Burnout is common among anyone working with people, like social workers, counsellors and of course sex workers.

Providing a service to others can be very draining unless you have developed some strategies for coping. Often people who put a lot of effort into their work become burnt out.

If you give to others, you need to give to yourself first and sex work is the one profession where you probably give more of yourself, your headspace and your energy to others than you do in any other profession.

It also helps if you can develop and maintain boundaries between work and your private life.

What are you going to be reading about?...

- What are the signs of burn out?
- Preventing and/or treating burnout
- What are the warning signs that you've gone into the dangerzone of burn out or gone beyond burnout?
- Numbers to call for further information and in an Emergency

What are the signs of burn out?

- feeling disillusioned about work and life in general
- having a sarcastic and cynical attitude towards work and your clients
- not turning up for your shifts if you work at a brothel

- switching your phone off or not being able to answer it when it rings
- not being able to switch your computer on, let alone answer a client's booking request email
- taking a booking and not answering your front door when they come to your unit, or not being able to go through with the booking if you're in a brothel when you're chosen in a line-up
- feeling restless and frustrated, perhaps even tearful and irritable
- projecting negative feelings onto others
- finding it increasingly difficult to see the positive aspects of work (even the money doesn't make you feel better)
- feeling physically sick at the thought of seeing a client, answering your phone or switching on your computer
- having a panic attack, throwing up or not feeling well when you're in a booking
- not being able to continue with a sexual service, mid-booking
- feeling miserable all day if you know you are working that night
- you stop making an effort to look good
- you don't go to bed until the sun comes out and don't get up until it goes down
- you don't leave your house and go outside until all your food runs out
- withdrawing from family and friends
- gaining or losing weight
- drinking or using drugs more, both in bookings and in your personal time
- feeling paranoid in public that clients are watching you or becoming hypersensitive to noise, movement and colour when outside

Preventing burnout as a sex worker can be really difficult; it requires you to make an effort every day.

Many sex workers find if they can lead a balanced life by finding the right amount of hours to work and maintaining boundaries, they can stay physically, mentally and emotionally happier.

Preventing and/or treating burnout

Here are some ideas that have worked for many of us:

- Develop and maintain a balance between work and personal life.
- Develop clearly defined boundaries with clients and, if necessary, co-workers.
- Work reasonable hours and avoid working double shifts if you're in a brothel or all day and night if you're a sole operator.
- Have realistic expectations of yourself and others.
- Take breaks from work if you can afford it and do something you enjoy on days off, whether it be meeting up with a friend for a coffee because you only have \$5 to spare or going to the movies because you have \$25 to spare.
- Try and take a holiday once a year to get away from it all.
- Talk to someone you trust about what's going on for you, whether it's a friend who knows you work, a counsellor or other sex workers who are your friends.
- Look at the big picture not just your immediate goals. For some people having goals really helps, but for others it can do your head in. If you have to pay uni fees or a big bill and so set \$5k as your goal, if you don't make any money one day or even every day for a week at work, it can do your head in sitting there feeling like you're not achieving anything and you'll never get what you need, etc. It can be less stressful to set a goal if you can be realistic about how long it may take to earn the money and can avoid negative self-talk.
- If possible, avoid going over time with clients and not charging them for it. There is nothing like a client to suck the life out of you, and on top of that if you aren't charging them for it,

you can become cranky at yourself and resentful of clients in general.

- Avoid reading negative forums and reviews because sometimes forums can be derogatory towards women and exhibit behaviour that can make you dislike clients and the sex industry.
- Fall in love with an animal. Many workers avoid having a pet, especially sole operators, because they live and work in the same apartment and their clients may not like animals. Think about how much you already give to your clients and know that sometimes you deserve a bit of unconditional love, so clients will just have to put up with it! If you can't have a cat or dog, fish can be relaxing to look at each day. A pet will replenish your love tanks, can be someone to talk to, is excited to see you get up every day, and if you have a dog it will make you go outside every day, which is healthy.
- As hard as it can be on some days, go outside for a walk. If you don't like walking when other people are around, go at night time or when the sun is just rising when it's quiet and still so you have time to think and talk to yourself in private. When you have been walking for a while, you'll also find your fitness level has increased, which makes it much easier to do the physical things you do in bookings.

“Develop and maintain a balance between work and personal life”

If you can afford to, take time off when you have your periods and eat chocolate cake.

It can be very helpful to have a few days each month you know are going to be just for you and that you'll be spending them indulging yourself and doing the things you love.

Having indulgent days doesn't have to be expensive, and it can help if you put \$5 per job away so that with every job you're reminding yourself you have something to look forward to.

Get up and clean your unit or work space each day to be proactive and remind yourself you have standards and deserve the best.

Sometimes achieving the smallest, most basic normal life goals can make a huge difference to your headspace.

If you notice your self-esteem is taking a battering, go and get waxed, get a manicure or get your hair cut.

This can cost you as little as \$20 but reminds you that you deserve to be the best person you can be and that you are gorgeous and worthy of spending money on.

It can also make you feel more confident in bookings, which can help you answer your phone, take bookings and actually do the booking, which can be an issue if you're burnt out.

Let your sex working friends know if you're having a problem and negotiate with them that they sit on Skype or MSN with you, or that they are available to talk to on the phone before a booking if you need someone to talk you into doing a job.

Having a friend to support you before, during and after a booking is invaluable. They can motivate you, laugh with you, get grossed out and feel your pain and tell you it's all going to be better really soon if you just get through the next hour or two.

The best bit is you can believe them because they are sex workers too.

“Be kind to yourself! Make sure you allow yourself some ‘ME TIME’”

What are the warning signs that you've gone into the danger zone of burnout or gone beyond burnout?

- feeling depressed
- unmanageable anxiety levels
- hating clients
- wanting to harm clients
- higher than tolerable stress levels

- not leaving your unit until a week after all of your food runs out
- complete isolation – not talking to anyone, ever
- losing control of your emotions
- losing objectivity
- not being able to get out of bed
- not being able to go to bed, rather sleeping on the lounge or floor
- not showering for days

If you find yourself experiencing these symptoms, it's time to speak to someone about what's going on if you're not someone who can drag yourself out of it once you recognise it.

Call Respect Inc, get in contact with a counsellor, go to your local sexual health clinic and let them know and they can give you a referral to someone you can talk to.

The most valuable way to dig yourself out of it is to speak to other sex workers. They'll be able to listen to you, offer you support, make you go for coffee with them, talk to you before, during and after bookings if need be and do a million and one other things that a paid professional cannot offer you.

The best approach can be to take a combination of these supports available to you and use them all at once.

It is possible to develop a happy medium where work is satisfying but not taking over your entire life. It is also possible to put your entire self and effort into work to achieve your goals, but when you find things are getting too much, back off to a level that allows you to recharge your batteries while still working.

To do this you need to be able to recognise the signs and your level of burnout and what to do when you feel uncomfortable at this level.

Everyone's point of burnout is different, the trick is to know yours and know what you can do to cope with it and make yourself better.

Contacts if in crisis and for further help

Lifeline

13 11 14

SANE Helpline (9am – 5pm weekdays)

1800 187 263

<http://www.sane.org>

Beyond Blue (24 hours, 7 days a week)

Information website and telephone counselling service

for people with issues associated with depression, anxiety and related substance misuse disorders.

1300 224 636

<http://www.beyondblue.org.au>

QuiHN

State-wide organisation that addresses drug use by providing confidential counselling, support services, education and training, needle and syringe programs, outreach and emergency relief.

07 3620 8111 (Brisbane office)

07 4051 4742 (Cairns office)

07 5443 9576 (Sunshine Coast office)

07 5520 7900 (Gold Coast office)

<http://www.quihn.org>

The Ethnic Communities Council Queensland

Provides advocacy; community development initiatives; statewide health programs; support groups; cross

cultural training; resource and reference library

07 3844 9166

<http://www.eccq.com.au>

Disclaimer:

All material in this fact sheet is provided for your information only and may not be construed as legal, medical or health advice or instruction.

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