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## Feeling the Burn: Confessions of a Formerly Burned Out Coder

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*Ten strategies for avoiding burnout are provided by the author.*

On any given day, if you walked into my home office, you might think you were in a spa. The walls are painted a soothing aqua color (at least, I think it's soothing), a scent diffuser releases a pleasant tea tree oil scent (good for the voice on those days when I present webinars), and Asian meditation music plays softly on an endless loop. At second glance, you would see an enormous desk cluttered with two large computer monitors, code books, copies of articles I've printed with the intent to read, and a planner opened to the current week with color-coded notes regarding weekly meetings, to-do lists, and deadlines. It might seem like a stark paradox, but I like to call it balance. And it's taken years to achieve.

Let's back up a moment and see how I got to my ironic office environment. I am a second-generation health information management (HIM) professional who took her first coding job 23 years ago. I attended community college right out of high school. For someone who lacked a clear vision of her future in high school, it didn't take me long to set my career goals at the age of 21. I was working as an outpatient coder and decided within two years I would be an inpatient coder. Within another three years I expected I would be a coding manager and I figured it would be smooth sailing from there.

My five-year career plan only took three years. I was woefully unqualified for the position of a coding supervisor and too proud to admit what I didn't know. Balancing day-to-day coding supervision along with management meetings was tough enough. Trying to please my staff and my superiors at the same time was something for which I wasn't prepared. Not only did I achieve my career goals in record time, I also hit a wall and burned myself out completely.

For me, working through burnout meant a lot of soul-searching and a change in my career path. I became a traveling coding consultant. As a single woman in her 20s, I figured it was the perfect time to travel and see some of the country while expanding my reach to hospitals I otherwise would never visit. I knew the lessons I learned would help me identify and prevent burnout in the future.

But I was wrong. Burnout hit me again several years later. This time I found that my professional goals were not in line with the company's mission. It was like trying to put a square peg in a round hole and I just didn't fit. That was when I realized I am motivated by the work and my true passion is coding education. It was time to move onto a new opportunity that fit my thirst to share coding knowledge.

As I tell this story, you probably have a vision of someone who is completely ineffective, but I don't think that's true. Over the last two decades, I've been national speaker, spent hundreds of hours training coders, written thousands of pages of coding training materials, and authored several articles. I've served on committees and as board members for my state and regional AHIMA associations. I successfully co-chaired Colorado's ICD-10 Task Force, developed a blog to mentor coding professionals, and won state and national awards. I got my last two jobs because I called up previous business contacts and asked if I could work for them.

Most of my achievements came after two brutal bouts of burnout. And it's embarrassing to say I went through all that as a single person without children, because having a family puts a new spin on things! I got married during the ICD-10 implementation and now I am a mom of a one-and-a-half-year-old, and life is more complicated. My career is still important to me and still demanding, so you might be wondering how I

manage it all. Full disclosure: there are days I don't. But for the most part, here are 10 strategies for avoiding burnout:

- **Find a good mentor.** Find someone who has what you want out of life and see how they manage it. My career/life balance mentor is the president of my company. I remember her telling me, "You can have it all, but not all at once. There will be times when you need to focus on your family and it affects your job. And then there are times when you have to focus on your job and it takes away from your family." Accepting that I can't be everything to everyone at the same time is something I remind myself of every day. It's all about managing priorities.
- **Make lists.** There's an internet meme that says, "The biggest lie I tell myself is 'I don't have to write that down.'" I make lists. Lots of them. At least the lists take some pressure off because I don't have clutter my head remembering things I don't need to worry about now.
- **Work when you're most efficient.** Most coding professionals work from home now, which means they can usually make their own hours. If you're most efficient at 5:00 am when the rest of your family is sleeping, that's when you should work.
- **Focus on the sustainable.** When I took golf lessons, the instructor said consistency is the key to a good golf game, but I think it's the key to a successful life. If you can't do something with consistency, then you'll fail. If what you're doing isn't sustainable, it can lead to burnout.
- **Pick one thing.** Inaction is not an option, but there are days when your to-do list seems insurmountable. My latest strategy is to pick just one thing that must be done. Granted, there may be more than one thing that has to be done today, but you have to start somewhere.
- **Surround yourself with people who know your limits.** My immediate supervisor at work is often my conscience. She

knows I will offer to do almost anything, even if I don't have time to do it. She's the one who put the "focus on the sustainable" statement in my head. The second part of this is, of course, taking that advice and learning to say no when you're overextended.

- **Go for a walk.** How much time do we waste being upset or feeling stuck while working on a project? You can either sit at your desk and be inefficient for an hour (or more) or take a quick 10- to 15-minute walk and clear your head.
- **Separate your home and work space.** The great thing about working from home is you can work any time you want. The bad thing is, you can work any time, even when you don't want. Setting boundaries is important. I set specific business hours for myself and I treat my office like one outside the home. I don't spend time there when I'm not working. In fact, it's the dustiest room in the house because I don't like to go in there on the weekend!
- **Follow your bliss.** This is best career advice I could give to anyone. Don't follow the money or the pathway someone thinks you should. Find your niche, find what you love to do, and find the job that fits that. But realize that businesses evolve and there may come a time when your bliss doesn't align with your employer's organizational goals. That's when you need to learn to let go and move on.
- **Find ways of incorporating self-care into your daily routine.** I'm not talking about a massage or an hour of meditation (unless that's what you want to do and have time for it). It could be something as simple as reading for pleasure a few minutes before bedtime or that quick walk you took earlier in the day to clear your head. Or making your office feel like a spa! It doesn't have to take a lot of time, but do one thing for yourself every day.

Are you feeling the burn right now? Or have you in the past? Send me a message and tell me how you've had to deal with burnout and actions you take to prevent it in the future.

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