



# Finding Joy After Burning Out

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In December 2021, I (Michelle Nichols DeLong) burned out. I vividly remember the day and feeling—or lack thereof. After six months of preparing a complex birth injury case for mediation, pushing myself past the point of no return, I hit rock bottom. Mediation ended in an impasse. As I collected my belongings and walked out to my car with my client, I felt nothing but total despair. I was simply broken.

The complicated birth injury case was not the only one I had been working on, of course. But the six months I had spent in nonstop depositions, hearings, and more, to push and prepare the case for settlement, had done its number on me. Since COVID, the legal field had changed. While I no longer had to travel to and from depositions, mediations, or hearings, the scheduling buffer that travel had once provided was gone. Now I could handle a deposition or two in one case in the morning and begin another set in the afternoon in a completely different case across the state. I allowed my team to overschedule me, erroneously believing I was invincible and that the work had to get done. I was driving my cases and did not have the support of another lawyer to assist. The workload was unsustainable.

A few months before that December day, I had resolved to leave my firm but delayed doing so in the hope I could bring my clients' cases to a resolution. My clients had become family, and I could not let them down. I also did not want to face the tension that comes from leaving a firm and taking your clients with you. I feared that tension could be worse than the underlying problem itself. So I took it upon myself to do the only thing I knew how to do: keep my head down and work as hard as I could until the cases were complete.

But the six months leading up to that December mediation had taken its toll. I drove my team to their breaking point too. My trusted legal assistant resigned the Friday before my two-week Christmas break would begin. Her parting words to me were, "Michelle, I love you, but you are too busy." I was surprised. Too busy? Isn't being busy a good thing?

Busy had become my mantra. It was what I answered when people asked me, "How are you?" My assistant's words made me question for the first time whether there was another way. Maybe "busy" or "overscheduled" was not the way I should live my life, personally or professionally. Yet, at this point, the damage was done. I had pushed myself over my limit. I burned out and I did not know how to undo it.

## Returning as a Ghost

When I returned to work in January 2022, I was a ghost of myself. My visible passion for my work was gone, and clients who needed my compassion received very little in response. Any feeling or care had literally disappeared from my body. Those around me could feel the emptiness. Those closest to me raised their concerns, and rightfully so. At the time, I could not even put into words how I felt—because I felt nothing.

Knowing I could not remain in this state, I desperately tried to find ways to reenergize myself or re-create the passion I once had for my work. I started creating false deadlines. I still wanted to leave my firm (but not my clients), so I tried to give myself future dates to push through. If I could just make it to this date,

or this event, I would be OK, I told myself. When those deadlines came, I felt no better. And I was not OK. My situation started to become exceedingly desperate.

In need of some escape, I traveled to New Orleans in March 2022 for a two-day CLE conference to dive into the medicine that applied to some of the cases I was going to try. I love to travel and learn. Surely, I thought, this will reignite my passion to do this work. It seemed to be working, until I learned in the middle of the conference that a friend of mine had taken his life. If my seemingly happy friend had entered a dark path that he could not escape, I feared that if I did not make a needed change, I could end up in the same place.

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## Heading to the Exits

As March turned to April, my unrealistic goal of resolving my clients' cases before I could leave my firm only led to further despair and a desire to simply walk away from it all. I woke up one morning with this thought: "I would be happy if I never took a deposition again." Over the next several weeks, that thought persisted and grew.

When I envisioned a future, the only way I could see any potential relief was if I stopped practicing law. The only flicker of hope I felt was when I considered what it would be like to no longer be a lawyer. I joined a former lawyer collaborative that provides resources to lawyers interested in leaving a legal career and finding an alternative, non-lawyer job. This seemed like the only solution to fixing my burnout.

I found the perfect job on LinkedIn. It combined my prior sales and marketing experience with my current litigation experience. The job required a law license, but I would not be practicing law. It seemed like the perfect solution.

When I received the offer a few weeks later, I submitted my resignation to my firm. I immediately felt all the weight I had been carrying around lift from my shoulders. There were painful conversations to be endured as I explained to my clients that I would no longer represent them. I was deeply sorry to leave without finishing their cases. But there was also overwhelming relief as I walked out of my firm that last day, leaving behind the dark cloud that had engulfed me for almost a year. I took a three-week break in between jobs and, for the first time in years, focused on me. I realized how broken I was, so much so that I did not recognize myself anymore.

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## Finding a Way Back

The legal industry tells us from the moment we enter law school that we must look a certain way and work a certain way to succeed. Lawyers who throw themselves into their work and are accessible 24/7 are the most successful. And I was willing to

conform to that box at the sacrifice of my mental health, until it broke me.

During the short time of reflection I had between jobs, I came across an invitation for a free career coaching session through the former lawyer collaborative. I had heard of successful people having career coaches and had thought I might have one at some point in my future. I was intrigued but also skeptical. If I had no idea what I was doing with my life, how was a career coach going to help me? I had just *left* my career practicing law, even though I had been a passionate and successful advocate. At best, seeking a coach seemed premature.

Despite my doubts, I signed up for the free session and met with career leadership coach Emily Hirsekorn via Zoom a week later. Although I had taken a step in the right direction by leaving my firm, I needed help to recover. That meant putting myself first and making that recovery a priority for myself, my family, and others. Saying yes to that initial session redirected my purpose and passion for serving others through the practice of law under circumstances that supported me.

When I first met Emily, she exuded joy. Her energy was contagious and her positive attitude was infectious, even when I felt empty. After our first meeting, I decided she could help me. So I committed to 10 sessions.

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## Doing the Work

My sessions with Emily uncovered my dysfunctional pursuit of perfection, which I suspect many lawyers suffer from before, during, and after law school. Lawyers are typically high achievers, seeking their next accolade. We spend very little time acknowledging our own successes. We live in a culture that praises workaholicism but fails to recognize the detriment it has on society.

Emily helped me to realize that, in my attempt to conform, I had lost my way. I no longer knew what brought me joy because it had not been a priority for so long. She posed questions I could not answer. And it was painful spending days in silence contemplating the answers to those questions. The exercise was necessary because, in time, I could define my core personal values. To shape the future I wanted, I had to make decisions with those core values in mind. If an opportunity did not align with those values, I learned to say no. I began to regain my confidence as I returned to who I am.

Emily also taught me how to change my mindset. I had been living in a low-energy state, plagued by self-doubt or blaming others for my situation. That state is what ultimately forced me to change, for which I am grateful. But I had to shift my focus and energy, stepping outside to see situations or circumstances from others' points of view.

Seeing the world differently brought me to a state of peace. I committed to a self-care routine that involved daily exercise for my mental health and listening to or reading books to fill my

desire for continuous learning and growth. I dove deeper into my own spirituality and connection with the universe, recognizing that I find my purpose in serving others. With time, I realized that I missed the practice of law. I had been doing the right work by serving my clients in their time of need, but I had been practicing in the wrong set of circumstances, circumstances that prevented the balanced life I needed.

Relying on my core values, I began to contemplate returning to the law but under different terms. Emily helped me articulate what I needed in my next opportunity. And with the benefit of that clarity came the fortunate opportunity to reenter the practice on my own terms.

In August of 2022, I began a new journey to create and develop my own division within a new law firm. My practice areas of medical malpractice and nursing home negligence complemented the firm's general personal injury practice. I took on the responsibility of developing the business, systems, and team to pursue cases successfully within our new division. Though I never initially believed it possible, my division turned a profit in its first year—a win not only for my firm and me but also for my clients whose cases resolved successfully and quickly. I attribute that success to using the tools I learned from Emily.

Although the journey was difficult and painful at times, it brought me to where I am today. I live my life completely differently than I did a couple years ago. I am now living the life meant for me. I have defined boundaries that I am not willing to compromise. I work in an environment that is suited for me and complements my strengths and core values. My passion for the law and helping my clients has returned.

I share my story with others so that they too may see the light amid the darkness. There is help available to you, but you must choose to make yourself a priority and seek the support and help you need. And to help you—as she did me—my coach, Emily Hirsekorn, will leave you with some advice on how to start rekindling your joy for your practice.

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## The Career Confidence Code: A Framework for Sustainable Career Success

I (Emily Hirsekorn) am in awe of Michelle's bravery, vulnerability, and commitment to inspiring fellow lawyers as she shares her personal story with burnout, recovery, and deep personal growth. Michelle has set the stage with an exceptional example of how to examine one's career, habits, and way of living to ensure that one's career is not only fulfilling but also sustainable. To that end, we are on a joint mission. I feel honored to share this space to offer a practical framework everyone can use in their own career leadership journey.

There is no single path to career well-being, and—as Michelle explained—transforming the way you live and work is certainly

not easy. But I am here to assure you that it is nonetheless doable, and the effort you put in will surely be worth it in the end. Having supported thousands of lawyers and law students over the past decade, I have recognized three universal career concerns: (1) career path confusion, (2) doubting oneself and those around one, and (3) poor work-life balance. I created the Career Confidence Code framework to help attorneys address each concern, while also learning the secret sauce to success that Michelle mentioned above: energy management.

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## Career Clarity

When it comes to career clarity, we often focus on finding that “perfect job.” But I want to offer an alternative definition: knowing who you are (your strengths, preferences, etc.); knowing what you value most in life; and clarity on the lifestyle you want to live. Then, and only then, can you set the right professional goals to align your work and life for long-term fulfillment and success. We focus here on the core values aspect, which played such a huge role in Michelle's personal transformation.

First, I encourage you to develop a short list of core values. There's no magic number, but five tends to feel manageable. Once you have your list, you can pull it out and assess how choices about your future align with your values. This process helps us avoid making important decisions based on notions of what we are “supposed” to do, instead making value-aligned decisions that are truly best for us personally. Even if you can convince yourself that a new role “makes sense” logically, you're likely to *feel* unfulfilled if it cuts against your values.

In addition to setting yourself up to make more conscious decisions, you can work toward greater fulfillment from a variety of angles by identifying current gaps in valued living. Take that list of core values and rate how well you are currently living out each one on a scale of 1 to 10, then identify gaps you would like to address. Consider how your current work or lifestyle might cut against each value, and consider changes you can make immediately to start closing the gaps.

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## Self-Confidence

As Michelle explained so clearly, the legal field is full of ambitious folks with perfectionist tendencies in high-stakes roles, and they are taught that busyness indicates success. When lawyers first enter practice, start a new job mid-career, or even assume a leadership role, self-doubt runs rampant. While confidence can certainly build with experience, there is much more work we can do early on. Here are my four favorite mindset shifts you can start using to bolster confidence in the workplace immediately (inspired by an Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching framework).

**First, challenge limiting thoughts.** We learn from our parents, society, and trusted institutions a variety of limiting concepts such as what success means, what we should do for work, and that there are limitations on what we can accomplish. When you notice any such thoughts holding you back, question their truth, clarify their impact on you, and choose a thought more supportive of your professional goals.

**Second, assume the best.** We are prone to assuming the worst and catastrophizing all the little things that do not turn out as planned. But this type of negative thinking leaves us paralyzed and hopeless. Instead, question how likely it is things will really turn out as badly as you fear (often, not likely at all!), and consider instead the best possible scenario. Once we can see other possibilities, we tend to feel differently and can access our creative problem-solving capabilities to move ourselves forward.

**Third, when you encounter a difficult interpersonal situation, consider other perspectives.** Someone walks by your office quickly or does not respond to an email for days, and you conclude that that person does not want to work with you. That negative conclusion then affects how you interact with this individual and may even leave you feeling self-conscious throughout the workday. When you recognize you are drawing negative conclusions from a scenario with limited information, try putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Consider what else could be going on and what that person may be going through. This shift in perspective can help us let the little things slide, not take things so personally, and give others the benefit of the doubt to improve relationships and workplace culture.

**Finally, talk back to your inner critic.** This pest telling you that you are not good enough never completely goes away. It wants to keep you safe and small, but it in turn holds you back from reaching your full potential. The first step in challenging your inner critic is to recognize that the message is coming from your inner critic—not you—and it is not true. Second, pull out all of the reasons (and supporting evidence) proving you *are* in fact good enough. Third, come up with more supportive messaging so you can effectively talk back to the inner critic when it rears its ugly head.

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## Work-Life Balance

We can achieve all the career “success” in the world, but if we fail to take care of ourselves and prioritize what we value most, we risk resenting our work, feeling unfulfilled, and ultimately burning out. Just to be clear: I don’t subscribe to the outdated definition of “work-life balance” that told us to sleep eight hours, work eight hours, and spend eight hours in our personal lives. I prefer, instead, to think about “balance” this way: You spend your time how you want to spend your time, with the right amount of work and the right amount of time outside of work. It is a completely personal inquiry!

So how do we pull it off?

**First, recognize your self-worth in order to start prioritizing yourself.** You must believe you are worthy of attention and care, which may require a shift away from an ingrained habit of equating your worth with your productivity. Recognize you are worthy simply because you exist.

**Second, establish your personal health and wellness needs.** We all have basic needs that must be met if we are to function well, e.g., nutrition, hydration, fitness, and sleep. Sadly, lawyers often tend to deprioritize even these most basic needs when work gets busy. But just as Michelle explained, once we recognize what we truly need, boundaries *must* be set and communicated. When you identify these basic needs, prioritize them like a work meeting. Create habits and routines that set you up for success and refuse to compromise. (Most days, that is . . .)

**Third, establish your personal well-being needs beyond health and wellness.** While basic needs are critical, we should also develop goals in the areas of spirituality, socialization, hobbies, and whatever else brings us joy and a sense of connection. These activities are often the first to go for busy lawyers, which leads to feeling unfulfilled and resentful toward your work.

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## Energy Management

Last, but certainly not least, we must understand what we as individuals find energizing, exciting, and inspiring to create sustainable career success. One simple way to start assessing your energy is to explore when you feel most energized and identify the various factors at play. Consider the environment, who is with you, what you are doing, and the purpose of the activity. These factors are your energy boosters, which you can lean into more to maximize your energy across all activities. Then conduct a similar inquiry into when you feel most drained or stressed, identifying all of the different stressors at play. Once you know what drains your energy, you can identify strategies to minimize or eliminate those stressors generally and with respect to particular events or future performances.

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## Putting It All Together

To sum up, it is time to clarify who you really are, decide what you want most for your career and life, build the confidence you need to go after your goals, and do everything you can to set yourself up for long-term success. We just covered a lot of new concepts and personal growth strategies, which can easily lead to feeling overwhelmed. So I encourage you to pick just one place to start and one strategy to try first, then dive right in! ■

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