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Burnout Can Strike Anyone, so Be Vigilant About Its Symptoms

* Sufferers often ignore this state of mental and physical exhaustion that threatens their jobs as well as their health and emotional well-being.

By SUSAN VAUGHN, Special to The Times

Office workers, no matter what their field, are increasingly threatened by burnout because of "access overload," according to Debra Dinnocenzo, co-author of the upcoming "Dot.calm: The Search for Sanity in a Wired World" (Dinnocenzo, 2001). Their employers now can harness them 24/7, thanks to cell phones, pagers, e-mail, electronic personal assistants and laptops, so there is no structured respite from job obligations.

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Burnout Busters

Suffering from burnout? Does your life feel like an endless Monday? If your energy is flagging, your workload is increasing and you're finding yourself fantasizing daily about starting life over as a Tahitian pearl farmer, consider taking some "anti-burnout" action stat. Here are some suggestions compiled from "Dot.calm: The Search for Sanity in a Wired World" by Debra Dinnocenzo and "Keeping the Fire: From Burnout to Balance" by Ruth Luban, psychotherapist and burnout expert.
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Hold certain times sacred. Don't let thoughts of work, job-related phone calls or other employment interruptions invade these personal rejuvenation times.

Exercise to burn off stress.

Create a sign that says "Breathe." Keep it on your desk at work. Each time you see the sign, breathe deeply and slowly.

Catch up on sleep time. If possible, take short naps when you feel sleepy.

Take regular weekend trips and long drives. Don't bring work along.

Regularly participate in favorite pastimes. These might include going to movies, listening to music, attending learning seminars, meditating, going on historical walking tours, volunteering for community service, visiting art galleries or going to

the theater.

Nourish your body through therapeutic massage, facials, dance and yoga.

Visit nature. Sail, camp, climb rocks, take hikes in the woods, go stargazing. Kayak, go bird or whale watching, scuba dive. Each day at work, aspire to notice the outdoors (the blue sky, cumulus clouds, a sunset).

Take up new hobbies. Play a musical instrument, garden, sing, skate, paint or make pottery.

Allow morning time for yourself. Before beginning work, spend at least 15 minutes centering, breathing, greeting the day. Use your commuting time for personal projects and meditation, not for pre-office work.

Beautify your work space. If possible, put up photos of loved ones and pictures of scenic places. Change these every so often so they don't become invisible.

Establish boundaries. Be assertive. Speak up when you're overwhelmed. Say "no" to those who demand too much of you.

Create anti-burnout affirmations, such as "It's OK to leave this for tomorrow"; "I'm entitled to a refreshing break right now."

Collect "centering scents"--incense, bath oils, potpourri--that can wake you up, boost your mood and invigorate you.

Play games. Be creative. Have fun. Do art. Make collages. Keep whimsical toys and objects on your desk.

Help others.

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