

# Preventing **Burnout** Among Personal Trainers

BY DEBRA ATKINSON, MS

Congratulations! The results from the testing service are in, and you are now a certified personal trainer! Your hard-won education, freshly printed business cards, promising client leads and unbridled passion for fitness are all about to pay off, right? After all, how can someone so talented, bright and people oriented as yourself not enjoy a long, successful career as a trainer? The answer is because it's bright lights like you who tend to burn out faster.

The good news is that you can take steps now to prevent career burnout, which can start even before you conduct your first client session. To help you keep your enthusiastic edge for personal training, this article shares timely tips from experienced trainers who themselves learned by trial and error. Revealing practical strategies for avoiding the common errors of new trainers, these veterans uncover the rationale behind the errors and underscore the reality of each situation. These tips are not exclusive to new trainers, however. Regardless of how long you've been a personal trainer, having a burnout prevention program in place is always a good idea!

**Error:** You are training clients from early in the morning to late at night, according to their demands and what is convenient for them.

**RATIONALE:** You've got an empty schedule to fill and you're anxious to start building financial security, so maybe it's not unreasonable to be working so many hours.

**Reality:** A split shift of two 4-hour time blocks adds up to more than an 8-hour day. Long hours can quickly cause you to lose motivation, and finding time for the people and activities that rejuvenate you is important.

**Strategy:** Keli Roberts, a personal trainer who also serves as group fitness manager at Equinox in Pasadena, California, believes the sense of urgency a new trainer feels about earning enough money can lead to mistakes when choosing which clients to take on. To avoid such mistakes, Roberts has learned to set boundaries for herself. She recommends that trainers look realistically at how many hours they are able and willing to devote to work.

Energy and coping skills are highly individualized. Determine what you need to stay fresh and what you are not prepared to

sacrifice. Then use these determinations to set your boundaries. Remember, it's ultimately easier to say no from the start than to agree to something you will later regret.

Mark Cibrario, owner of The Trainers Club in Northbrook, Illinois, concurs that setting parameters is important. However, he admits that, early on in your training career, you may need to take on clients as they come. One way to reconcile these two needs is to plan in advance how you will end or modify a client relationship down the road. Cibrario suggests that if faced with the prospect of cutting back, you tell new clients up front that your arrangement with them is temporary. You could say something like, "I am willing to train you at 7:00 PM now, but when my schedule fills, I will be dropping my evening appointments." This way, you clearly communicate your expectations and draw boundaries in a manner that clients respect.

**Error:** You are attempting to make one-to-one client sessions your sole source of income.

**RATIONALE:** Training is what you love to do. Providing this kind of "personal" service enables you to share your passion and positively influence lives.

**Reality:** You'll soon exhaust your resources, because you can train clients only so many hours a day; focusing on training to the exclusion of other services narrows your opportunity for growth. Without diversi-

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fication and downtime between sessions, there is also a risk that all your programs will begin to look the same and no longer be personalized for each client. In the long run, you will have little job satisfaction if you stagnate.

**Strategy:** “You have to find ways to leverage your time and make more per unit of time,” says Juan Carlos Santana, MEd, and director of Optimum Performance Systems Inc. in Boca Raton, Florida. Santana has diversified his general services to include training special populations, producing videos and books, running sports performance camps and presenting at conferences. As a result, he can now reach and influence many more people, which is personally rewarding.

Roberts and Cibrario are two other industry veterans who have evolved their careers by continually moving forward with new products and concepts to create more pieces in their business “pie.”

“If I’m not moving forward, I’m moving backward,” says Cibrario. By diversifying his career, he not only augments his income but also stays intellectually challenged. “Boredom leads to burnout,” he warns. In fact, being able to distinguish between boredom and burnout is a skill you need in order to stay motivated. To solve or prevent any problem, you must first be able to define it thoroughly.

Santana describes fatigue as the precursor to burnout. He contends that true burnout occurs only after years of hard work with little or no rest. But long before burnout manifests itself in obvious ways, boredom is simmering under the surface. According to Santana, boredom is the result of a lack of stimulation, challenge or action. “Too much thinking [and] not enough doing” is what he sees as the cause of boredom in many fitness professionals. Doing the same thing day after day, cue after cue,

## Six Ways Group Fitness Instructors Can Avoid Burnout

Personal trainers are not the only fitness professionals vulnerable to career burnout. Group fitness instructors can also take steps to avoid burning out on the job. Here’s how:

- 1. Define What You Consider a “Full” Schedule.** Determine how many days a week you want to work and how many classes you want to teach. Look for a balance in the types of classes you offer. Be realistic and specific.
- 2. Think of Ways You Can Diversify Your Career.** Unless you are independently wealthy or have another income, you probably want to find ways to supplement your teaching earnings. Also, all that high impact will eventually take its toll on your aging body. Start thinking now about how else you can tap into your current skills. For example, you might think about writing fitness-related articles, publishing a newsletter, providing new-instructor training or offering one-to-one training in your area of expertise. You should also consider pursuing additional education or training so you can advance to a management level in the fitness industry.
- 3. Know What Refuels You.** Do you need your own personal workout time each day to stay fresh and motivated in your classes? Do you need to add new music to your programs or attend other instructors’ classes for ideas? Are you receiving the continuing education you need to move forward? Know what excites you to teach your next class.
- 4. Know What Drains You.** Are you teaching too many of the same classes, teaching too frequently or putting in long days? Do you hear the same music every day? Are you rushing to class at the last minute? Start finding solutions to those questions that have you nodding your head as you read this.
- 5. Define Personal Boundaries Around Your Teaching Schedule.** Set parameters based on your answers to what refuels you versus what drains you. One parameter might be, “I will not teach classes that cause me to miss my children’s sporting events.” If you are an adrenaline junkie who is continually rushing, a parameter could be, “I will leave for class 10 minutes earlier so that I arrive on time regardless of the traffic.”
- 6. List Your Personal Benchmarks for Career Success.** What does success mean to you? Do you measure it in terms of financial compensation, the number of people who participate in your classes, your career longevity and standing at your club, or simply the compliments you receive from class members? Use your answers to clarify your intentions and inform your future career decisions.

spot after spot is enough to bore anybody. Many trainers are apt to procrastinate: They have lots of great ideas and desire to do more, but they are often afraid to jump in and do it. Santana's advice is to jump! After all, what do you have to lose? If it doesn't work, will you be worse off than when you started, or just in the same place? Even when you fail, you can learn from the experience and move on to the next thing. Persistence is the difference between being good and being great.

**Error:** You're working 6 or even 7 days a week straight without taking any time off.

**RATIONALE:** You love your work and want to maintain relationships with clients who can train only during the time you would normally take off. You justify the extra work by saying it's only a few hours here and there, and if someone's willing to pay you, you'll do it!

**Reality:** Training is a very service-oriented business. Day in and day out, your job requires giving a lot of energy to others. You need to replenish that energy regularly.

**Strategy:** New trainers can be seduced by a case of "mistaken economics," suggests Roberts. "Money is a large motivator for developing a huge client base," she says, "but it comes at a high price." She knows from personal experience that without time away from work, her own practice suffered when her training became stagnant. In addition to affecting your career, burnout rears its head in other areas of your life, showing up as general irritability, impatience in traffic or supermarket lines, being on edge or getting upset too easily.

According to Roberts, it's important to find a balance between work and time off in your life. "When I treat myself with compassion, I am also better able to do that for my clients," she says.

**Error:** When opportunity of any kind knocks, you answer with a resounding "yes."

**RATIONALE:** You're hungry for income and experience and have a strong desire to prove yourself. You want to do it all, because you think you can.

**Reality:** You may be putting obstacles in your path to success without realizing it. Feeling that you are not making any headway is often the result of having no career direction in the first place. Without a clear purpose, all you are really doing is creating busy work in your daily schedule. This self-created and self-fulfilling lack of vision will eventually lead to true burnout.

**Strategy:** Developing—and continuously refining—a 3-to-5-year business vision can clarify decisions about which projects and clients to take on versus which to pass to someone else. When you have a fixed idea about where you want to be, it's easier to see when something will take you too far from the path you need to follow to get there. A clear vision allows you to figure out quickly who you need to be and what you need to do to reach your career goals. It also makes your choices less personal and subjective.

### Shine On Brightly

Maintaining your passion for personal training and your industry edge requires nurturing not only your clients but also yourself. In addition to fine-tuning your programming finesse and your periodization savvy, you need to know how to keep burnout at bay. Keep your bright light burning by taking some mindful action and setting boundaries and benchmarks that will spark your long-term career success.

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