

# Bounce back



Stress and inadequate resources to cope with it can leave SLIs vulnerable. **Jules Dickinson** reflects on her recent brush with burnout and offers tips on staying healthy in the hot zone

**In October 2020, the phrase that was on repeat** in my brain was ‘physician, heal thyself’. It took a week’s well-overdue holiday, during a brief lockdown respite, to make me realise I was burnt out. I had been firmly strapped to the work treadmill since the pandemic started and it was only when I had the chance to take one foot off the belt that the impact really hit me.

For someone who spends many an hour of my professional supervision practice gently suggesting that supervisees undertake more self-care, the fact that I had reached the point of burnout was a shock. It made me take stock of my own practice and prompted a deeper look at what burnout is, how we can recognise it and what we can do to build our resilience. I would like to share some of my findings with you in this article.

## What is burnout?

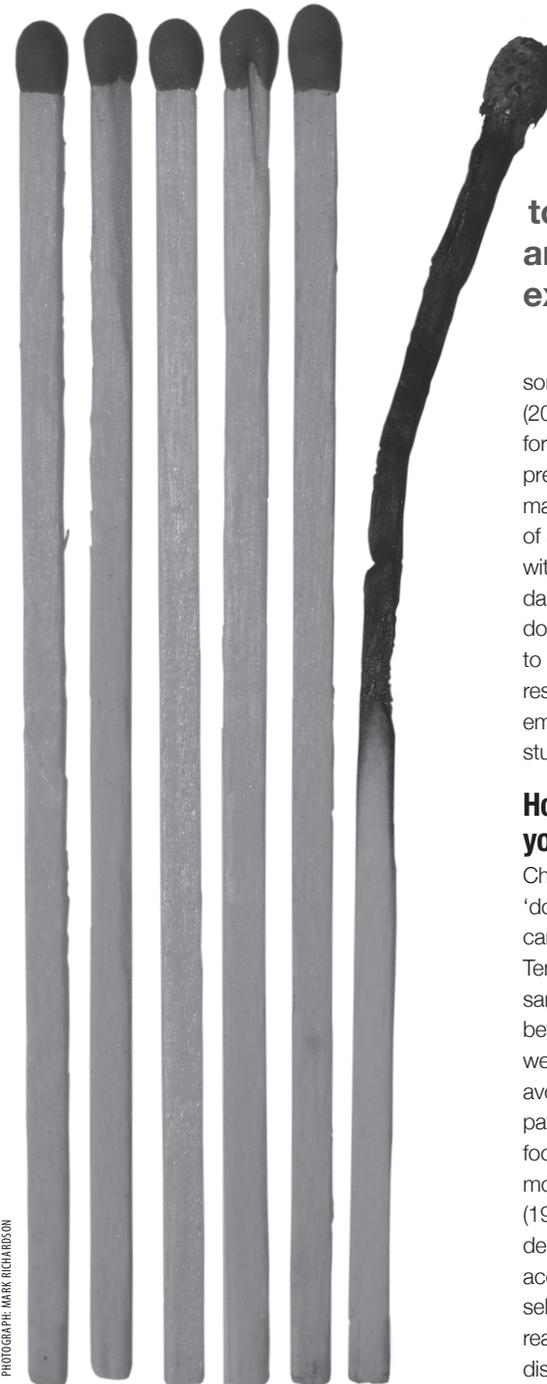
Research suggests that sign language interpreters and translators are particularly prone to burnout (Schwenke et al, 2014), a term used to describe the point where we are emotionally, mentally and physically exhausted, where we feel we can no longer cope and have nothing else to give. Burnout occurs when we are subject to an accumulation of excessive and prolonged stress and when the causes

of this stress surpass our need for rewards, recognition and relaxation.

Stress is our body’s neurological and physiological response to a stressor, and a stressor is essentially any threat which activates those responses. We all have many stressors in our lives. Some are external: unreasonably high workloads, insufficient travel time between assignments, not knowing where the next job is coming from, Covid-19, other people’s expectations. Other stressors are internal: our expectations of ourselves, setting the bar too high, being perfectionists, our sense of self-worth, our investment in our work. While we cannot always do something about our stressors, it is vital that we address our *reaction* to them, as stress can negatively impact on both our mind and our body.

When we look at burnout, it is important to emphasise that stress is not the sole cause. It is impossible to get through life without

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PHOTOGRAPH: MARK RICHARDSON

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some degree of stress. As Hawkins & Shoheit (2000) point out, stress can be a positive force, activating our body, mind and energy, preparing us for action and helping us to manage a threat or crisis. It is the combination of stress and inadequate resources to cope with the demands of our job which causes the damage. As interpreters and translators, we don’t always have the opportunity or agency to convert our stress energy into action. The result is that we can become stuck in our emotional reaction to stress and, when we are stuck, we become exhausted.

## How to recognise when your tank is nearly empty

Chris Johnstone (2019:171) says that we ‘don’t just drive on regardless’ when our car warning light tells us we are low on fuel. Tending to our burnout signals is exactly the same and we need to pay attention to them before we are out of energy. So what tells us we are running low on fuel? In my blog on avoiding burnout, I refer to my disturbed sleep pattern, lack of appetite and loss of interest in food, my irritability and difficulty in controlling moods and emotions. Freudenberger (1975) highlights emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and a decreased sense of accomplishment. Other signs include crippling self-doubt, difficulty in making decisions, reactions that are out of proportion and displaying confusion and irritability.

## Why are sign language interpreters prone to burnout?

Of course, everyone is at risk of stress and burnout but, as Boucher (2021) says, those who engage in listening to and caring for others, especially where there is trauma, can be at greater risk of harm. There are several factors that can contribute to sign language interpreters experiencing burnout and, while you are undoubtedly aware of many of them, I will highlight a few here as we can often minimise or dismiss their impact.

**Vicarious trauma:** Sign language interpreters<sup>1</sup> frequently work alongside professionals who provide support to people who have suffered trauma, distressing life events or who are in a state of unmet need. The nature of interpreting means that we witness and re-present through our bodies ‘the spectrum of human experience, from the most public to the most intimate, the most joyful to the most tragic’ (Herring, 2021).

This exposure to the detail of traumatic events, suffering and/or distress of others can lead to vicarious trauma, severely depleting our physical, psychological and emotional energy. Descriptions of vicarious trauma focus on more obvious or overt incidents and situations, but the impact of witnessing the subtle but ongoing oppression and mistreatment of deaf people should not be underestimated. Most of the issues that I have taken to supervision during the last 18 years of my practice have originated in the ‘ordinary’ work that I undertake, such as workplace interpreting. Sometimes we are on the lookout for the traumatic events that we know will knock us sideways but forget the insidious accumulation of the everyday microaggressions against the community we work with.

**Moral injury:** In addition to vicarious trauma,

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sign language interpreters can also be affected by ‘moral injury’, which is the distress we experience when actions or inactions violate our moral code or conflict with our individual beliefs about what is right or wrong. I am sure we can all recall instances when this has occurred during an interpreting assignment. Perhaps you have had to interpret a discriminatory remark or act or have witnessed a deaf client being treated unjustly. Maybe you have interpreted a conversation where someone’s opinion is in direct opposition to your strongly held beliefs. As Gross (2020) identifies, in these situations, we are the vehicle for someone else’s views – the words are coming out of our mouths and from our hands and will inevitably leave us feeling tainted or contaminated to some degree.

A constant sense of our core values being under attack can evoke powerful feelings of shame, guilt and anger and can lead to individuals feeling devastated and disillusioned (Alexander, 2021). A build-up of these feelings will eventually result in disconnection and a lack of engagement with colleagues and clients; once we start to lose our connection with others, we become more susceptible to burnout.

## Interpreting in the pandemic

I couldn’t write an article on burnout without mentioning the impact of Covid-19 and the shift to working remotely. It is increasingly recognised that online work poses challenges that go beyond the technological. For many of us, our work is

now in our home, in a way that it never was before, and this brings its own unique stress. We can find ourselves interpreting those calls which evoke feelings of moral injury or which trigger distress and upset, but we are no longer able to walk away and leave our feelings in the therapy room or the doctor’s surgery. There are also the additional challenges inherent in online platforms, such as hyper-gaze, mirror anxiety and cognitive overload from producing and interpreting non-verbal cues (Fauville et al, 2021).

## Becoming a resilient practitioner

Resilience is the ability to cope with and bounce back from trauma, crisis and stressful situations. There are many steps we can take to help ensure we remain as healthy as possible in the face of difficult and challenging work, but I would like to suggest my top three for keeping yourself well. Content warning: I may frequently recommend professional supervision!

## Set your tripwires

First and foremost, we need to identify the signs which indicate we are running low on emotional, mental and physical energy. Take some time to think what *your* warning signals might be. A good professional supervisor will be on the lookout for patterns of behaviour that indicate you are approaching burnout. If you are not in supervision, can you ask colleagues and friends

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to be honest with you if they are concerned about your emotional, psychological or physical health? You can also map out and monitor your own ‘stress signature’ using a system like the one illustrated below (Johnstone, 2019:169).

## Find your safety valve

As Breanna Cross Hall (2017) succinctly puts it, ‘we are charged with bearing witness to some of life’s greatest beauty and deepest pain, all while maintaining a stance of neutrality and flexibility’. Interpreting is a people-facing profession and people are complex beings. If we take time to reflect on interpreting assignments, we can see how many situational demands actually have little to do with the linguistic elements of our work. It is important to recognise the stressors of working alongside professionals who are supporting people in times of trauma, great need and crisis, of working with an oppressed minority group and frequently witnessing oppression. Sometimes we are unable to do anything beyond interpret and provide access in these situations, so it is important to have a safety valve to siphon

## Finding your stress signature

Domain	Warning Signs	Symptoms
Feeling	I’m tense, sulky	Anxiety, depression
Thinking	My mind is racing	It is hard to concentrate
Body	Sweatiness, tension	Skin rash, headache
Behaviour	I go quiet, withdraw	Mistakes, accidents
Relationships	Tension, irritability	Rows, I become isolated

<sup>1</sup>I refer to ‘interpreters’ throughout this article but of course all communication professionals can experience burnout and need to be mindful of developing and maintaining their self-care and resilience

off those built-up emotions and feelings. A professional supervisor will help you find that valve and enable you to open it, thus releasing the accumulated pressure.

### Complete your stress cycle

Unresolved and undischarged stress stays within the body (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020) and can produce the symptoms highlighted in this article. The good news is that there are several ways to stop getting stuck in the emotional fallout from your reaction to stress. Emily and Amelia Nagoski's (2020) work on completing your stress cycle is invaluable here. At the top of their list is physical activity, as it tells your brain that you have survived the threat and that your body is a safe place. Find

something that works for you. It doesn't have to be running or heading to the gym – get out and go for a walk, dance around the kitchen to your favourite music, get stuck into the gardening, strap on your roller-skates – but find time for it and schedule it into your diary.

### In conclusion

Next month will mark a year since my realisation that I was at burnout point. In that time, I have taken a large helping of the medicine I dish out to others and have done a lot of work on my personal resilience. I have learnt some useful tricks and strategies to develop my 'bouncebackability'. I hope that this article inspires you to do the same.



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