

# Burnout Alert

Do you have a life outside of work? Maybe you should

**M**y moment of truth in advertising hit me in 1998 when, as CEO of NW Ayer, I was speaking to the “under-30 professionals” of the New York Ad Club. I gave my usual cheerleading speech, which I truly believed: “You have to love it to be in it.” “This is a business of passion ... bring your whole self to work.” I shared war stories and “get ahead” tips.

A young man raised his hand and quietly asked, “Do you have a life outside of work?” I almost fell off my stool. I looked at him and said, “No. I don’t have a life outside of this job. I don’t have hobbies. I work.” Silence.

I had a good life with my husband Joe. But too often I was obsessed with the latest crisis or the new pitch or the next big thing. I bought into the 24/7 badge of busyness, sometimes feeling like a FedEx package, traveling wherever and whenever. Nothing was too much to ask.

Several months later, I said, “Enough.” I took five weeks off. In the end, I quit and created Just Ask a Woman, a women’s marketing company and a career that’s livable and, honestly, lovable.

I wasn’t the only worn-out ad girl. Recently I asked my friend Pam why she’d left advertising.

**Often the most dedicated people are the ones who wear themselves out from pushing so hard, with no rest.**

“Because for once I wanted to be the first person to arrive at my own dinner party and to get to the airport before my flight took off,” she said.

The hours can even be dangerous. Dave, a 12-year ad veteran, told me: “I was in L.A. on a shoot. It was 5:30 a.m. I had been awake for 24 hours and had six more to go. Driving back from a studio to my hotel, I called my girlfriend and made her stay on the phone with me for half an hour because I was sure I would fall asleep and crash.”

The risk to agencies is that often the most dedicated people are the ones who wear themselves out from pushing so hard, with no rest. And they may feel that leaving the business is their only option. We may be draining the pipeline of the best of our future leaders.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen,” or you believe that advertising thrives amid chaos, all-nighters and the sweat and screams of ideas being born. One creative director wryly agreed: “All cre-



**MARY LOU QUINLAN** is CEO of Just Ask a Woman and author of *Time Off for Good Behavior: How Hard-working Women Can Take a Break and Change Their Lives* (Broadway Books, 2005). She will be speaking at an Advertising Women of New York event on Feb. 17. For info, call (212) 221-7969 or visit [www.awny.org](http://www.awny.org).

atives, marketing and agency folk are profoundly codependent. We need the affirming torture of what we produce every day or we don’t function for long. We believe we have no choice but to perform to get the self-worth we so desperately desire. Burnout is an unavoidable consequence.”

Is there a way to control the burn before it’s too late? In researching my new book, *Time Off for Good Behavior*, I found several predictors. Recognize any?

**Deferred maintenance.** Cancel any doctor appointments lately? Headaches or anxiety a way of life?

**Too big for your own good.** Exercise takes a back seat to a tight schedule. Cold pizza counts as a major food group. Impatience and frustration follow.

**Joined the 2 a.m. Wake-Up Club?** I used to leave middle-of-the-night voicemails for people so

they would see I was committed. Right.

**Lonely at the top/middle/bottom?** When your colleagues know you better than your friends or family do, something’s wrong. Just because they “get” it doesn’t mean they get all of you.

Why do we let this happen? Account-guy-turned-client Larry said, “I think some of us put work before life because there’s a vested interest in seeing something through to completion. Not to complete it feels as if we’ve failed. That’s why I’ve given up those dinners with the family or bailed out of that ski weekend that was planned for three weeks.”

But the dinners and weekends and downtime can be the key to keeping your passion and energy high. Here’s some preventive medicine:

**Take your vacation.** You’re not that indispensable. Leave the blackberry at home.

**Plan an annual weekend getaway where you are the only guest.** Nap, walk, relax but write down what’s important and what isn’t. Is it you, the agency or the industry that isn’t working? Compare notes with an ad friend you trust.

**Plan some real time off.** Some agencies are starting to address the 21st-century call for flexibility. Present your case. Be specific about your needs. Be prepared to negotiate.

According to recent surveys, 43 percent of people plan to change jobs this year. Salary.com says that compared with three years ago, 20 percent more people are voting for more time off versus more money. Look at how your agency is rewarding and motivating your hardest workers. Let them go ... for a while. With a little time off, they may never want to leave.