

# THE PHILADELPHIA LAWYER

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## Shining a New Light on Public Interest

### Sheller Center Focuses on Social Justice for All

BY LAWRENCE S. FELZER



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Dean Rod Smolla

By JOHN E. SAVOTH



"On Service"

By M. KELLY TILLERY

# Emotionally Drained

## *A Pragmatic Guide to Caring for and Avoiding Burnout Caused by Empathy-Based Work*

### BURNOUT AND SELF-CARE IN SOCIAL WORK

Written by SaraKay Smullens

103 pages

\$34.99, NASW Press, Washington, D.C.

**I**t seems there is a paucity of literature about lawyer burnout. This book is aimed at social workers and others in the mental health field, but after reading a few chapters, I thought it could just as well be applicable to lawyers.

SaraKay Smullens is a well-known local clinical social worker, therapist, educator and writer who begins by telling us how you may love your profession but suffer from frustration, exhaustion, helplessness and fear of failure.

She says that this often leads to symptoms of irritability toward clients (and adversaries and judges), disaffection toward spouses and friends, substance abuse and gambling addiction, loss of sleep, susceptibility to illness and depression. The perspectives Smullens advances to help readers recognize they have reached a dangerous level are what she calls compassion fatigue, countertransference and vicarious trauma.

Compassion fatigue comes from the chronic use of empathy when dealing with clients who are suffering in some way, when having difficulty helping them causes stress. Countertransference is the problem of being vulnerable to burnout due to present or past personal problems of your own, with the need to set boundaries. Vicarious trauma can be similar to post-traumatic stress disorder arising after the handling of a matter, perhaps not as successfully as wished.

You may be too lacking in time and energy to realize how far down the path you have gone, but Smullens brings it home with practical examples. Once you have acquired this self-actualization,

you can work on the remedies of “self-care” that comprise the second part of the book.

These suggestions are not just touchy-feely. Smullens tells us how to turn pity and sympathy into empathy in order to establish proper boundaries, and how to turn negative concerns into passion for your work, even if some of these behaviors are impermanent.

She suggests getting personal and organizational support, including therapy, exploring exercise and other leisure time options, religious and spiritual associations, sharing with supervisors, journaling, trying not to act like a social worker (or lawyer) in your

personal relationships, getting a pet and even changing the focus of your practice. In this way she helps us think outside the box.

The author is very convincing that doing the best you can will help you remain strong and avoid burnout. Many lawyers say they feel like social workers sometimes anyway. This book is for all of us. ■

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