

Know the signs of writer burnout

You usually think of writers burning out after a long career, or at least after they get half a dozen books out—and then it’s not burnout, it’s just a slump.

If you really want to be a published author, it goes without saying that you’re driven, goal-oriented, and your own worst critic, right? Take a person like that and sign them to a publishing contract. Their dream is achieved, so they can relax, bask in the glow, and enjoy their success, right?

Wrong. (See above for “driven, goal-oriented, and their own worst critic.”)

They want each book to be better than the last, they’re constantly striving to become a better writer, and if they have a day job (and the vast majority of authors do), they’re essentially holding down two full-time jobs. Add to that trying to juggle family, and guess how much time that leaves for “alone time”—those precious minutes when you get to read, rest, and recharge. And if you’re truly driven, you feel guilty when you’re not writing. A deadline is always looming, so your butt needs to be in a chair, your eyeballs on a laptop screen, and your brain in gear and on fire.

Guess what? That’s an author setting themselves up for burnout. And guess what? That was me.

After I turned in my third book, I realized (and admitted) a lot about myself. I’d always known that I was driven and goal-oriented. That and sheer stubbornness is what got me published (and perhaps a wee bit of talent). I was proud that I was that way, and I still am. But I’ve realized that if I’m going to have a long writing career (which I’m determined to have), I have got to be equally driven, determined, and oriented on the goal of *having a life*.

Writing isn’t everything. There, I’ve said it. And if you want longevity in this business—play isn’t just important, it’s critical.

We get so intensely focused on having achieved the dream and working so hard to keep the dream going, that we’re blind to the signs that if we keep going down that road at that pace, that dream could turn into a nightmare. It’s called burnout. Nothing strikes more terror into the heart of an author than the fear that their creative well might run dry. And it can happen, unless you take steps to prevent it.

I’m glad to say that I caught myself in time. Balancing my life with my work isn’t easy, but I’m getting there. I’m making the time to read, relax, go out with friends, and do the things that I enjoy. I wouldn’t have done any of those things (rest, read, or leave the house unless it was on fire) before I saw the writing on the wall and took steps to take my life back. Remember that when you sign your name to that publishing contract. Dreams were meant to be savored and enjoyed. You do have to work hard, but sometimes, the work can wait.

