

# Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

Don't Stop Wagging Your Tail

as seen in:



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## Self-Care

By Ann Marie St. George

# Don't Stop Wagging Your Tail

As the plunger in the syringe slowly pushes the liquid into his veins, he gradually stops breathing. The pain of the last few weeks has drifted off with his last breath, so imperceptible I hadn't noticed it. I just stare at the plunger waiting for some reaction from Max that this fluid of death has reached his heart. There is no response, just the sudden realization that the doctor is reaching for her stethoscope and placing it on his still chest, telling us he is gone. As I come out of my fog, I remember mid plunge the veterinarian telling him it was OK to chase the squirrels in the sky. Wait, I want to tell him I love him and loved the way he loved me, one last time. The moment is gone, and I hope in my heart of hearts he knows how much he was loved.

The tears fall gently from my eyes, the pain is real, the world stops spinning, the memories flash by, the unconditional love, curious nature and the incessant tail wagging never stopping until the end. The tears rolling off my nose and cheek, my nose fills and I need to inhale to stop it from dripping off my lips and chin. Feeling like I am having a heart attack, wiping my nose and feeling the wetness of the tears on my face, recalling the warmth of Max's furry body after he is gone - still sensing his presence. I know his pain is gone and his tail wagging continues somewhere safer and more gentle, as gentle as the soul he was.



**W**hat you have just read is an excerpt from my journal sharing the loss of my dog Max. Max was always wagging his tail, always enjoying every second of his life. It wasn't until he stopped wagging his tail that I knew his time here was done. This got me thinking about those of us who don't feel like wagging our tails anymore and how we are more prone to career burnout than most professions.

In researching a definition for "burnout" I found that David Ballard, Psy.D, assistant executive director for organization excellence for the American Psychological Association, described job burnout as "an extended period of time where someone experiences exhaustion and a lack of interest in things, resulting in a decline in their job performance." His thought was that most burnout had to do with facing chronic stress, and it often occurs when we experience stressors that are more than we can handle. One of Ballard's main focuses was that when left unchecked, burnout can wreak havoc with our well-being, relationships with others and job performance.

As people-pleasing overachievers, funeral directors should be keeping a close eye out for signs of burnout before it causes irreparable problems. It is often due to our "I can do everything" attitudes that we seldom see it coming. Because we are often so passionate about what we do, we tend to ignore the fact that we are working long hours, taking on heavy workloads and putting pressure on ourselves to excel. We become perfect candidates for burnout. That said, we need to take a second look at ourselves and self-evaluate our risks. It can't hurt to reach out to a family member or friend to ask their opinion, as they are apt to be more honest with you than you are with yourself.

The key signs we should be looking for are: exhaustion, lack of motivation, frustration, cynicism, negative emotions, cognitive problems (like not

being able to pay attention), not caring about how you are doing your job, conflict with those at work and at home, not taking care of yourself, being preoccupied with work when you are not at work (actually one of our typical occupational hazards), tendency to feel less happy or satisfied, as well as health problems like chronic fatigue, insomnia, forgetfulness, impaired concentration, increased illness, loss of appetite, anxiety, depression, anger, digestive issues, heart disease, depression and obesity. For the average funeral director, at some point in our careers, we have all experienced one or more of these signs of burnout.

### Top 10 Tell "Tail" Signs of Burn Out for Funeral Directors

1. You think about how relaxing it would be if you were on your own prep table right now or even in the cooler at the morgue.
2. You cremated your daily plan-

ner a week ago but still haven't been able to miss a meeting.

3. You leave for a party and instinctively head to the local hospital.

4. You fall asleep to counting floral baskets from last night's wake.

5. You envision a vacation scheduled for three weeks from now in order to get through Monday.

6. You have so much on your mind you forget to put Mr. Magoo's pants on, which normally might not be a problem if he wasn't in a full open couch casket.

7. You lead the funeral procession to a local bar instead of the cemetery.

8. You come out of your fog long enough to remember the confused look on the registrar's face when you ordered a Big Mac and Coke, only vaguely remembering where you must have filed the death certificate.

9. You are so tired you answer the phone, "Drop dead."



The author with her dog, Max. (Photo courtesy of Ann Marie St. George)

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10. You wake up realizing you cremated the wrong person but go back to sleep because there isn't much you can do about it now.

I only throw a little humor in here to bring your attention to the real dangers of burning out in our profession. What we have chosen to do takes a special mindset. So, to survive we must pay attention to the signs and be willing to be kind to ourselves.

As a remedy, some of the suggestions I read included the following: taking relaxation seriously by meditating; listening to music or reading a book; finding something outside of work to be passionate about; unplugging (for those techies out there, you know what we are referring to and for those of you who don't, "Put down the darn phone during dinner"); getting enough sleep, which means at least seven hours a night; getting organized, so you don't worry about forgetting something; staying aware of physical signs of burnout before it leads to a major health problem; knowing when the stress is self-induced or caused by others; and above all making sure you understand when enough is enough, which, unfortunately, may mean you may have to move on.

As funeral directors, our goal is to take care of our families and move our business successfully forward into the future. If we are burned out, we will never be able to accomplish these goals.

Burnout is a true detriment to our livelihood. As a suggestion, try to live, love, and laugh while wagging your tail as you howl at the moon or maybe engage in something else you feel is better suited to help you relieve your stress. Whatever it may be, which may include taking a step back to reconnect, you need to do so. Not only for yourself, but also for the families you serve. Oh and by the way, when a dog is unable to wag his tail it is called, "dead tail," go figure. •