

Back on Track From Burnout

A Coaching Case Involving Overcoming Fear of Relapse



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Ana's* Case: A Turning Point in Integrative Coaching

Recovering from burnout isn't just about rest. For many, the fear of relapse becomes the next invisible wall.

What happens when someone moves past the acute phase of burnout but remains stuck, unable to return to work because their body still feels like it's in danger? For people who love their work, returning should feel like fulfillment. But what if fear outweighs the desire, and even the belief that it could be safe again?

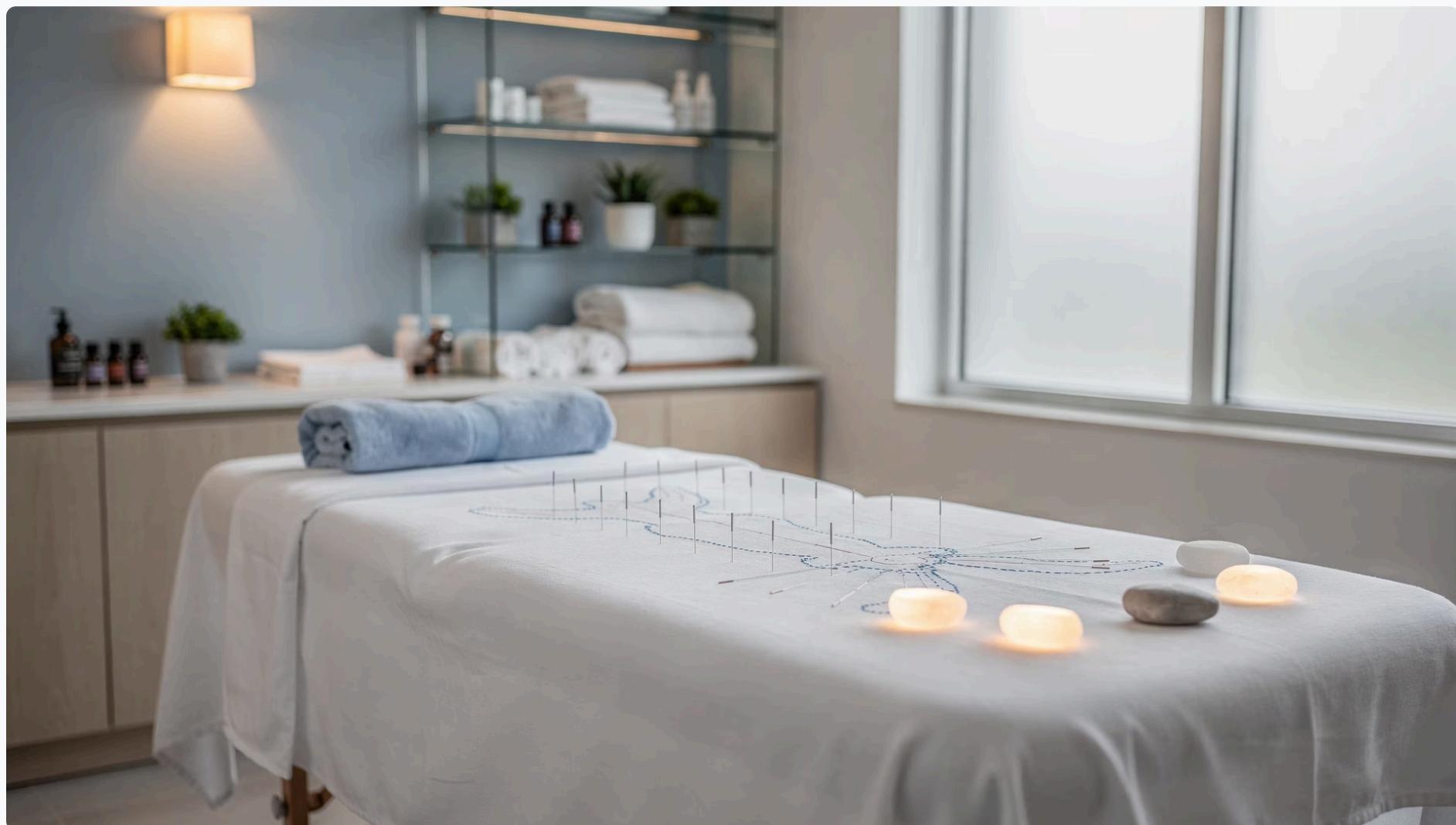
Coaching in this context must honor the story a client brings. It must open space without applying force or pressure for a quick win. We need gentleness, nuance, and strategy.



The Standstill: When Fear Blocks Purpose

Ana* is an experienced body therapist trained in acupuncture and shiatsu with a solid professional background. When she arrived at her first coaching session, she was at a standstill. After a health collapse related to stress and the use of biosynthetic cortisol, she was struggling with ongoing symptoms and the fear of relapse. Though no longer in acute burnout, Ana felt blocked from returning to the work she loved.

More than physical detoxification, she wanted emotional clarity. Her goal: return to work at an integrative healing institute where she had received both results and recognition. Her sense of purpose was deeply tied to her identity as a health professional. But that identity was overshadowed by fear.



Rewriting Identity: "I Am Not a Stressed Person"

During the first intake session, she shared something powerful: "**I've always been a stressed person.**" That's an identity-level statement. When I reflected it back to her, Ana paused and reconsidered.

This was a crucial realization. Her mind had recontextualized the story. But her physiology hadn't yet received the update.

"Actually, I was constantly in stressful situations with an abusive ex-husband who later caused problems with my sons. I was exposed to stressful situations by others, but *I am not a stressed person.*"

The Intervention: A Question That Changed Everything

In the second session, Ana returned to the idea of needing to remove every last "residue" of the biosynthetic hormone. She believed that without full detox, she couldn't safely return to work. When I asked, **"When would you like to be back at work?"** her physiology changed immediately. This was the moment we moved from information gathering to intervention.



The Question

"When would you like to be back at work?"

Physical Response

Ana's physiology changed immediately

The Shift

From information gathering to intervention



The Turning Point: From Elimination to Regulation

I made a quick decision. Using her own metaprogram ("sort by information"), I leaned into the Ericksonian principle of utilization. Since Ana had come to her conclusion through online research, I suggested we do another search together—but this time with a new frame.

We turned to ChatGPT with a carefully worded prompt, seeking scientific information about the half-life of biosynthetic cortisol. The result: **the hormone had been eliminated from her body for some time.**

Suddenly, the cause of her symptoms wasn't the drug. It was a process of neuroendocrine regulation. As a therapist, she immediately understood the concept.



Her narrative shifted. Her new goal: support neuroendocrine regulation in an ecological, balanced way. That shift unlocked her. She began to imagine returning to work in a way that honored her healing.

She had a surprising insight: instead of full acupuncture sessions, she would offer auricular acupuncture using mustard seeds—a gentler, lower-intensity intervention that aligned with her current state.

Key Coaching Elements

Looking back, several strategies contributed to Ana's transformation:



Rapport

Though Ana had known me through courses and previous solution-focused sessions, we had never done a full coaching cycle. I was intentional about building deep rapport.



Framing

I clarified that I am not a medical professional, and we would work in tandem with her health team. My biology training helped me follow her narrative with both empathy and insight.



Validation

Ana had lost trust in her prescribing physician, who dismissed her psychological symptoms. As a coach, one of my prime directives is to understand clients as they understand themselves—before attempting intervention.



Utilization

If she believed she was intoxicated by the medication, we could use that belief as leverage for a solution. Erickson would be proud.

Strategic Interventions That Created Change

Leverage

Her original trigger—an online search—became the same tool we used to present new evidence. It was the same metaprogram in action, but with a new direction.

Reframing

The ChatGPT result revealed the hormone's short half-life and helped reframe her fear. The message: while the hormone had left her system, her body was still recalibrating—and there were ways to support that.

Reestablishing Expectation

The AI-generated data included a range of recovery times. Ana physically responded when we read the moderate range: one to three months. This affirmed a timeline she could believe in. Bandura's work on self-efficacy and outcome expectancy rang true.

Client Self-Determination

With this new clarity, Ana herself proposed a gentle return-to-work plan. She no longer needed to eliminate a substance. She was ready to support a system.

The Journey Continues

At the time of this writing, we continue our sessions. We're working on reframing life narratives, building supportive beliefs, and creating identity-level shifts rooted in self-regulation. We're reviewing triggers and strengthening ecological boundaries between care and overwhelm.



It has been both a challenge and an honor to support Ana. I'll share further updates as the cycle concludes.

About the Author

Arline Davis is a Master Coach Trainer, transition mentor, and trainer of human development professionals. She currently represents the International Association of Coaching Institutes as President in the USA and Brazil.

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*The client's name has been changed to protect her identity.

