

White Paper

Coping with Burnout



COPING WITH BURNOUT

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A Typical “End-of-the-Term” Scenario

The end of the spring term has arrived and you are taking a breather to review the last several weeks. You have graded many papers and quizzes and counseled students who either failed your course — or whose grades don’t reflect the success THEY thought they had achieved. You have fielded calls about these grades from mothers and fathers of students — and one attorney. As you are contemplating the recent past, one of your team members stops by to discuss the announcement that during the next admission period, your program will be accepting 30 additional students without additional faculty (“Some adjuncts will be hired — maybe”). You glance through your email to find a request from your immediate supervisor to teach an additional course during the upcoming semester, one that you have never taught before. Suddenly, you receive a call from your teenager telling you she has just had a minor “fender bender” in your new car and could you come pick her up and bring the insurance card? You love your work as a nurse or health professions educator — but right now, you hate your job. More specifically, you feel as if you are being “pecked to death by ducks!”

Scenarios like this are being played out in nursing and health professions programs throughout the country. The multiple demands placed on educators in today’s health care programs can result in stress and perhaps even burnout. The complex environment in which we work is unlikely to change significantly. Instead, we must change our responses to these stresses, so that we can be the teachers we hope to be. This paper offers strategies to help you manage your response to the multiple demands upon your time.

Burnout can be defined as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. It is characterized by three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy. An educator who is usually dedicated and helpful begins to become disengaged from full participation in their job and exhibits indifferent feelings about their students. This type of emotional exhaustion is a key characteristic of the syndrome — a tired and fatigued response that makes it easy to depersonalize interactions with students. Educators who experience burnout may also exhibit negative, callous, and cynical attitudes toward their job and the tendency to evaluate one’s work negatively (Sarmiento, Laschinger, Iwasic, 2004; Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, et. al., 2006).

There are a variety of factors that may influence the development of job burnout. These include:

- Work overload
- Lack of autonomy
- Insufficient social support
- Role ambiguity
- Work-family interference
- Mismatch in values
- Extremes in work activity

Some behavioral clues can help educators identify potential burnout in themselves. While the symptoms outlined in Box A may signal a variety of conditions, when a faculty member can identify factors in their job environment that influence its development, burnout should be considered.

Box A: Symptoms of Burnout

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you identify so strongly with work that you lack a reasonable balance between your work life and your personal life?
- Do you try to be everything to everyone?
- Have you become cynical or critical at work?
- Do you dread going to work or have trouble being productive when you are there?
- Do you have trouble caring about student issues?
- Do you lack the energy to be consistently productive?
- Are you irritable or impatient with students or colleagues?
- Do your achievements no longer bring you satisfaction?
- Do you feel disillusioned about your job?
- Do you feel you have little or no control over your work
- Do you think or say negative things about your chosen role as an educator?
- Are you feeling bored?

Adapted from: Mayo Clinic Adult Health <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/burnout/WL0006>

A program of research by Bakker, Demetouri, & Euewema (2005) suggests that, although job demands may require substantial efforts by workers that result in physiological or psychological costs, organizations may also have job resources that buffer the development of burnout. The authors define job resources as physical, psychological, social, and organizational factors that assist workers in achieving work goals and stimulate personal growth and development. These may include social support that helps get the work done, high-quality relationships with one's supervisor, autonomy to plan work activities, and constructive feedback such as praise and encouragement.

The job demands felt by faculty may be the result of the structure of the work environment. For example, the scenario at the beginning of this white paper describes a potential plan to increase the number of new admissions, without increasing the number of faculty. This would certainly be a structural problem. On the other hand, there are some demands that are internally motivated within the individual faculty member. This author can certainly recognize the internal drive to continue to work beyond what is reasonable. Similarly, there are some job resources that require administrative intervention. Hiring additional faculty when the number of students is increased is certainly a resource that must be provided by the administration. However, there are many resources that an individual faculty member can access independently and bring to bear on the work environment.

Consider the following resources that you might implement to avoid feeling “burned out.”

Personal Strategies Away from Work

- Spend time with spouse/partner/family/friends. Research indicates that family and social involvement are powerful mediators to job stresses (Montgomery, Panagopolou, & Benos, 2005).
- Take regular vacations.
- Engage in physical activity — even a walk during lunch can be helpful.
- Maintain a sense of humor — let's face it, the world of teaching and learning often provides some pretty funny events!
- Maintain a balance between personal and professional life. The positive effects of personal interactions aren't available to those who work ALL the time.

Individual Strategies for Work

- Identify areas of stress at work. Determine whether they are the result of the organizational structure or if they are internal. Make a plan that you might implement to reduce these stressors for yourself.
- Reflect on satisfactory experiences with students — when we focus on our students’ achievements, we remember why we do what we do.
- Talk to your colleagues about student or professional issues. Talking about problems reduces their power. In addition, colleagues often provide validation and effective solutions.
- Assess your interests, skills, and passions — determine how you can be involved with these during work.
- Assess the areas of your work where you can function autonomously and focus on those.
- View problems as interesting issues ready to be solved.
- Remain active in your professional life. Participate in a professional project about which you are excited.
- Maintain self-awareness. If you are feeling fatigued from working too many hours, assess if this is a short-term demand that is reasonable, or a continuous problem. Determine if this is an external demand (reasonable or unreasonable) or an internal drive.
- If working long hours is a habit for you, make a plan to increase your personal time — even if it is leaving the office early at least once a week.
- Give positive feedback to your colleagues. Not only will it be helpful for them, it will make you feel better as well!
- Avoid speaking negatively about your role, even in jest.

Administrative Strategies

If you are in an administrative role, there are a number of strategies you can implement to “burnout-proof” the environment.

- Make sure that roles and responsibilities for faculty and others are clearly defined.
- Be clear about administration and faculty roles in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the curriculum, as well as areas of freedom for individual faculty.
- Provide opportunities for faculty input into decisions.
- Offer constructive feedback immediately.
- Give positive “strokes” to faculty for positive outcomes.

(Adapted from Gupta, Paterson, et. al., 2013; Mayo Clinic Adult Health, 2013)

Mismatch between Individuals and Organizations

There may be circumstances in which there is a mismatch between the individual and the organization that can’t be resolved. Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter (2001) describe a number of ways in which the perceptions of the individual could be significantly different from that of the organization, including views related to workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. For example, individuals who feel strongly that the instructor is individually responsible for developing teaching-learning activities in the classroom may find it uncomfortable to participate in a pre-developed curriculum. If accommodations cannot be made that are comfortable for the individual faculty, it may be that a job change is in the best interest of all concerned.

Conclusion

Having committed, effective faculty is critical to producing a sufficient number of competent graduates to meet the needs of our current and future health care delivery system. Preventing faculty burnout can help ensure that we don't lose productive professionals from the educational arena that are so desperately needed to meet the demand for future clinicians. Using the strategies discussed in this paper can also help ensure that faculty who remain in an organization will be working to their highest potential. By making sure that we come to the classroom or clinical experience fully committed to providing the best learning environment possible, we are not only supporting the development of our future colleagues, but also improving the quality of our own work life!

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