

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

ADVICE

4 Ideas for Avoiding Faculty Burnout



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By David Gooblar | APRIL 03, 2018

Is it just that time of the semester, or are academics more and more stressed out? In the past week alone, I've talked with:

- A colleague emotionally reeling from counseling two students who each had a parent die this semester.
- Another unsettled colleague who received an expletive-filled email from an angry student demanding to "speak to your supervisor."
- A friend at another institution buried under a mountain of papers — the product of a fourth course that he's teaching on overload to make a little extra money.

Meanwhile, multiple friends on the tenure track are stressed about publishing, and my friends off the tenure track are stressed about teaching (and about money).

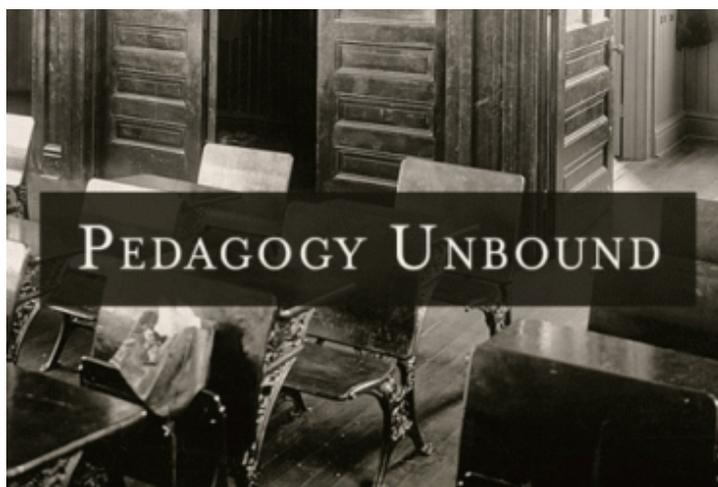
Faculty burnout is a well-worn topic in *The Chronicle*, with professors writing about their attempts to stay sane by doing some "intellectual wandering," venturing out into the world beyond the university, or leaving academe altogether. But is emotional exhaustion (one of the three main dimensions of burnout) really endemic to academic work?

In most industries, studies of employees usually show that the more committed they are to their employer, the more satisfaction and well-being they find in their jobs. That makes intuitive sense.

Pedagogy Unbound

Looking for inspiration on teaching or some specific strategies? David Gooblar, a lecturer in rhetoric at the University of Iowa and a blogger on teaching, writes about classroom issues in these pages. Here is a sampling of his recent columns.

- 'Is It Ever OK to Lecture?'
- How to Help a Student in a Mental-Health Crisis
- Will Students Actually Believe They Can Do This Assignment?
- Will Students Actually Want to Do This Assignment?



But a 2014 study of depression, stress, and anxiety among non-tenure-track faculty in the United States discovered something strange: Among the faculty surveyed — in both part-time and full-time positions — the more committed they were to their institutions, the more likely they were to experience high levels of workplace stress, and to experience depression, anxiety, and stress more generally. Keeping in mind that non-tenure-track faculty members make up roughly 70 percent of the American professoriate, that says something pretty damning about the 21st-century university as a workplace.

Most of the research on the topic has confirmed that dreary prognosis. A British 2005 study of workplace stress across 26 occupations found university faculty members to be among the worst professions in terms of self-reported psychological well-being. A 2010 literature review of studies of faculty burnout found that the phenomenon was comparable to burnout among school teachers and health-care professionals. That study said the problem most likely was related to our role as teachers, finding that "exposure to high number of students ... strongly predicts the experience of burnout."

Of course, if teaching is the main source of faculty burnout, doesn't it follow that our teaching — and our students' learning — will suffer the more stressed and exhausted we become?

Good teaching is emotional work, requiring reserves of patience and ingenuity that are all-too-often depleted in overworked faculty members. I haven't seen any research on the relationship between faculty burnout and students' learning, but there have been at least two recent large-scale studies of that relationship in elementary schools. The two studies — both conducted in Germany and published in 2016 — found that teachers' emotional exhaustion was directly and negatively related to students' educational outcomes. That is to say, the more teachers reported feeling emotionally exhausted, the worse their students did across the board: on their grades, on standardized tests, on measures of school satisfaction, you name it.

Now, teaching college students is not the same as teaching the fourth grade. We don't spend nearly as many hours in a classroom with our students, of course. But it would be hard to argue that faculty burnout *helps* our students.

So what can we do? I'm more and more convinced that faculty well-being is a pedagogical issue. The more I teach, and the more I think and write about teaching, the more I believe teaching should be thought of as among the human-services professions — like counseling, therapy, and nursing. We work with people and try to help them to develop — a task that requires much more of us than our academic training. If we're not psychologically healthy, it's near-impossible to do our jobs well. Here are some suggestions for making it through the semester.

Take time off, if only for an evening. From grad school on, we're trained to feel like we should always be working. The lack of a 9-to-5 workday only contributes to that mentality. If you are able to work at any time of day, any day of the week, shouldn't you be working at all times, every day of the week? But the negative effects of an always-on mind-set are real. You would be better able to write that paragraph after a good night's sleep. And all those emails from students? Unless the question is urgent, responding can definitely wait till morning.

Remember that your job is a job — even if you love it. As academics we are both blessed and cursed with a profession that aligns with our personal intellectual ambitions. Most of us were drawn to our field because we earnestly wanted to find answers to questions that fascinated us, and most of us have probably caught ourselves telling others how lucky we feel to be able to do what we do.

Yet, as many scholars have warned, that devotion to our work makes us prime candidates for exploitation. As Sarah Brouillette has written, "our faith that our work offers nonmaterial rewards, and is more integral to our identity than a 'regular' job would be, makes us ideal employees when the goal of management is to extract our labor's maximum value at minimum cost." Remember: That 2014 study of non-tenure-track faculty members found that the more you identify yourself with your institution, the more stressful your job will be. Do your best to cultivate perspective — and outside interests. Just because you love your work doesn't mean it's the be-all and end-all of your existence. You are more than your job.

Find ways to say no. The "do what you love" mantra also leads many of us to take on more work than is probably wise. It may be collegial to sit on multiple committees, but there are only so many hours in a week, and you've already got that mountain of papers to grade. Recent research has demonstrated that so-called "extra-role behavior" at work can significantly contribute to workplace stress, and that academic workplaces, in particular, depend on that kind of behavior. Take a hard look at your work commitments, both formal and informal, and ask yourself if you absolutely have to do all of them.

Choose sleep over extra class-prep time. Most of us aren't getting enough sleep. And sleep deprivation (which usually kicks in when people get fewer than seven hours of sleep a night) can lead to high levels of anxiety, poor decision-making, lack of energy, and lack of concentration. What is going to be more valuable to your students — that you went over the readings one more time, or that you are rested enough to be fully present and responsive in the classroom? All of your capabilities are needed to be a good teacher, and your fully functioning brain is worth far more than your completely worked-out lesson plans.

Finally, don't be afraid to ask for help. You've got friends, family, and colleagues who can help. Your institution most likely offers support services. If you're feeling stressed and emotionally exhausted, it's for good reason — most likely you care about your job and believe in the importance of doing it well. But there's no benefit to running yourself into the ground. Let people around you know when you're feeling low, and offer words of understanding and support when you see colleagues struggling to balance it all.

If you worry that you're burning out, you can safely assume that others around you are, too. Share your burden and it will start to feel lighter.

David Gooblar is a lecturer in the rhetoric department at the University of Iowa. He writes a column on teaching for The Chronicle and runs Pedagogy Unbound, a website for college instructors who share teaching strategies. To find more advice on teaching, browse his previous columns here.

This article is part of:
Pedagogy Unbound

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1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037