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Addressing (and Avoiding) Burnout: Strategies that Work

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What is Burnout?

Burnout is a commonly used term in education, especially in the spring, when the school year is wrapping up and we are all engaged in state assessments. This term was coined in 1974 by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger who defined it as “to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources.” It is now officially recognized by the World Health Organization as a syndrome resulting from “chronic workplace stress.” And, it can be contagious as over-negativity from chronic stress in the workplace can be “catching.”

Characteristics of Burnout

Burnout can have a variety of characteristics, and range from mild to more severe, and includes three basic categories:

- Exhaustion – feeling tapped out emotionally, physically, or both; struggling to “find the energy” to do work tasks.
- Detachment – feeling increasingly cynical about your job and/or coworkers; finding more stress and frustration than satisfaction in your work.
- Poor Work – feeling unmotivated to do quality work; having trouble focusing on tasks.

If you’re feeling mild symptoms, such as dreading going to work, having low energy, thoughts of changing jobs, keep reading! I have some strategies for you to try.

If you’re feeling more severe symptoms, such as chronic fatigue, insomnia, loss of appetite, anxiety, or physical symptoms (especially chest pain or difficulty breathing), I’d encourage you to seek out the supports/services you need.

What to do about Burnout?

Strategies for eliminating/reducing burnout:

- Take care of yourself – physically, mentally, emotionally/spiritually. This looks different for each person, but engage in behaviors that refuel/recharge you. Examples include: taking a walk, practicing meditation, making sure there are vegetables in your diet, etc.
- Find/rediscover meaning in your work.
- Seize small opportunities to make adjustments in your work setting. Major changes can cause stress and increase overwhelm.
- Build relationships both in and outside of work.
- Eliminate “language detours” that minimize/discount what you’re experiencing. Avoid telling yourself to “be resilient” and/or build resiliency.
- Avoid pain hierarchy language that places others’ needs in front of your own. Phrases like, “they need me more”; “What they’re going through is so much more”; “Do it for the students/clients” etc. encourage you to ignore signs of burnout.
- Discuss the signs and signals of burnout openly and acknowledge them.
- Seek help.

A Specific Strategy to Try: Your Strongest Moment

- Ask yourself, during a typical work week, what tasks do you perform with ease, excellence, and enjoyment?
- Make a list of these tasks. You are likely capitalizing on your natural talents to get them done.
- Of the items you listed, identify one that is the most important or produces the greatest success. Let's call it your strongest moment.
- Focus more closely on your strongest moment. What makes it great for you? What are the ingredients that make it great? (These are your natural talents and strengths.)
- What would happen if you borrowed some of the ingredients that make your strongest moment so great and applied them to new ways of approaching the tasks you enjoy less?
- Make a plan to use your strongest moments in a new task.

While this is not an exhaustive list of strategies, I hope you've found something in here to implement in your own life to address (or avoid) burnout. Feel free to reach out for more resources related to this topic.