



Faculty Burnout & Sustainability

The issue of [faculty burnout](#) has become a common talking point in higher education. After working through almost three years of a global pandemic, social unrest, and economic uncertainty, many faculty report being exhausted, depleted, and lacking a sense of meaning in their work. There are concerns over an exodus of [faculty leaving academia](#), and that those who stay may engage in “[quiet quitting](#)” as a means of coping with an ever increasing workload.

Burnout or Stress? Is It You or Your Environment?

The [World Health Organization](#) describes burnout as not a medical condition, but an “occupational phenomenon” resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, and consisting of three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distance from or feelings of cynicism towards one’s work;
- Reduced professional efficacy

It is common to hear people referring to being “burned out” in response to routine stress. True burnout, however, can be debilitating, leading to decreased productivity, performance, and well-being. Oftentimes, burnout is framed as an individual problem, one that results from an individual’s inability to “tough it out” or “just deal” with existing workplace stressors. This can lead to feelings of isolation, shame, and guilt among those experiencing burnout. Burnout arises, however, from a mismatch between individuals and the work environment, which means that organizational responses and remedies are necessary to fully address the issue of burnout. There are at least [six areas in which these mismatches may occur](#), including: work overload; lack of control;

insufficient rewards; breakdown of community; absence of fairness; and value conflicts. Given that burnout is not solely an individual problem, it is critical that we think of solutions not just at the individual level, but at the organizational level as well.

What You Can Do for Yourself: Individual Solutions

Although burnout is not solely an individual problem, there are steps we can take to help protect ourselves from experiencing burnout. These coping strategies can include, but are not limited to:

- **Reconnecting with your values.** Set aside some time to identify [the values that connect you to your work](#) - perhaps it is a passion for sharing knowledge with students, or the pursuit of new knowledge through research. Reflect on your own individual personality, needs, and motivations as well. Doing so can help you to prioritize the areas of your work that give you the most energy and meaning, while making it easier to say “no” to those commitments that don’t align with your values.
- **Reconnecting with your support system.** Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us have become disconnected from our colleagues and others that previously served as a support system. Make a concerted effort to reconnect with a colleague or mentor - this could be through a scheduled coffee date or a phone call, for example. [Belongingness is a fundamental human need](#), and can help sustain us during times of difficulty or challenge.
- **Prioritizing your well-being.** Mental and physical resilience is a key component of protecting oneself (and recovering) from burnout. Prioritize activities that sustain and maintain your well-being, such as getting regular physical activity, eating healthy foods, [sleeping 7 - 9 hours each night](#). While it can be especially difficult to engage in these activities when experiencing high levels of stress, maintaining your well-being will help you to weather future challenges and stressors.

What You (and Others) Can Do for the Larger Group: Organizational Solutions

Many of us have formal and informal power in our departments, units, and within the university to help implement change that can begin to address faculty burnout and lead to more sustainable, enriching careers.

- **Normalizing boundaries and saying “no.”** It is common for articles on burnout to include advice on saying no and doing less. However, we know there are factors that limit certain individuals' ability to say no - for example, the precarity of one's position, or the pressure to live up to ideal worker norms. If you are in a position of power that allows you to say “no” on behalf of or alongside those with less power (within reason), consider exercising that power. If you are on the receiving end of a “no,” respect the sender's wishes and look for another individual to help with your request. Work towards normalizing the setting of boundaries and reasonable workloads among your colleagues.
- **Reviewing workload distributions.** If possible, consider a review of how your area, department, or unit distributes workload across faculty. This is especially important in the area of service, where [female and underrepresented faculty](#) members are more likely to take on a larger share of the service responsibilities. Often these service responsibilities are invisible and are not readily recognized and valued by others. If there are none, consider developing shared guidelines on how these responsibilities are distributed and set timelines for rotating these responsibilities between faculty members.
- **Addressing concerns related to fairness.** One key driver of burnout is feeling a sense of unfairness in the workplace. This is especially relevant to the rewards associated with one's work (e.g., promotions, raises, informal and formal recognition). Advocate for transparency around how faculty performance is measured and tied to rewards and recognition. Identify other opportunities to share information on processes, such as mentoring a junior colleague on the promotion, review, and tenure process.

It is likely that many of us have experienced aspects of burnout throughout our careers - particularly over the last few years - although not all of us will have experienced full-blown burnout. It is important that we move beyond considering this an individual problem, and look at solutions from both the individual and organizational level. Consider normalizing discussion of burnout and sustainability among your colleagues, and think about how your students may be experiencing burnout as well. Where appropriate, consider taking five minutes at the beginning of class to ask students to share a few words describing how they are feeling currently or what they are doing to cope with stress. Remind students of the resources available on campus, including the [OU Counseling Center](#) and [SEHS Counseling Center](#). [Trauma-informed teaching](#) can further inform how we have these conversations and design our courses.

Lastly, if you have tried working through the suggestions here and others and are still feeling overwhelmed by burnout, seeking out the support of a trained counselor or therapist can be incredibly beneficial.

Additional Resources

- [The Burnout Challenge](#), Christina Maslach & Michael Leiter
- [The Stress Prescription](#), Elissa Epel
- [Honoring Ourselves and Each Other Through Burnout](#), *Inside Higher Ed*
- [‘Quiet Quitting’ Isn’t the Solution for Burnout](#), *Inside Higher Ed*
- [Beating Pandemic Burnout](#), *Inside Higher Ed*
- [Four Ideas for Avoiding Faculty Burnout](#), *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
- [Four Self-Care Strategies to Support Students](#), *Harvard Business Publishing*

Related CETL Teaching Tips

These plus other teaching tips and resources are offered in [CETL’s Productivity and Teaching Hacks: Faculty Resources](#).

- [Creating Balance to Take Back Control](#)
- [Managing Stress and Anxiety in Uncertain Times](#)
- [Being Human Online during COVID-19](#)
- [“Productivity” during Disruption](#)

About the Author

Caitlin Demsky, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Management in the Department of Management & Marketing. She teaches courses on organizational behavior, human resource management, and work and stress. Her research focuses on employees’ stress and well-being and the work-nonwork interface. Outside of the classroom, Caitlin can be found chasing her two-year-old son, reading, or trying out a new recipe.

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