

## Extinguishing Teacher Burnout

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### Abstract

*A large majority of teachers experience high daily stress. Over time this stress can lead to teacher burnout, which can manifest itself psychologically, emotionally, and physically. While stress and its effects are unavoidable, these pressures can be mitigated if appropriate action is taken. When teachers have professional development opportunities, they are able to learn new, complex skills that can influence their competence and, in turn, improve their psychological well-being. Furthermore, providing teachers with collaboration structures such as mentoring and peer-professional groups enables teachers to alleviate emotional exhaustion leading to teacher burnout.*

Teacher burnout is a syndrome that is produced by the mismatch of unrelenting pressure, demands, and stress put onto educators and the resources needed to cope with them (Lauermann & König, 2016). Researchers have discovered that teaching is among the most stressful professions today; over 90% of educators have reported experiencing job-related stress, while an estimated 46% report “high daily stress” (Bottiani et al., 2019, p. 36; Larrivee, 2012, p. 8). Teacher burnout is a serious condition that can cause psychological lassitude, emotional exhaustion, and physical fatigue—all of which can trigger additional complications, creating a vicious cycle of health problems (Kim & Burić, 2019). These chronic stressors have negatively affected the teaching profession, causing rising rates in absenteeism, attrition, and turnover (Caruso, 2019). Teacher burnout has become one of the biggest problems plaguing the education system today because it negatively affects the ability of teachers to perform their roles effectively by exhausting their mental health, draining their emotional wellness, and fatiguing their physical welfare; however, these complex problems can be resolved through continuous professional education and the institution of collaboration structures (Hoff, 2020).

### Problems Associated with Teacher Burnout

Teacher burnout is a growing concern and has become notorious for its psychological, emotional, and physical health effects on educators. With teaching being considered one of the most stressful professions, the problem of teacher burnout and all of its manifestations is severe (Larrivee, 2012).

### Psychological Effects

Teacher burnout syndrome arises when there is a mismatch between job demands, or stressors, and available resources to cope with these demands and, as a result, these chronic stressors negatively affect the teacher’s psychological health (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017). The psychological effects associated with teacher stress and burnout include anxiety, frustration, lack of self-confidence, cynicism, and depersonalization (Larrivee, 2012). DiCarlo, Meaux, & LaBiche (2019) described teachers’ perceived stress, also known as psychological stress, as the degree to which they are able to cope with and control situations that are appraised as stressful. When teachers experience an accumulation of extended stressors, the psychological effects (frustration, cynicism) can negatively influence their self-efficacy (Herman et al., 2018). Self-efficacy refers to teachers’ perceived ability to control their classroom’s management and instruction, while maintaining a belief in their own capacity to effect positive

change in their students (Kim & Burić, 2019). This means that teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy will be able to regain their confidence quickly after facing stumbling blocks and stressors (Larrivee, 2012). Unfortunately, when teachers suffer psychological effects such as anxiety from chronic stress, it lowers their self-efficacy which, in turn, makes it more difficult for them to cope with job-related setbacks (Herman et al., 2018). Teachers who endure prolonged periods of low self-efficacy experience burnout, which leads to them quitting their jobs (Kim & Burić, 2019). This sense of helplessness worsens their mental health, exacerbates other psychological conditions such as depersonalization and depression, and triggers other health problems such as emotional exhaustion.

## **Emotional Exhaustion**

Many teachers will experience emotional exhaustion while enduring burnout syndrome (Herman et al., 2018). The effects of emotional exhaustion include affective deterioration, or not being able to give more of oneself due to the exhaustion of emotional resources; alterations to one's thought process and lens with which one interprets situations, often becoming negative; and changes to how one acts, usually wanting to give up or being quick tempered (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017). In other words, emotional exhaustion caused by chronic stress can permeate the way a teacher feels, thinks, and acts (Larrivee, 2012). Burnout syndrome appears to occur at a much higher rate in the helping professions, such as teaching (Sánchez et al., 2019). Teachers will often fall prey to burnout as a "consequence of caring," or the emotional response to the chronic stress of dealing with interpersonal demands (Larrivee, 2012, p. 9). Consequently, if a teacher feels a lack of emotional resilience and well-being, their students and classroom environment are negatively affected (DiCarlo et al., 2019). As their personal relationships and performance suffer, scrutiny and pressure from parents and administrators can add to the teachers' feelings of frustration, anger, and depression (Herman et al., 2018). This imbalance is what contributes to teacher stress and burnout, which manifests itself into emotional exhaustion and other difficulties such as physical fatigue and other related conditions (McCarthy et al., 2016).

## **Physical Effects**

When teachers are exposed to prolonged periods of stress, leading to burnout, they are faced with a litany of somatic complaints, such as physical fatigue, back pain, aching joints, and headaches (Hue & Lau, 2015). Other physical illnesses have been reported to develop in teachers experiencing burnout, such as stomach ulcers, gastritis, and insomnia (Larrivee, 2012). Burnout syndrome can also trigger physical repercussions such as chronic-degenerative diseases in teachers who suffer from it, including hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disorders (Sánchez et al., 2019). If teachers suffer from any of these physical ailments because of burnout syndrome, it most likely means they are already exposed to high amounts of stress, which, unfortunately, triggers their bodies to produce even higher levels of cortisol, or stress (DiCarlo et al., 2019). Cortisol is the body's "stress hormone," which is the last thing a teacher who is already struggling to cope with job-related stress needs (Larrivee, 2012, p. 13). As a result, the chronic stress is no longer arising from just the individual's work environment, but is being produced by their own body, compounding the issue (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2016). In this situation, teachers are usually forced to take a leave or quit their job because they are unable to perform their duties while enduring serious physical conditions and potential consequences (Kim & Burić, 2019). While psychological and emotional effects of burnout syndrome can be dangerous, many teachers can still function with diminished mental and emotional states; however, serious physical conditions tend to manifest into a plethora of potential illnesses and disorders (Sánchez et al., 2019).

## Solutions to Teacher Burnout

In order to resolve teacher burnout, effective interventions such as professional development and the institution of collaboration structures need to be established. The implementation of these interventions can lessen the chances of teacher burnout if they are focused on solving the problem – stress.

### Professional Development

Teacher burnout syndrome is rampantly becoming the most prevalent problem in the education system today; however, this complex issue can be resolved, and even prevented, through continuous professional education and the institution of collaboration structures (Hoff, 2020). Research has discovered that certain components of work, such as professional development, are linearly related to the psychological health of workers (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017). In other words, professional development can influence the psychological well-being of teachers. This means that the more education teachers receive, the better their psychological health will be. Continuous professional education provides teachers with opportunities to increase their knowledge in order to develop the appropriate skills and strategies needed to cope with the stressors they face in the classroom. When teachers possess the necessary knowledge to control stressful situations, their self-confidence is reinforced and their self-efficacy grows (DiCarlo et al., 2019). Over time, as teachers continue to assess and successfully solve various situations in the classroom, their competence increases and, in turn, their psychological distress decreases (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017; Herman et al., 2018). Providing teachers with continuing educational opportunities can equip them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competence to cope with the psychological effects of teaching; however, more collaborative support must be implemented to solve the problem of emotional exhaustion.

### Collaboration Structures

Instituting collaboration structures, such as mentoring, peer-professional groups, and collaboration days, within a school division's operational year can mediate emotional exhaustion leading to teacher burnout (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017). Emotional exhaustion has been associated with low levels of positive peer supports, impaired relationships, and working in isolation (Herman et al., 2018). Collaboration compels teachers to network, share resources, and develop a teamwork mentality, which can offset challenging teaching conditions and buffer burnout (Lauermaann & König, 2016). Collaborative days and peer-professional groups provide support and guidance for all teachers, especially beginning teachers who are most at risk for isolation, emotional exhaustion, and leaving the profession (Larrivee, 2012).

Unfortunately, in education, seeking advice can often be seen as an admission of failure or an indication of one's own inadequacy; many teachers are reluctant to collaborate with their peers or do not feel secure enough to show their vulnerability (Cox, n.d.). This is why it is crucial that a school division mandates collaboration time by building it into their calendar year, especially since teachers are already busy. Research has shown that teachers who worked in an environment that they perceived as being supportive were less likely to experience high levels of stress and burnout, and they were more resistant to the harmful effects of stressful events if they had social support (Larrivee, 2012). Teachers who collaborate with their colleagues are able to overcome professional hurdles, trust each other with their capabilities and expertise, and share similar problems and experiences; furthermore, this leads to higher levels of engagement, vigor, and dedication. Providing teachers with additional support and opportunities to collaborate can minimize the emotional effects of chronic stressors in education. While providing continuing professional education and instituting collaboration structures can be

a perplexing and convoluted process, these two solutions have a synergistic effect that can resolve the complex problem of teacher burnout.

### **Evaluation of Stress**

An adequate amount of stress in one's profession can be considered healthy in generating proper learning and work motivation; however, research has proven that overwhelming chronic stress can lead to burnout syndrome when the resources needed to meet the demands are not provided (Hue & Lau, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2016). The highest incidence of burnout syndrome occurs in human service professionals who deal with the welfare of others and social activities, such as teachers (Larrivee, 2012). Teacher burnout not only has detrimental effects on the educators, but has repercussions at the organizational level: teacher absenteeism, lower performance, and teacher turnover (Sánchez et al., 2019). Currently in the USA, 40-50% of teachers leave the profession due to burnout within their first five years of teaching (Caruso, 2019, p. 2). Consequently, school divisions are left to face high financial costs in the form of teacher recruitment such as position advertisement, hiring incentives, and administrative processing; and teacher replacement such as training materials, professional development, and orientation (Barnes et al., 2007; Watlington et al., 2010). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) reported the annual cost of teacher replacement in the USA to be \$1 billion to \$2.2 billion, which equates to a replacement cost of \$4365-\$9501 per teacher. While Canadian statistics are lacking in literature, it may be assumed that the per capita cost to replace a teacher is similar. In the end, teacher burnout can have lasting negative effects on everyone it comes into contact with: the educator, the administrator, the school district, and the students.

It is well-documented that being a teacher is stressful and that burnout syndrome can lead to the deterioration of job performance (Sánchez et al., 2019). Nearly all teachers (93%) confirm that they experience high levels of stress in their classroom, while only 7% of teachers allege that they, and their classroom, are well-adjusted with low stress and overall wellness (Herman et al., 2018). Given today's stressful teaching environment, many teachers feel completely helpless and overwhelmed, which leads to burnout, increased absenteeism, and turnover (Caruso, 2019). Teachers today are coping with more troubled and complicated students, contending with ill-conceived administrative mandates, and grappling with demanding parents (Larrivee, 2012). Add to this longer work days, intensified job demands, planning in isolation, continuous evaluation and looming accountability, it is no wonder that stress and burnout is rampantly growing (Sánchez et al., 2019). Finding innovative and impactful ways to support teachers in need can mitigate the negative effects of teacher stress (Herman et al., 2018). Because of solutions such as continuing professional education and the institution of collaboration structures, teachers can work to minimize and manage their psychological, emotional, and physical stress. When action steps are taken to alleviate or remove these chronic stressors, burnout syndrome is less likely; this prevents absenteeism, lower job performance, and turnover from occurring (Caruso, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Stress is the psychological, emotional, and physical response to life's changing demands (Larrivee, 2012). Teacher burnout syndrome occurs when educators have to deal with a wide array of stressors, for long periods of time, which they cannot handle (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017). The growing number of teacher burnout cases can no longer be ignored and the effects of burnout syndrome (damaged psychological, emotional, and physical conditions) cannot be easily overcome unless adequate measures are taken to reduce this chronic stress, such as continuing professional education and instituting collaboration structures. Teacher burnout is linked to absenteeism, diminished performance, and turnover; however, taking the measures necessary can mitigate these negative effects of chronic stress (Herman et al., 2018). A certain

level of stress can result in improved focus and performance; however, long-term and ongoing exposure can take over a teacher's life (Larrivee, 2012). If teachers continue to learn new knowledge to develop skills and strategies needed in the classroom, spend time collaborating with their colleagues, and take care of their physical health, they will be able to cope with the stressors they face in the classroom and maintain a healthy level of stress throughout their careers (Larrivee, 2012). Chronic stress can unrelentingly consume teachers, leaving them unable to perform their jobs, leaving them burned out; however, with the proper interventions, we can finally say *good-bye* to teacher burnout and extinguish that flame once and for all (McCarthy et al., 2016).

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