

SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

Frazzled: Rediscovering Our Why

Patti Everett

Abstract

Teacher burnout is a growing concern. Stressors of the teaching profession can become too much. Emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and personal and professional inefficiency are three main facets of burning out. By reconnecting to others and themselves, teachers can conquer burnout. Self-care, including getting enough rest, is also an important element to overcoming the stress of the job.

Educators have forgotten the enthusiasm of acquiring their first teaching position and classroom. When the job becomes too much, the outcome is often burnout. Burnout is described as "a state of chronic stress that leads to physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment" (Tapp, 2020, What Is Teacher Burnout? section, para. 2). The growing concern of teacher burnout can be concentrated into three main facets: "emotional exhaustion, a feeling of cynicism, and a sense of personal and professional inefficiency" (Capone & Petrillo, 2018, p. 1757). One suggestion is that teachers who are emotionally invested have a higher chance of burning out. Being "fired up" by the profession should not be considered a negative (Fernet et al., 2012, p. 270). One method to prevent burnout is to reconnect, not only to purpose, but also to self and to others. Connection will assist in bringing back the feeling of joy. Self-care and compassion, including getting enough rest, are also ways of preventing and conquering burnout. Additionally, educators can increase their efficacy, and triumph over burnout, by understanding how they cope with stressors and build resilience. Reminding teachers to look after their own well-being can change the narrative from a negative into a positive.

Causes of Teacher Burnout

Teaching has been described as one of the most stressful professions because it often leads to emotional exhaustion. Educators describe the situation of having to be "on" continuously as a cause for this weariness. "Being on" constantly can be described as showing emotions that one is not actually feeling or suppressing emotions that may not be considered appropriate (Larrivee, 2012, p. 38). Teachers often have conflict between the roles they play, because they are the providers of content and curriculum, but also play the part of counsellor, nurturer, and friend. The weight of role overload occurs when the emotional needs of students weigh more than the teacher has experience for. The emotions of teachers are shaped by experiences of influence and authority, causing an inability to let go of what is beyond their control (Larrivee, 2012). The emotional consequences can be overwhelming. Emotional fatigue, also known as compassion fatigue, can be triggered by an educator's own trauma. These are the stories, which educators have yet to make sense of, causing them to put up a wall, or armor of protection (Larrivee, 2012). It is no secret that being a teacher requires a large heart but also a strong one. Compassion or emotional fatigue is often one of the main causes of stress within educators.

A feeling of cynicism can be caused by a lack of overall job satisfaction and a perceived lack of respect, creating unhappiness (Capone & Petrillo, 2018). The pessimism surrounding an educator in this state can be overbearing for others, especially if they are dealing with their own negative thoughts. These feelings of malice toward the job and all that goes with it can feel like losing a piece of who the educators believed they were. The feeling of disconnect or depersonalization can cause a perception of little support and even a fear of job security, causing mental health issues. Cynicism towards the profession is often the result when stress levels become unbearable. Teachers no longer

can see their own growth and efficiency.

Personal and professional efficiency is required for educators to feel competent in their profession. The sensation of professional efficacy, in education, often relies on whether a teacher observes that their students are achieving and doing well. Teachers' perceptions that students' failures are a direct result of their teaching abilities can cause their mental health to suffer as they begin to question their efficacy. They struggle to feel a sense of accomplishment and to maintain a personal and professional work life balance. Teachers struggle with the demands they place on themselves. They try to do it all and struggle with setting limits, leaving them feeling like nothing has been accomplished (Mielke, 2020). When this starts to happen, educators become unproductive and end up spinning their wheels, completing little. Rather than incorporating "self-protective strategies" such as stopping to take a breath, they ramp up their desire to be everything their own children need, as well as everything their students need, causing exhaustion and the feeling of being overwhelmed (Fernet et al., 2012, p. 284). The vast pressure that teachers put on themselves leads to an overall feeling of inefficacy.

Prevention and Elimination of Burnout

There are ways to prevent burnout or to help those who may already be feeling the effects of burnout within their profession. One strategy is to reconnect, not only to purpose, but also to self and others. Connection will assist in bringing back the feeling of joy within a profession. Understanding connection as energy alignment and knowing that we are all made up of energy confirms that when we share space, we are literally sharing energy (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020). Educators need to recognize that the energy they extend affects the positive relations around them and those connections (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020). For myself, acknowledging the power of the positive energy I extend assists in my ability to connect with, and advocate for, some of our most vulnerable youth. These connections and witnessing the success of students reminds me of my purpose and returns a sense of joy for my profession. One strategy I use to assist in increasing connection is through the practice of gratitude. By practising gratitude, we remember our social connections and are thankful for the personal relationships in our life (Larrivee, 2012). We all have the ability to alter the "trajectory" of our world by (re)connecting to those around us and being grateful for the ability to choose joy (Carrington, 2019, p. 175).

Self-care and compassion, including getting enough rest, are also ways to prevent and conquer burnout. 2020 has proven to be an exceptionally tough year, and the one reminder I share, in my role of supporting teachers, is that we grow stronger by being gentler to ourselves. Rest is the first step in repairing our bodies so that we can overcome the effects of burnout (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020). We decrease the hormones that cause stress and improve our mood by practising self-compassion, therefore the energy we emit will be positive and inviting. Rest and self-compassion are connected. If we are un-rested we lack compassion and patience, yet when we reclaim rest we also reclaim power over the energy we emit and the overall compassion we feel toward ourselves and others (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020). One method to ensure that negative emotions do not overcome the positive is through "expressive" writing. Writing is an effective strategy for ensuring that invasive thoughts do not take over. Writing these thoughts down permits us to make sense of, discover the meaning behind, and eliminate them all together (Larrivee, 2012). Rejuvenating compassion for ourselves creates an attitude of caring toward others that points us in the direction of supporting with empathy (Pogere et al., 2019). By increasing our self-care we can increase our resiliency, which increases our effectiveness on the job, reducing stress, and reducing the chances of burnout (Ungar, 2020).

Additionally, educators can increase their efficacy and triumph over burnout by building their resilience and understanding how they cope with stressors. Coping assists in adapting worrying feelings and modifying the setting associated with that concern. Educators who chose a "direct or direct action" coping approach are successful in decreasing teacher burnout (Pogere et al., 2019, p. 271). By recognizing the emotions of students, we build a stronger connection, which provides

stronger coping strategies through relationships. Having an overall concern for students and using “problem-focused strategies” reduces compassion fatigue and increases resiliency (Pogere et al., 2019, p. 278). Resiliency increases when educators feel they are needed and are making a contribution. Educators’ stress levels decrease when they feel valued in their role both inside and outside the work environment (Ungar, 2020). Effective leadership is an important factor in building resiliency and adapting useful coping skills. For instance, leaders need to model the “life-work balance” and provide employees with a sense of responsibility and trust, by permitting them to own their classroom and to incorporate their teaching styles (Russell, 2020, p. 17). The increasing importance of these factors is relevant as we all navigate our way through a global pandemic. Facing adaptation of teaching styles and how we connect to our students and colleagues must be handled through a supportive atmosphere (Kuchah, 2020). We have a responsibility to support each other in conveying a feeling of hopefulness as we work to build a large number of realistic teaching strategies while we shift how we teach and connect.

Conclusion

If educators feel an extended reaction to “chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors,” they may be experiencing burnout (Maslach et al., 2001, p.397, as cited in Capone & Petrillo, 2018, p. 1758). The approach that educators use toward coping with the stressors in their professional and personal lives may directly affect how emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of personal and professional inefficiency will affect their overall mental health (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2017). Once educators are able to reconnect, not only to purpose but also to self and others, they will once again feel the joy within their profession. Reminding educators to practise self-care, get enough rest, and be compassionate with self are ways of preventing and conquering burnout. Additionally, educators can increase their efficacy and triumph over burnout by building resilience and understanding how they cope with stressors. Encouraging teachers to (re)connect with students and colleagues, look after their own well-being, and understand their value can change the narrative of the demands of the job from negative to positive.

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About the Author

Patti Everett is currently employed with Prairie Spirit School Division as a resource teacher. She lives in Cypress River, Manitoba, with her husband and their two dogs. Patti has two grown children, Kaitlyn and Colton, and stepson Taurie. Patti is working to complete a master's degree in inclusive education.