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Transforming Emotional Health: Addressing Teacher Burnout

By Jennifer A. L. Johnson

Sometimes the most important transformations are those on the inside.

It was mid-September 2021. Some schools were still closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A deaf education teacher, who was still going to class and teaching in person—or at least was trying to—left the following message in my inbox:

“I’m just exhausted . . .,” she began. “My students are out of control . . . I feel like I’m a terrible teacher . . . Kids aren’t making progress . . . I can hardly get them on task to learn anything . . . I don’t even like one of my students, and that’s never happened before . . . And then there’s all the extra paperwork . . . all the extra tutoring required by the new state law . . . I don’t know if I even want to do this anymore . . . I’m ready to quit, but I can’t because I have to pay the bills.”

Her words echoed those I’d heard from teachers so many times before. I recognized them as a sign of severe workplace stress—what is commonly referred to as “burnout.” Burnout is an occupational phenomenon measured by the combination of three dimensions (Maslach et al., 2001):

- Exhaustion
- Depersonalization or cynicism toward the job, and for teachers emotionally distancing from students and coworkers
- Inefficacy, or reduced sense of personal accomplishment

Photos courtesy of Jennifer A. L. Johnson and Tori Smith



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Left: A teacher of the deaf builds compassion satisfaction—joy and a feeling of satisfaction at seeing the impact of her teaching on her students—by keeping a bulletin board of photos, cards, notes, and student handprints. It reminds her that she’s a good teacher, even on difficult days.

This teacher’s cry for help reflected all three of these dimensions. She was exhausted. Her feelings toward her job had become cynical, and she sensed a lack of professional efficacy. I wish I could say I was shocked to read this in my inbox, but I wasn’t. A visit to any Facebook group for teachers where they feel safe to share displays comments like this, and some comments are even more dire.

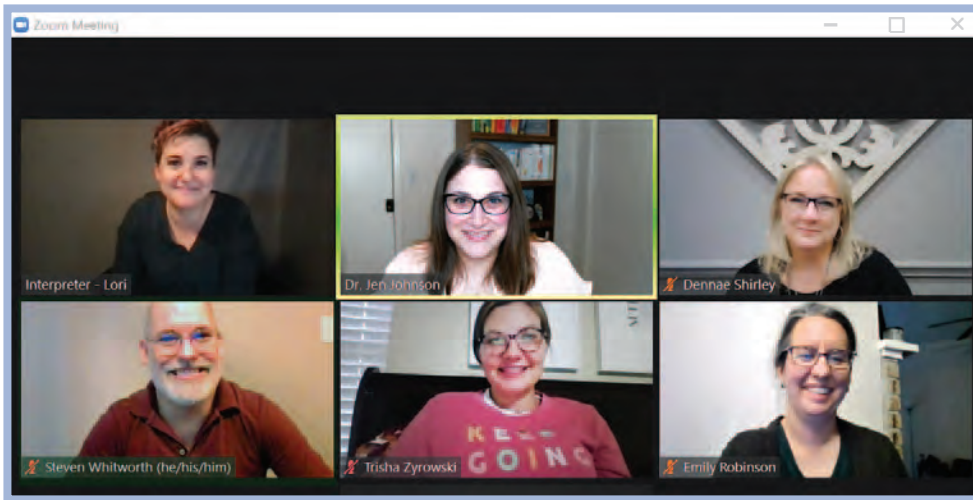
Before the pandemic even began, Kennon and Patterson (2016) investigated the causes of burnout in deaf education teachers. They identified eight stressors listed in order of stress level:

1. Amount of paperwork
2. High-stakes testing
3. Dealing with parents

4. Lack of administrative support
5. Lack of parental support
6. Lack of resources for deaf education
7. Responsibility of multiple roles
8. Inconsistency in curriculum for deaf education

This reflects the results of my own informal poll conducted during the pandemic in the teacher burnout support community I lead. When polled, deaf education teachers reported that increased paperwork was indeed a factor in the burnout they were fighting to overcome. However, the pandemic had caused new stressors. Teachers said that lack of sign language and auditory accessibility during virtual learning and hybrid teaching (online and in-person

simultaneously) were the biggest stressors they were experiencing during pandemic teaching. Further, teachers frequently reported frustration with their administrators; they felt administrators did not realize or acknowledge how much work they did in comparison to pre-pandemic times. Additionally, they felt they weren’t supported or valued. Hall (2021) found this unexpected result in her study of teacher self-efficacy during the pandemic. She found teachers were seeking emotional support from all stakeholders, including parents, administration, and the community, far more than they were seeking technical support. They wanted to be seen, heard, and validated for what they were experiencing at work.



Left: In teacher support groups, which fall within the “social support” recommendation, teachers can meet to discuss their experiences with burnout and make strategic decisions about new practices to implement to reduce burnout symptomatology.

4. **Build compassion satisfaction.** Compassion satisfaction consists of positive feelings from experiences that make us believe we are making a difference in our work. Keep records of success and accomplishment. Write down how you feel when you succeed. Save pictures, notes, and emails that prove you’re an effective teacher. Refer to your lists and artifacts when least satisfied and most overwhelmed.

Further, if the dimensions of burnout—the exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inefficacy—become pronounced, it is critical to:

- **Seek help.** Administrators should help normalize the experience of burnout and assist those who seek help by referring them to mental health professionals, support communities, and coaches.

Burnout Recovery

Research on preventing and recovering from burnout is rare in education, although that is beginning to change due to a focus on helping people recover from pandemic-related burnout. However, burnout prevention and recovery research is quite common in other helping professions (e.g., nursing, veterinary medicine, and mental health counseling). Until research in education is developed further, we can turn to these professions to see what has been learned about burnout and, perhaps even more important, how people recover from it. Figley and Ludick (2017) suggested four keys to recovery:

1. **Engage in evidence-based self-care.** Prioritize attending to personal physical, emotional, financial, professional, social, and spiritual needs. Spread self-care throughout the day in short, manageable time blocks ranging from 30 seconds (e.g., deep breathing) to 30+ minutes (e.g., cooking a meal). Too often people don’t engage in self-care because they don’t know what self-care looks like and how little time it may take when integrated into the work day.
2. **Find social support.** Social support should be both professional and personal. Professional support for burnout recovery can be accessed through teacher support groups online or through a schoolwide support program (e.g., Teacher Care

Network Support Community, www.facebook.com/groups/teachercarenetwork, is a free resource). Personal support includes the support of friends and family and participation in cultural organizations, hobbies, and communities of worship. At least some support should come from individuals who are not teachers, allowing detachment from chatter about work.

3. **Develop healthy detachment skills.** Detachment from work is a key skill, and it may be the hardest one to develop due to increasing workloads, ever-evolving teaching methods, and limited time to plan and provide meaningful feedback on student work. If you need to work at home, set boundaries by scheduling specific times and honor those times to reduce guilt. Delete your work email from your phone, and communicate that you are available by phone for emergencies. Enjoy your family, your home, and leisure.

Burnout Evidence

Burnout Symptom	Personal Experience
Exhaustion	“I’m just exhausted.” “I dread Monday.” “I feel like I’m drowning.”
Cynicism	“I don’t even like one of my students, and that’s never happened before.”
Inefficacy, reduced sense of personal accomplishment	“I feel like I’m a terrible teacher right now.”

Confidentiality should be assured if a teacher requests it. Learning—and modeling—emotional health should be part of the school culture.

- **Be transparent about the help you seek.** This applies especially to administrators. We teach kids new skills through modeling every day in classrooms across the world. To normalize a new behavior that feels risky, it helps to see someone in authority engage in that behavior without negative consequences.

When special education coordinator and former deaf education teacher Brittany Gregory, in the Arlington Independent School District in Urban, Tex., and I set up an interactive Zoom training in response to her staff's struggle with burnout, I was stunned by the positive evaluations. One teacher stated that it was the best training she had attended in 26 years. Her reaction made me reflect on exactly what we did. Teachers took an assessment to measure their compassion fatigue and burnout before they arrived. I briefly shared the science behind compassion fatigue and burnout. Teachers reflected on their own experiences with a partner and shared these experiences with the group. We learned a few practical strategies to build resilience based on the four key points in the beginning of the article. That was it.

Teachers reported that they had never had a name for what they collectively experienced, and that it felt validating to know what they felt was real. Several also stated in a variety of ways how they hadn't realized the impact work had on their personal lives, and that they were excited to start using the strategies. Validation of experiences. Sharing hardships. Strategies for recovery. This is what teachers needed.

While workshops and training can be critical, it can also be helpful to address issues related to burnout in the school's weekly newsletter. Regardless of the newsletter's style, addressing these issues lets teachers—and sometimes parents and caregivers—know that

administrators would be supportive should a need for help arise. The newsletter might include:

- Articles that validate teacher experiences
- Contact information for an employee assistance program
- Contact information for private counselors and coaches
- Links to support groups in the area or online
- Links to websites or documents with information on burnout recovery
- Quotes about emotional health

As deaf education teachers return to the classroom and demands to decrease pandemic learning gaps grow, an emotionally safe environment for work becomes critical. Teacher experiences should be validated, and prevention and recovery from burnout should be normalized. Above all, we must provide meaningful, evidence-based resources that are accessible and low cost to support our teachers. Facing the issue of burnout and showing concern for teachers' emotional health and well-being can not only transform the teaching experience, it can transform the teachers.

References

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Burnout Assessment Tools

- **Maslach Burnout Inventory:** A more rigorously validated test by Christina Maslach, www.mindgarden.com/117-maslach-burnout-inventory-mbi
- **Professional Quality of Life Scale—Version 5:** A rigorously validated test that also includes measures for compassion satisfaction and secondary traumatic stress, <https://proqol.org>
- **Burnout Self-Test:** An informal assessment created by MindTools, www.astrazeneca.com/content/dam/az/PDF/2020/covid-19-toolkit/Burnout_Self-Test.pdf