Unraveling Faculty Burnout

Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal

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I don’t think I would have told anyone on campus about my burnout and mental-health struggle if I hadn’t had a panic attack in front of a senior colleague two weeks before the fall semester of 2018. I dreaded a new semester, and a misunderstanding about my schedule had led to one of my first-year writing classes meeting twice in the first week but the second meeting only once, meaning they would be out of sync until fall break in October. Given my mental state, this schedule, which should have been merely annoying, felt disastrous. So in early August I shakily resigned myself to this nightmare and went to campus to pick up the textbooks I needed, catastrophizing and ruminating all the way there.

As soon as I walked toward my building, my chest seized up, and I knew I had to grab the books, avoid everyone, and get out fast if I didn’t want to have a breakdown. But as fate would have it, one of my senior colleagues was in her office. She greeted me warmly and asked me the question I feared most in the world: “How was your summer?” Hopeless, I tried to explain my calamitous schedule for the fall and began to have a panic attack as I spoke, hyperventilating, lungs in a vice.
In that spirit, Katherine Segal has advice for developing a meaningful self-care plan that can help you heal from burnout. The term “self-care” has become an overused, meaningless cliché synonymous with indulgence, numbing out, and pretending your stress isn’t there. While it’s not going to fit on a bumper sticker, I prefer to say, “Actions an individual can take to support their well-being” (see Segal 2020). This is not only more expansive; it gets at the purpose of what acts of self-care should be doing: supporting our well-being. Many readers may already be familiar with the dimensions of wellness model. The original model was developed in 1976 with six dimensions: social, emotional, physical, spiritual, occupational, and intellectual (Green 2016; National Wellness Institute 2019). More recent iterations of the model have included additional dimensions: mind/body, environmental, and financial (Segal 2020).

Burnout, while generally presumed to originate in the occupational wellness dimension, has the potential to negatively impact functioning in all wellness dimensions. Imagine a person broke their arm at work. While the injury occurred on the job, the arm does not spontaneously heal when it is time to clock out for the night and go home. Without proper intervention, the arm remains broken and the person not only experiences a decline in their ability to fully perform work duties but may also have difficulties away from work, such as in their ability to care for themselves. This could lead to decline in emotional well-being and then decline in interpersonal relationships as the person becomes increasingly distressed. Similarly, the impact of burnout spreads across the wellness dimensions, negatively impacting our ability to perform job functions efficiently, fully care for ourselves, and interact with the world in a meaningful manner.
When we understand burnout from this perspective, it becomes easy to see why the occasional bubble bath and shopping spree will never cure burnout. Before and during burnout it is important to identify and engage in activities that will foster healing and raise your level of satisfaction in each of the wellness dimensions.

The following activity shows how to identify the wellness dimensions most in need of your attention. To create your healing self-care plan,

1. Begin by listing the wellness dimensions on a sheet of paper.
2. Reflect on your level of satisfaction in each wellness dimension. Place a score of 0–10 next to each wellness dimension, where 0 is the least satisfaction and 10 is the most satisfaction you can feel in that category.
3. Identify which areas are in distress (scores below 5), which areas feel “okay” and need some improvement (scores 5–7), and which areas are doing well and need maintenance (scores 8–10).
4. For each wellness dimension, identify activities you can engage in to raise your level of satisfaction. For example, if your satisfaction in your physical well-being is low, identify the key issue and potential solutions. Do you need to get more sleep on a consistent basis, go to the doctor to address illnesses, or improve your eating habits?
5. Identify where on your list of potential solutions you would like to start.

As you create your healing self-care plan, tailor it to your personal needs, goals, and preferences. When possible, select action steps that interest you. For example, when creating a plan to improve your satisfaction in your physical health dimension, if the thought of jogging thirty minutes a day makes you want to fake a
heart attack, pick something else that supports physical health. You may also find yourself needing to engage in action steps that are “good for you” rather than fun. For example, it may be important to go to the doctor to support your physical health or go to therapy to support your emotional health. These steps may not be fun or easy, but deep healing rather than quick fixes will result in greater benefits, sustainability, and life balance.

People with self-compassion ask for what they need but maintain boundaries and “know that growing any psychological resource, including compassion, is to have repeated experiences of it that are turned into lasting changes in neural structure or functioning” (Hanson and Hanson 2018, 15). Self-compassion can be hard in an environment like higher education, but we are all capable of fostering it, actively using it during the challenging times, and building it up as a muscle.

**Conclusion**

Compassion can look like many things: showing empathy and pointing others who are suffering to available resources; setting solid boundaries around when you will and will not check email; making yourself vulnerable by discussing your burnout and struggles or really listening to someone sharing these feelings with you. As women, our evolutionary tendency to “tend and befriend” predisposes many of us to caring deeply about the people we work with and care for, students included, but it can also lead us into burnout in ways men may not experience.

Perhaps because of these evolutionary and social behaviors, women may be uniquely positioned to both experience burnout and help others work through it. While it was unintentional at the time, I turned to other women initially to cope with my burnout.