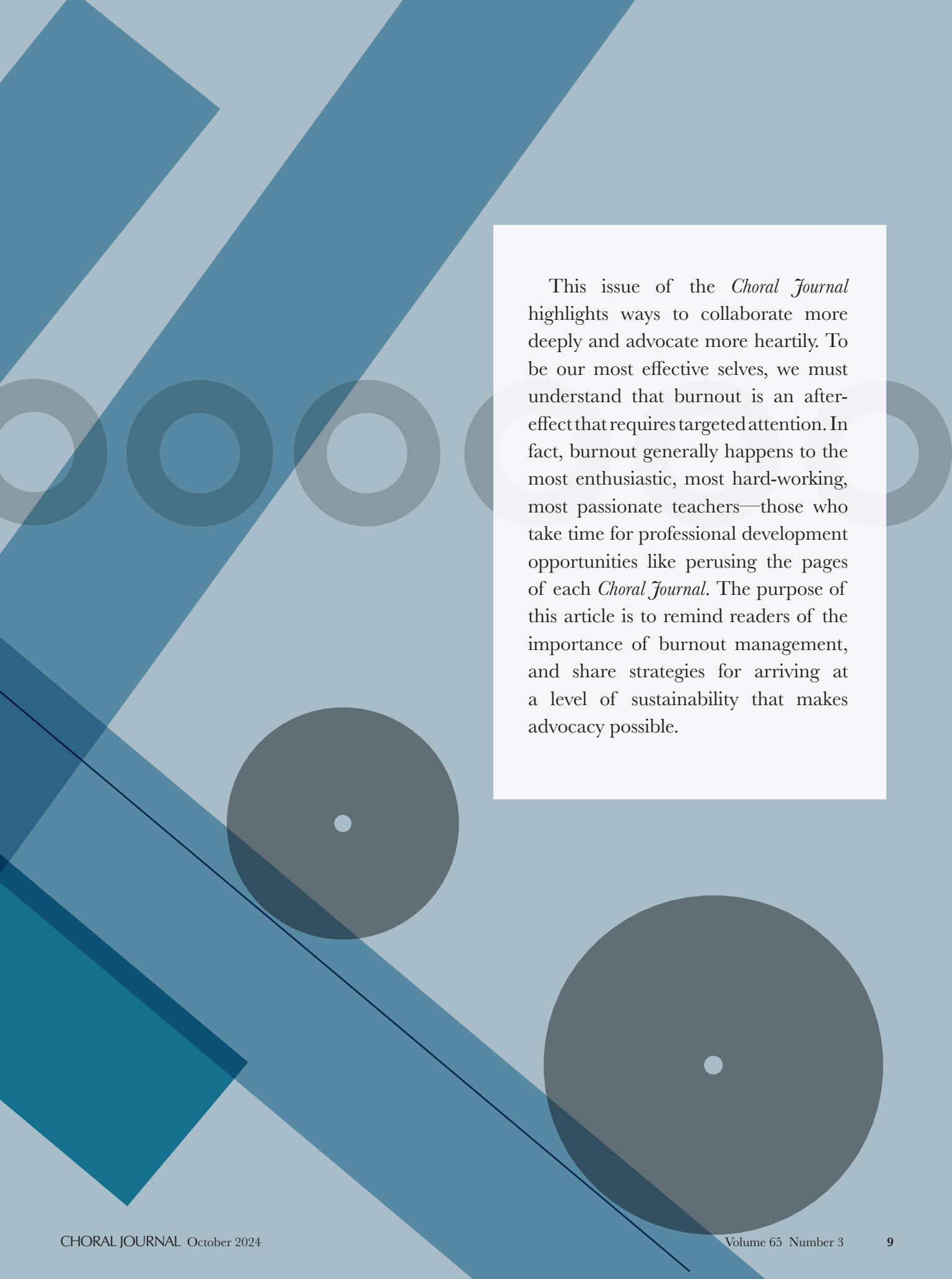


Tenacious Teachers: A Methodical Approach to Burnout Management

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This issue of the *Choral Journal* highlights ways to collaborate more deeply and advocate more heartily. To be our most effective selves, we must understand that burnout is an after-effect that requires targeted attention. In fact, burnout generally happens to the most enthusiastic, most hard-working, most passionate teachers—those who take time for professional development opportunities like perusing the pages of each *Choral Journal*. The purpose of this article is to remind readers of the importance of burnout management, and share strategies for arriving at a level of sustainability that makes advocacy possible.

Recognizing the Source of Burnout

“Burnout is not an event, but rather a process... [and] should not be confused with occasional feelings of discouragement and unhappiness.”¹

Where do you find yourself on a sliding scale between inspired and fatigued? With constant monitoring, we maintain an environment that is tenable and enjoyable. Regularly take time to self-diagnose and eliminate perceived feelings of shame or guilt. If you find yourself questioning your status at this moment, recognize the fluid nature of our emotional health. All is not lost.

According to Barbara Brock and Marilyn Grady’s book, *Rekindling the Flame*, symptoms of burnout can be found in five common areas: 1) Physical: weight gain, migraines, tense muscles, back pain; 2) Intellectual: decisions become difficult, often overwhelmed; 3) Social: withdrawn, hobbies become nonexistent, hermetic at work; 4) Emotional: anxiety issues, hermetic at home; 5) Spiritual: personal values become affected.²

After identifying symptoms of burnout, identify the probable source(s) of aggravation, which, for music teachers, often fall into four categories:

1. Administration-related: perceived lack of support, poor salary, unreasonable expectations, insufficient preparation time, ongoing need for choral advocacy
2. Student-related: discipline problems within the broader school culture, lack of student engagement, poor public perception of teachers
3. Music-related: unreasonable performance expectations, lack of interest in musical study or discovery, attrition of musical skills
4. Personal circumstance: shifting life goals or family dynamics, relocation, personal or family illness; and one that affected us all in a global way: the Covid-19 pandemic

After ten years of public-school teaching—once I was able to realize that my sources of burnout were

administration- and student-related, rather than music-related—I chose to leave the classroom but remain active and happy within the profession. I was fortunate that my personal circumstances allowed for this change. While my feelings of burnout were valid, I discovered that I had further musical discoveries to pursue, and a shift of environment would make this possible.

Individual situations vary, but recognizing the source is an important first step and can enable a strategic plan to address specific aggravations. Depending on the situation, finding resolve is not typically immediate. Not all personal circumstances allow for more drastic changes such as moving or changing jobs. Everyone can and should, however, turn weekly attention to additional management strategies. Strive to manage burnout in three regular areas of focus, as seen in Table 1, below.

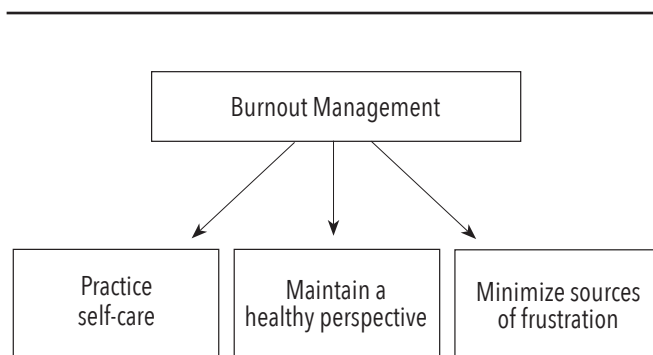
When we recognize that we are inching toward burnout, we can set a goal to implement one change in each of these three areas. Creating a tactical plan to address targeted areas on a weekly basis makes progress more manageable.

Three Burnout Management Strategies

One. Practicing Self-Care

One tried-and-true area of burnout management is regularly practicing self-care. This includes setting boundaries and establishing practices that increase one’s quality of life. Here are a few ideas to add to your personal plan.

Table 1. Burnout Management: Three Areas of Focus



Non-negotiables include adequate sleep and meals. I used to list these items as self-care numbers one and two, but sleep and meals are, in fact, basic human needs and could be held in the same category as going to the bathroom or breathing. (See the following article in this issue from Christina Vehar and Sierra Manson Randall for more.) Eat when it is time to eat. Breathe when it is time to breathe. Do not confuse elements of human survival with those of self-care.

Exercise is crucial and can take on various forms. It is wonderful to be in the regular habit of distance running or going to the gym. But even at our busiest times we can afford a ten-minute walk around the building. I am privileged to teach on a campus surrounded by woods and find myself refreshed if I walk the exterior perimeter of the building during the day.

Vocal health must be at the forefront of our practices. As choral musicians, ensure you are taking steps to maintain vocal health, including regular hydration, using a microphone, and monitoring your coordinated onset while singing and speaking. Take time once a year to visit a laryngologist and address any internal medical needs. Consider working with a voice coach during the summer.

Be a participant in the choral art. Too often, we are the ones doing the cooking but are unable to sit and enjoy a meal. Join a community choir, opera chorus, or sing in a church choir. If your schedule is restrictive, ask a student to conduct while you take a seat in the choir for a few minutes each day.

Designate spaces that are free of choral music. I have chosen to confine the listening of choral music to my offices at home and work. Recordings of choral music are not allowed while driving in my car or cooking in the kitchen. I enjoy cultivating playlists far from choral pedagogy.

Going home for dinner is a healthy way to escape. As previously mentioned, eating is not an appropriate use of the term self-care. Beyond that, however, try wearing jeans on a concert day. This practice creates an opportunity to eat at home before returning for the evening event. If you

do not have the luxury of living within a reasonable distance, the same principle can be applied by going out to a nearby restaurant and finding a moment to decompress.

Programming choices affect our daily mood. Avoid selecting music you don't like. The piece you like the least is generally avoided and risks being underbaked by the time of performance.

Consider adjusting the course load. This doesn't necessarily mean lighten. A respected teacher experiencing fatigue recently added a special-needs choir class to her schedule, which became an exciting change in an otherwise mundane routine and is now the class she looks forward to the most.

Two. Maintain a Healthy Perspective

The second area of management involves simply reframing or adjusting one's perspective. This requires very little action but can yield immediate results. Here are a few examples of mental changes that are easily implemented.

Bad day barometer. Let us stop and recognize for a moment the joyous nature of our choral profession. A bad day, for us, might be when a particular student breathes in the wrong moment of a phrase. Is this a true emergency? No. And aren't we lucky to be involved in a communal art form? When we feel our day is ruined due to a musical situation, take note of the bad day barometer.

Drawer of joy. When sitting at your desk, identify the drawer that is closest to you. This is where all the thank you notes, student success announcements, graduations, weddings, promotions, uplifting emails, and other items that make you smile can be stored. Open this drawer often.

Observation. There is satisfaction to be found when we can attend a nearby choral festival and appreciate the good work being done. Even at an event that involves your own choir, would it be possible to send the singers

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home with someone else? You will find value in observing other fine performances.

Favorite music. Choral musicians are often asked, “What’s your favorite song?” To be effective, I truly believe the answer to this question is found in my active repertoire at that very moment. Successful journalists behave in a similar way: the most interesting story they’ve ever worked on must be the one they are researching at that time. Let yourself fall in love again and again with the music.

The student experience. A public-school principal once encouraged us to attend the class schedule of our students, which gave me an opportunity to experience the classes that bookend my rehearsal: in that case, physics and gym. I came to realize why, perhaps, it took the students a few minutes longer than expected for them to engage with the music and why they might feel a little anxious toward the end of rehearsal. The cognitive whiplash of a traditional high school schedule can be quite staggering.

Delegate. Many of us likely discovered our love of choral leadership when a trusted mentor gave us an opportunity to lead during a formative period in our development. Return the favor often. This not only pays tremendous benefit to the student but can positively influence our own perception regarding their capabilities.

Administration is temporary. If you are experiencing a beautiful period of support, prepare yourself for the eventual, and unfortunate, expiration date. If the opposite is true, and your present administration is less than ideal, remember this is a temporary situation.

Adapt with integrity. The companion to a regularly changing administration is the periodic implementation of new teaching strategies or educational “buzzwords.” It seems that each year, a passionate administrator will introduce a novel approach that we are required to honor. Most of the time, upon reflection, I find I’m already effectively executing the proposed concept. It is possible to apply the new label without

much adjustment. Take comfort in trusting your quality training and solid record of good teaching.

Extra-curricular obligations. During the busiest of times, choral directors may be required to put in a significant number of hours. Reframing our own perspective regarding those extra activities is key. Chaperoning the homecoming dance is a chore; spending time with your singers in a different environment while witnessing their wardrobe and excitement is a joy. Sitting in a dark concert hall for yet another evening is grueling; spending time listening to a particular student succeed in their senior recital is a delight.

Three. Minimize Sources of Frustration

The last area of management is identifying and minimizing sources of frustration. This can include simple solutions to problems that are a hindrance to one’s effectiveness; apply the Stephen Covey adage of “sharpening the saw.” Here are a few implementable ideas pertinent to our discipline.

Take care of your office personnel and custodians. What would we do without the people who keep the program and facilities running? A twelve-pack of soda is a nice way to show gratitude for a custodian. A handful of chocolate when making a last-minute request of the school treasurer goes a long way. When they are happy, you are happy.

Keep a clean desk. When the desk is piled high, we can spend an inordinate amount of time looking for that one important document, dongle, or pen. Recognize these moments of frustration and schedule time to clean it up. If not every day, make it a goal to leave a clean desk on Friday afternoons. A similar approach can be applied to our email inbox.

Voice preservation. Reminding ourselves to wear a lapel mic and limit the delivery of excessively loud instructions mitigates feelings of vocal frustration and fatigue. This topic is addressed previously as self-care but worth mentioning again.

Important tasks. Although unconventional, my very first principal coached me not to do any paperwork unless it is requested a second time. Every significant administrative request has a built-in reminder. Examples range from final grade entry to annual budget reports. This can be especially helpful to young teachers as they learn to identify what is truly necessary.

Encourage solutions. Amateur singers of all ages can conjure up a lot of questions, especially on performance day. I have trained my singers to think of the “Big 5.” If they raise their hand with a question, I’ll hold up my own outstretched fingers as a visual reminder for them to ask themselves:

1st finger) Is this important?

2nd finger) Is this important right now?

3rd finger) Can I solve this myself?

4th finger) Can anyone else in the whole world, other than the director, solve this for me?

5th finger) Even if I brought up this concern, is there anything the director could do about it?

My proudest moments have been when singers come up with solutions on their own.

Change the classroom setup. Numerous demonstrations are available regarding creative ways to rehearse. Dr. Charlene Archibeque’s fantastic work on choral rehearsal strategies is a standout example. Arrange singers in a circle around the room. Form small quartets. Move to another location like an orchestra pit, hallway, or reverberant bathroom. Each situation provides your singers an interesting new environment with challenges and benefits.

Time management. I teach best when I have immediate access to an analog clock with an accurate minute and second hand. Digital clocks require too much math during rehearsal. With an analog clock, I can visually assess the amount of time left.

Student-directed learning. It has proven helpful to plan a fifteen-minute sectional time into the middle of every lengthy rehearsal. This gives me, and the singers, time to breathe and refocus. Ninety minutes is a long time for even the most seasoned teacher to play the role of cheerleader. Give clear objectives, provide separate rehearsal spaces if possible, and send students on their own for fifteen minutes. The first few attempts may not go smoothly, but once singers settle into routine, it can be a tool of tremendous value.

Rehearsal architecture. Review your regular process. Are you beginning and ending rehearsal with something successful? Is the hardest work happening in the middle third? Reviewing the psychological needs of the singer can maintain positive momentum.

By taking moments of reflection, I hope we can all be sustainability minded as we routinely manage our own symptoms of burnout. The first step is to identify the various sources, followed by a three-pronged strategic plan: 1) Practice self-care, 2) Maintain a healthy perspective, and 3) Minimize sources of frustration. Such an approach enables longevity.

Suggested Resources

The choral art form is one of community. All that we practice and preach as individuals comes from a deep well of practices observed across this vast choral ecosystem. I do not claim any of the above to be original research. My observations and practices have evolved over decades of interactions with quality educators and friends who regularly inspire me. In addition to dozens of private conversations and memorable conference sessions, some of the publications that I regularly revisit are listed below:

Barbara L. Brock and Marilyn L. Grady, *Rekindling the Flame: Principals Combating Teacher Burnout* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, Inc., 2000).

Carl B. Hancock, “National Estimates of Retention, Migration and Attrition: A Multiyear Comparison of Music and Non-Music Teachers,” *Journal of Research in*

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Music Education 57, no. 2 (2009): 92-107.

Donald L. Hamann, “Burnout: How to Spot it, How to Avoid it,” *Music Educators Journal* 77, no. 2 (1990): 30-33.

Sung Eun Kim and David Barg, “Reducing Music Teacher Turnover and Its Consequences,” Music Education Policy Briefs (Boston University), October 2010.

Johanna J. Siebert, “Why Music Teachers Remain in the Profession: Conversations with Career Music Educators” (PhD diss., Eastman School of Music, 2007).

Valerie Strauss, “Teacher: The Day I Knew for Sure I Was Burned Out,” *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2014.

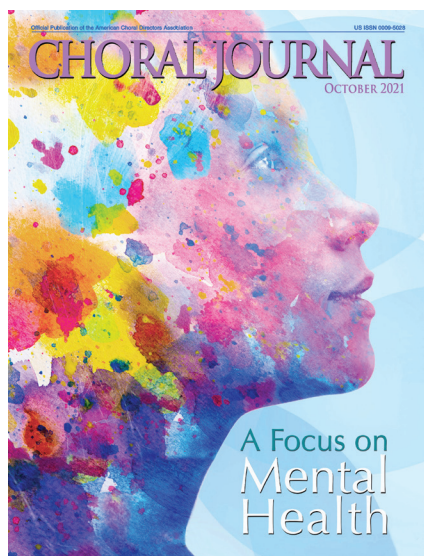
Franchesca Warren, “Teacher Burnout is Real—Signs and How to Avoid It,” NAFME.org, May 20, 2015. 

NOTES

¹ Barbara L. Brock and Marilyn L. Grady, *Rekindling the Flame: Principals Combating Teacher Burnout* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, Inc., 2000), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

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