

# **A State of Stress: Self-Care Strategies for Combating the Effects of Burnout**

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### **An Overview of Burnout Research**

What is burnout? How do we define it and what can we learn from it? Burnout is uniquely personal to each lived experience, and the research is relatively young, having only been in literature for around forty years. However, understanding some foundations helps give us language for what we are experiencing.

Burnout is a combination of both internal factors—such as personal needs and values—and external factors—such as work overload, insufficient reward, and conflicting values. As Peter Steenblik mentions in his article in this issue, burnout is a process. We can also view burnout as in between stress (strain or pressure) and demoralization (corruption of morals and discouragement).<sup>1</sup> Stress can occur in two ways: eustress and distress. Eustress can activate and motivate us, but distress slows us down. Demoralization occurs when there is a conflict of values to the point where we are not able to do the right thing. Dr. Christina Maslach suggests three dimensions to burnout: 1) emotional exhaustion, 2) depersonalization/cynicism, and 3) reduced personal accomplishment.<sup>2</sup> A study by Jessica Nápoles, et. al., found that impostor phenomenon and burnout are intrinsically linked.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, burnout is nuanced, and the factors should be studied individually rather than collectively.<sup>4</sup>

Burnout has increased post-pandemic. Research from Devlin Peck explains that teaching is the most burnt-out profession.<sup>5</sup> There are 500,000 fewer educators post-pandemic, with 300,000 resigning mid-year in 2022. Nearly half of teachers report feeling consistent burnout, and 67% of teachers view burnout as a major issue. Seventy-five percent of teachers have stress-related health issues, and the majority of teachers view the teaching profession as unsustainable.

Burnout is a process that has always existed but has certainly been amplified post-pandemic. A 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey by RAND found that one of the main stressors for teachers is health.<sup>6</sup> Burnout truly affects our health by affecting us emotionally, mentally, and physically. The strategies to combat burnout must not come from teachers alone, but rather a collective that also includes administrators, school boards, families, communities, and beyond.

## **Burnout Effects**

Once we know what burnout is, the next step is identifying its effects. Whether it be inside or outside of the classroom, burnout affects the person experiencing it and those around them. Some of the physical effects of burnout include weight gain or loss and irregular hair loss, attributed to change of appetite and fatigue. Most

effects of burnout, however, come in the emotional and psychological symptoms. These include anxiety/depression, potentially developing sleep disorders, lack of job satisfaction, and inability to enjoy downtime.

In the podcast “Ten Percent Happier with Dan Harris,” Harris interviews Drs. Emily and Amelia Nagoski. Emily Nagoski discusses the idea of an “emotion cycle,” where just like any other normal human function, your body has a process it must filter through when experiencing an emotion. Burnout happens when we get stuck in the middle of the cycle—experiencing the emotion, the stressor that caused said emotion, that “fight or flight” feeling—and are unable to properly process or separate ourselves and return to a state of balance.<sup>7</sup> As educators, our triggers are often things we have to experience: student/parent behavior, school safety, toxic work environment, unsupportive administration, etc. When we are not able to successfully alleviate the issue causing our trigger because it is “just part of the job,” then we are in a constant state of fight or flight.

If we are constantly worrying about how to improve our work environment, or working so much overtime that there is no true downtime, or using our free time to doom-scroll through social media for hours and hours, then we are not able to properly complete the emotion cycle and run ourselves ragged. We then only notice the burnout feeling when the effects appear: the depression, sleepiness, and impacted psychological state.

We often ignore the signs of burnout until it seems too late to turn back. By addressing what these signs look and feel like, as well as what stressors potentially cause them, we are able to address the issues at large and work to improve them. There will be stressors that cannot be fixed immediately (or in the field of education it seems ever), but we do have coping mechanisms we can use to better manage our body’s reactions to these stressors. By knowing what to look for, addressing the cause, and finding ways to work through our bodies’ emotional cycles, we can better manage these symptoms and ideally alleviate them all together.

## Self-Care Redefined

### In-School Self-Care Strategies

It can seem counterintuitive to find strategies for self-care that are specifically in-school. Isn't that the whole purpose, to take care of yourself outside of the stressful environment? Oftentimes, we spend more time in our rehearsal spaces than we do in our own homes. It is imperative to find ways throughout the day to recenter ourselves and to create spaces that cannot be turned against us or do damage to us. Why shouldn't we also feel comfortable in the spaces we strive to make comfortable for our musicians?

#### *Setting Boundaries/Defining Non-Negotiables*

We as teachers are quick to say "yes" for many reasons: to prove we can be good team workers, work for our administration's praise, to do what we can for our students, to name a few. However, for us to be the best versions of ourselves we can be, we have to make our work environment a place where we feel comfortable saying a teacher's least favorite word: "no." Creating a calendar at the beginning of the school year with dates you can commit to and sticking to it is a way to ensure that your administration sees you are able to work, but you have set days that you cannot add extra. If you are an upper-level teacher, often students come to you with all of their hard issues and emotions. Finding a way to be supportive while not making their issues your problem is crucial to create those boundaries and keep your classroom not just a safe space for them, but a safe space for you.

#### *Changing Your Environment/Organization*

Take time to make an organization system that works for you. Whether that's labeled drawers or folders, or just having your own system of piles on your desk, keeping things organized will help to alleviate the panic of having to be "perfect." Creating a space in your classroom, whether you have an office or a corner with a desk that is your comfort space, can help.

#### *Mindfulness and Crafting*

The little things are absolutely allowed to bother us, but we should strive to not let it be the bane of our

existence. Remembering where you are and the group you are surrounded by and putting your situation into perspective is crucial. If you are a K-12 teacher or undergraduate college professor, it can be difficult to remind yourself that a student's prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until age twenty-five, which of course is the part of the brain to control complex behavioral performance and executive functions.

#### *Use Your Time Off!*

Sick days vs Personal Time Off (PTO) are two things teachers try to collect like gold coins. However, oftentimes PTO does not roll over for future school years! Take the time in the beginning of the school year to pre-schedule PTO for things you find important to you—birthdays, a mental health day after a particularly stressful concert series, a concert by your favorite band. This will also provide little spots in the year to be excited for outside of an otherwise hectic schedule!

### Out-of-School Self-Care Strategies

Out-of-school strategies for burnout highlight yourself, the people you love, and that which you love to do. We want to emphasize that eating, sleeping, and resting are not self-care; they are basic human needs. Using those as "rewards" is not beneficial to our emotional, mental, or physical health, and trains our brains not to place value on them.

#### *Setting Boundaries*

There is a long-standing stigma that burnout is equated to success; we have the power to break that cycle and redefine what success is to us. Setting boundaries encourages us to give of ourselves in all aspects of our lives as we are able, which creates balance. Powerful tools to utilize include defining our own non-negotiables—the things in our lives that we are not willing to give up, the lines we are not willing to cross, and the values we hold—along with using "no" as a full sentence.

#### *Spending Time with Loved Ones*

Being in the presence of those we love can instantly shift our mood, our motivations, and our actions. Living life with and creating memories with loved ones is

something we carry with us forever, and therefore important to not miss out on.

## *Spending Time on Hobbies and Interests*

These absolutely fuel who we are as humans and contribute to what makes us unique. There is nothing quite like time spent in creativity and inspiration! Another thing to consider is that remaining involved in music making for the sheer joy it brings you is vital. It is easy to get wrapped up when our hobby is also our profession. Staying involved in an ensemble encourages us to keep a love for music at the forefront.

## *Having Designated Mindful Spaces*

Creating spaces in the places you most frequent can quite literally bring a breath of fresh air. The calm and peace we feel in a space that is cozy, organized, and uplifting can make all the difference.

## *Making the Ordinary “Extraordinary”*

Being alive is the special occasion! Finding ways to bring light to your day can truly make the ordinary extraordinary! Even a small change can create a big impact. Something such as turning dinner into a picnic or picking up flowers on the way home to celebrate the day can remind you to love the present—knowing there is nothing better than the here and now.

In addition, remind yourself of how kind, brilliant, and beautiful you are always. Celebrate being human. Celebrate your hard work. Celebrate just because! This world would not be the same without you, and that is forever something to celebrate.

## *Perspective and Affirmations*

Reflection and gratitude help us pour into and love ourselves while we pour into and love others. Take time to stop and think, “I do not get this moment in time, with these people, doing this thing ever again. How can I use this perspective to guide my day?” Affirmation is also a powerful tool that can be embraced in a variety of ways: words spoken or written, a small gift, or time. Positive words we speak to ourselves, things that bring us joy, or time spent in self-care connect us to greater health emotionally, mentally, and physically.

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We hope that reflecting on these strategies helps bring into focus your life, your lived experience, and your needs. We also hope it affirms that self-care is not self-indulgent, but rather a means for greater mental, emotional, and physical health.

## **Advocating and Mentoring**

Advocating and mentoring are both powerful tools in self-care. Advocating allows us to use self-care to help others. Mentoring allows other people to help us. This cycle of people helping one another creates an unstoppable and influential force for good and for self-care.

## **Self-Care Advocating Strategies**

Strategies for advocating include speaking out, having courage, and recognizing humanity. While advocating, it is important to do so to the capacity you are able. It is not your responsibility alone to fix what needs to be restored. Partnering with and leaning on the common collective helps remind us we are better together. Know that both you and your actions are enough. Remember to pour grace into yourself. Advocating is work we all can contribute to, and it will look differently person to person. That is what makes it so powerful!

## *Speaking Out*

Your voice has power. Speaking out against injustices, unfairness, systemic issues, work overload, and conflicting values when able encourages inquiry and open-mindedness in others, inspiration, and motivation. It is important to recognize that many voices are silenced. Helping break down barriers by questioning why they are there is vital in making sure all voices are heard. Speaking out can look like calling out harmful language used by a colleague. It can look like sharing your ideas at community meetings or at your capital. It can look like questioning policies. It can look like voicing concerns. The list is endless, so remember, the ways in which you speak out are powerful and do contribute to combating systemic issues that can cause burnout.

## *Having Courage*

Advocating requires deep courage. Honor yourself. Give yourself rest. It can be exhausting when it feels like

you are the only person on your team/in your school/in your circle of influence who is voicing concerns or calling out issues. You are brave for the sheer fact that you have empathy and recognize humanity. Your courage will look different day to day, and sometimes even moment to moment. That is okay.

### *Recognizing Humanity*


Seeing people as humans rather than commodities reminds us that each person is facing their own lived experiences each and every day. We approach life and our actions differently when we live in a space of honoring and celebrating all people. In modeling this in our own lives, we nurture it within our own singers and those around us. This also fosters space for us to learn from one another and create deeper understanding, building an impactful, never-ending cycle of growth.

### **Self-Care Mentoring Strategies**

Some of our greatest assets are the others in our fields. Specifically as choral educators, we are often the only ones in our school, and our mentors are often another arts teacher who gets the school but not necessarily our subject or situation specifically. Creating a network for mentoring and collaborating is important. Having a group of people who understand what it's like to be in your shoes and are able to offer advice, sympathy, and help you to find humor in the situations you end up in will be a large part of completing those tense emotion cycles. Find your support, whether it's another chorus teacher in your district/a neighboring district, your undergraduate cohort, or a group of people you talk to online that all met in a chorus director Facebook page.

Make sure you find people who are unbiased to express your thoughts and feelings to. If you are able, find a therapist or counselor. Surrounding yourself with those you love who have no connection to your profession will give you space to find parts of yourself that are not solely weighed in what you do for work.

As singletons in our own environments, whether it's at a school, church, or community choir, often we keep our stressors and issues to ourselves. Sometimes, the most beneficial thing we can do is to reach out to an-

other person to function as a sounding board. By incorporating self-care strategies in your work and personal life, you will begin to see small but important changes in your physical, mental, and emotional health. 

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Jessica Nápoles, "Burnout: A Review of the Literature." *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 40, no. 2 (2022): 19-26. doi.org/10.1177/87551233211037669.
- <sup>3</sup> Jessica Nápoles, et. al., "Burnout and Impostor Phenomenon Among Undergraduate Music Education Majors." *Journal of Research in Music Education* (November 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> Jessica Nápoles, et. al., "Burnout and Perceived Agency Among Texas Choir Teachers." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 71, no. 3 (2022): 283-96.
- <sup>5</sup> Devlin Peck, "Teacher Burnout Statistics: Why Teachers Quit in 2024," n.d. <https://www.devlinpeck.com/content/teacher-burnout-statistics>.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth D. Steiner and Ashley Woo, "Job-Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply: Key Findings From the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey," n.d. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports\\_reports/RR1100/RR1108-1/RAND\\_RRA1108-1.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports_reports/RR1100/RR1108-1/RAND_RRA1108-1.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> Dan Harris, host, "For the Burned, Fried, and Exhausted with Dr. Amelia & Emily Nagoski." *Ten Percent Happier with Dan Harris* (podcast, 2022). Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://www.tenpercent.com/tph/podcast-episode/emily-amelia-nagoski-409>.