Burnout Matters! Prevention through Education

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I committed my doctoral studies to understanding the issue of burnout, the current solution landscape, and opportunities for innovation in prevention and intervention. I interviewed numerous social work professionals, ranging from those in direct service to executive leaders. I found that people often confuse other professional issues, including compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, with professional burnout. This confusion is significant, because being empowered with information to differentiate the cause of one’s symptoms is crucial to addressing it effectively. These knowledge gaps made clear to me that there is a need in the solution landscape for formal education in burnout.

Innovation through Education

To learn how professional burnout is addressed in educational settings, I researched college-level course offerings. I found no courses focused solely on professional burnout. The courses that appeared in my query focus on student burnout. Professional burnout, however, emphasizes many catalysts that differ from challenges faced while in school, despite some areas of overlap (i.e., overwork). Considering the gap in formal burnout education, I decided to design an online, asynchronous elective course called Burnout in Social Work Practice. Since developing this new course, I have facilitated three sections, which have engaged 62 bachelor’s and master’s-level students. Through this instructional experience, I have had several insights regarding the significance of the content. First, let us discuss a little more about the issue of burnout, since it is the foundation of said insights.

Defining Burnout

Burnout is a significant occupational hazard for today’s workforce. A recent study found that 8 out of 10 full-time employees report feeling burned out at least sometimes (Gallup’s Perspective, 2020). The occurrence of burnout has become so prevalent that in 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) named it an occupational phenomenon as part of the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (WHO, 2019). According to WHO, burnout results from chronic workplace stressors that go unmanaged over time. Burnout comprises three dimensions, including:

1. Exhaustion– feeling a depletion of one’s energy.
2. Cynicism– distancing oneself mentally from one’s job or feeling negative toward one’s job.
3. Inefficacy– having a reduced sense of effectiveness in one’s role.

Burnout is widespread and poses a significant risk to today’s workforce, including our students as they enter a variety of professional endeavors. The consequences of burnout include threats to one’s physical, psychological, and occupational well-being. Workers experiencing burnout are 2.6 times more likely to be job-seeking and 63 percent more likely to utilize sick leave due to chronic stress (Wigert and Agrewal, 2018).
Burnout in Caretaking Professions

Mission-driven professionals can feel deeply connected to their work, often from a personal passion. This passion can wane over time due to instilled norms within organizations to work excessive hours and manage high caseloads. Workplace pressures can catalyze uncontrolled stress and cynicism towards a job that was once a source of enjoyment and satisfaction. A masters-level student shared the following reflection about workplace norms:

*The common mindset in the workplace is that if you love what you do, it should not feel like work. This mindset is not productive as it contributes to the idea that if you love what you do, you need to dedicate your life to it. Working long hours has become well-respected and glorified in today’s culture. I have heard co-workers casually talk about working 12-13-hour days and on weekends to catch up on work. I am always hearing how exhausted everyone is. These kinds of conversations have become normalized in the workplace.*

Although burnout can affect anyone in the workforce, it is of the highest concern for caretaking professionals, such as social workers, physicians, nurses, and teachers. Social workers, who represent the largest behavioral health profession in the United States with 715,600 active positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), are likely to experience higher work-associated stress and burnout than non-caretaking professionals. Such stress occurs due to excessive caseloads and responsibilities, complex job demands, low compensation, and a lack of supervisory support.

The Intervention Landscape

Because burnout manifests in individual workers, its solution landscape often emphasizes person-directed interventions, which employ self-care, cognitive-behavioral, and resiliency-building approaches. These interventions may bring many short-term benefits to workers, but they will never cure burnout. An increasing number of organizations offer wellness programs to address burnout in staff, but these programs often prioritize person-directed approaches alone rather than organization-directed approaches, which are more effective in the long term. While well intentioned, in the absence of other workplace supports and changes, person-directed interventions put the onus on employees to bear the burden for their experience rather than focusing on systemic causes that continue to fuel the problem.

Organization-directed interventions incorporate structural changes, increase employee communication, and develop the morale of collaboration and job control. The importance of organization-directed intervention is captured well in an interview with burnout research pioneer Christina Maslach. In the interview, Maslach asked the interviewer to imagine beautiful canaries in a coal mine. She encouraged the interviewer to think about the colorful, singing birds flying deep into the cave. Then, Maslach asked the interviewer to imagine the birds arising from the coal mine, ill and covered in soot. Maslach asked, “Can you imagine us asking why the canaries made themselves sick? No because the answer would be obvious: the coal mine is making the birds sick” (Schulte, 2019). This story is an excellent illustration for students seeking to understand the role organizational systems have on the well-being of their employees.

Course Design

The Burnout in Social Work Practice course aims to empower students with knowledge and resources to mitigate professional burnout in the future. It is offered to bachelor’s and master’s-level students. I use a variety of teaching tools including podcasts, TED Talks, case studies, assessments, current events, peer-reviewed articles, and various readings. I create original short-form educational videos with images, information, music, and voice-over dialogue for every module. Each week, students complete asynchronous modules with a clear theme, engaging in structured activities, discussion, and peer feedback along with their major assignments.

Teaching Insights

Students begin the course with a general sense of what burnout is, but throughout the course, their knowledge matures to understand the complexity of this occupational phenomenon. The course content highlights how burnout is often viewed as an individual problem because it manifests behaviorally and emotionally in workers. As a result, several modules examine how burnout runs deeper than the individual and develops from organizational systems.

Most students initially express a limited understanding of professional and organizational interventions for burnout mitigation.

Bachelor’s and master’s-level students most commonly identify person-directed interventions, including self-care, as the primary method to address burnout and well-being. Students typically report using self-care in their personal lives but were less likely to identify professional self-care strategies. A student highlights their perspective on self-care by sharing the following:

*I think that often people only think self-care is getting a massage or working out or eating healthy, that they forget or are unaware of the other examples that can make a huge difference in their day-to-day lives.*

Another student shared:

*Self-care can also include more practical tasks like meal planning, organizing your space, and establishing limits with others.*
This was a great course that allowed for a foundation of understanding of burnout and how we, as social workers, can navigate the profession moving forward. This course was helpful in understanding leadership and how, as a leader, there is some responsibility in the burnout culture of the workplace. I will take what I have learned and apply it to my internship this coming year and my career beyond. I will be conscious of my surroundings and what I can actively change. I will also be more conscious moving forward about whether my workplace is doing all it can to foster a non-burnout environment. I think learning to say no and not feeling guilty about taking time for myself are ways I will move forward. These shared insights highlight the importance and impact of burnout education, which transcends all majors. Although this course will continue to develop over time, students have already taught me that focusing on burnout in the classroom has impacted their level of knowledge, awareness, and resources. I hope the lessons learned in this course will stay with my students, helping them be fierce self-advocates for well-being throughout their careers. Perhaps, through sharing the lessons learned in this course, it will inspire us as a learning community to consider how we engage our students in intentional conversations about burnout.

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