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Burnt Out? You're Not Alone!

by Emily O. Gravett

It's that time of year. Are you feeling it? I'm feeling it. The stress, the exhaustion, the late nights, the droopy eyeballs? The barely keeping it together, the barely staying on top of things, the barely getting everything done? Just the other day, I wondered if I could cancel class—not because of snow (though apparently April is a month when it still snows)—but because I was *so. darn. tired.*

As [Flaherty](#) put it in 2014: "Professors work long days, on weekends, on and off campus, and largely alone." While not everyone agrees that [we work hard enough](#), studies (such as the one Flaherty was covering) consistently capture instructors reporting that they work much more than the 'typical' 40 hours a week. At any given time, we might be: preparing for class, teaching class, teaching extra sections, holding office hours, mentoring students outside of office hours, responding to emails, advising, grading student work, writing recommendation letters, recruiting majors, responding to emails again, scheduling meetings, attending meetings, doing committee work, giving talks, reading, writing, responding to more emails, running labs, supervising student employees, attending conferences, serving on search committees, submitting annual evaluations, attending professional development opportunities, and have I mentioned the emails??

In a recent advice column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called "4 Ideas for Avoiding Faculty Burnout," [David Gooblar \(2018\)](#) tackles this important, timely, and perennial topic. My friend (and [CFI Faculty Associate!](#)) Mike Deaton sent it my way because it resonated with him—and his colleagues—all too well. In this piece, Gooblar reports that, unlike employees in other industries, "the more committed [both part-time and full-time faculty] were to their institutions, the *more likely* they were to experience high levels of workplace stress, and to experience depression, anxiety, and stress more generally." Gooblar cites the work of [Watts and Robertson \(2010\)](#) who determined that the problem is likely related to our role as teachers and our "exposure to high numbers of students" (33). Of course, for many Toolbox readers, teaching can be a source of great joy, excitement, stimulation, pride, even beauty. But it can also contribute, as papers pile high and final exams loom, to burnout, especially at this time of year.

And, as it turns out, burnout isn't just bad for us; it may be bad for our students too. While studies haven't been done with post-secondary populations—and, of course, teaching college students is different than teaching third-graders (most of the time)—Gooblar presents evidence from two elementary school studies in Germany that "the more teachers reported feeling emotionally exhausted, the worse their students did across the board: on their grades, on standardized tests, on measures of school satisfaction, you name it."

So, for the sake of ourselves, and possibly our students, Gooblar offers four ideas for addressing burnout, which I present now to encourage you to practice some self-care as we near the end of the semester:

- **Take time off, if only for the evening:** Teaching has a way of filling whatever time we have. In our grumpier moments, we might even call it a “time suck.” We may find ourselves working in “off” or odd hours, never truly leaving our jobs. Gooblar recommends taking the nights off and distinguishing what’s truly urgent from what can wait (like replying to those emails). If part of the trouble is our ever-accessible devices, [Mindful Tech \(2016\)](#) contains useful exercises that can help anyone reevaluate their relationship with technology and engage with it more intentionally.
- **Remember that your job is a job—even if you love it:** Gooblar reminds us that, though many of us entered our professions because of a deep love of a subject matter and/or teaching, it is still our *job*. “Do your best to cultivate perspective—and outside interests,” he writes. “Just because you love your work doesn’t mean it’s the be-all and end-all of your existence. You are more than your job.” This mentality may make it easier to take evenings off, [keep grading under control](#), or just say no.
- **Find ways to say “no”:** I’ve recently read, and recommended to anyone who will listen, [Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less \(2014\)](#), which has encouraged me to start taking control of my own time. This book has helped me to understand that just because you *can* do something doesn’t mean you *should*. (And, just because you can do something *well* doesn’t mean you *should*.) Some colleagues I know regularly return to Covey’s [Seven Habits of Highly Effective People \(2013\)](#) for support. Others are great about pausing and thinking before making any commitments or about asking “what will I have to take off my plate if I take this on?”
- **Choose sleep over extra class-prep time:** Just as I recommend to students that [choosing to sleep before an exam may be better than staying up late cramming](#), so too might we benefit from some extra shut-eye. Gooblar says most of us aren’t getting enough sleep. And sleep deprivation “can lead to high levels of anxiety, poor decision-making, lack of energy, and lack of concentration.” I could have finalized this Toolbox late last night, but I chose to sleep instead.

Gooblar ends his piece by encouraging instructors to reach out to each other for support. Sharing struggles may help lighten the burden. If you have any coping or rejuvenating strategies that seem to work especially well at this time of year, please share them with the listserv!

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