



Teacher Burnout: What You Can Do

by GAIL CARROLL

What do we mean when we talk about teacher “burnout”? And what should we be able to recognize in our own experiences of and reactions to stress so that we can be aware of the need for positive intervention and prevention strategies?

Teachers at various points in their careers may be affected by increasing workloads, expectations and stress. Work-life balance is becoming more and more challenging to achieve and teachers who seek support from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) often report feeling ill equipped to handle the challenges they face. We often hear concerns such as: *University did not prepare me for the many realities that I face each day; This is not what I expected; I am just starting my career and I am not sure that I can survive this year!; I am mid-career and I am not sure that I can spend another year teaching! What can I do?*

In March 2017, *The Globe and Mail* published an article on teacher burnout in Canada. The following are a few highlights from this article:

- Teachers are taking early retirement, going on stress leaves and quitting young.
- The Canadian Teachers’ Federation report that we lose many teachers (30%) in the first five years of their careers.
- More and more teachers report just going through the motions of their job each day.
- Many teachers are leaving because they can’t meet the expectations or take the pressure. (Larry Booi – President of the Alberta Teachers’ Association).
- The province of Quebec reports that teachers seem to be in the same state in December that you would expect to find them in in April or May! Extremely tired!
- Ontario reports that burnout seems to be especially severe. Mental health issues were cited by nearly 50% of the teacher claims on LTD.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, mental and nervous disorders continue to be the top trending diagnostic category for Long Term Disability benefits, currently at 40% of all new claims. (This percentage can fluctuate up or down each year.)

So what is happening in the profession that is causing this significant reaction of stress and burnout amongst teachers? The following is a list of concerns we hear from teachers:

- Teachers have to be many professions, not just a teacher.
- The employer’s expectations of teachers are increasing, with more and more duties and responsibilities being added each year.
- Parents and the public have higher and higher expectations of teachers including, but not limited to, demands for increased contact and immediate responses via email, text, telephone and in person meetings.
- There is more integration of special needs students often without the extra supports needed to make this successful for both the student(s) and the teacher(s).
- Demanding new curriculum and pilot courses.
- Increases in student behavioural issues in schools.
- An increase in mental health issues in all student populations.

Students may be coming to school with numerous challenges and teachers may be coming to school feeling challenged and tired, which in turn impacts students. Work-life balance is a demanding challenge for teachers at all points of their career. Teachers are in the classroom all day and then often stay late to prepare for the next day to mark tests, papers and/or projects, etc. This often carries over into their home lives as many report getting supper for their families, rushing through their own children’s activities and homework and then settling in for many more hours of work, often going to bed quite late without enough time for a good sleep to recharge their batteries. Many report difficulties sleeping due to anxiety about finishing their work, and the stress of not completing it keeps them awake. Teachers often go to school tired, which has an effect on their students and also on the quality of their own lives. If teachers are just going through the motions to get through a school day, that same reality may be present in their family life as well, preventing them from experiencing the joy of their work day as well as their life outside of school.

How do you know you are being affected by teacher burnout? What are the signs to watch for?

- Have stopped socializing at work. No longer go to the staff room for coffee or other breaks or attend social functions for work.
- Leave is increasing. May need to take a day here or there to re-charge your batteries or just to rest and feel better.
- Energy is becoming lower and it is becoming increasingly difficult to get through a school day.
- Planning has become more challenging because of low energy, feeling like there is a lack of time and inability to focus and/or concentrate.
- Feelings of negativity. It is becoming increasingly challenging to look to the positive. Have started to complain more.
- Feeling like your joy and passion for teaching has gone and you wonder if you can get it back.
- You have stopped taking care of yourself, i.e., eating more fast food and/or skipping meals, skipping your regular routines like going to the gym.
- Loss of your sense of personal accomplishment.
- Difficulty regulating your emotions.
- Isolation, depression and anxiety.
- Complete exhaustion – may be off on sick leave or Long Term Disability.
- Looking at leaving the profession and exploring alternate work or careers.

There are positive things you can do if you recognize any of these signs in yourself. It is important to get help as soon as you experience any of the signs or symptoms – the earlier, the better! Call your EAP, visit your family physician and take action!

Some of the proactive steps teachers can take to prevent burnout are:

- Take good care of yourself. Begin with ensuring you are getting enough rest and down time.
- Try to eat healthy and plan for your meals. When you can't plan, skip the drive-through and go for options like some of the prepared meals that many supermarkets are now offering. You can get a healthy dinner and just pop it in the oven.
- Build little positive things including activity into your day, for example, a short walk around your building at lunch or recess – activity helps us release stress and build resilience. Or try out some mindfulness techniques, such as a short meditation that only takes 3-4 minutes (see www.nlta.nl.ca/guided-imagery/).
- Understand what you can control and what things you cannot.
- Be kind to yourself! We all make mistakes and face challenges. Instead of putting yourself down, ask yourself what you learned from the mistake or the challenge.

- Build a network of support. Take breaks with friends and colleagues you enjoy spending time with.
- Be patient with yourself. We cannot be all things to all people. Set limits and boundaries on your time and what you can reasonably do.
- Take time when you are not feeling well to take care of yourself and give your body and mind a chance to recover.
- If you cannot meet expectations in a given time frame, be sure to seek assistance. Do not be afraid to ask for help!
- Remember what made you want to be a teacher.
- Celebrate all successes – even the little ones!

Burnout and high levels of stress are often indicators of larger, systemic issues. Learn to build your own resilience by understanding yourself. Know your own triggers and when to take action to prevent burnout.

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