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# AVOIDING BURNOUT

Don Forrester  
Editor

After the philosophers had argued at length about how many teeth there are in a horse's mouth, one of them, with a white-hot stroke of sheer genius, decided to settle the altercation by prying open the nearest equine jaws and counting the teeth! That's where we get the expression, "Straight from the horse's mouth." With equal brilliance, your editor saw the folly of writing about "faculty burnout" without going to the most readily available source of wisdom, namely colleagues who are subject to burn out, but haven't. Or if they have, they've somehow been able to get the fire going again.

It seemed like a good idea at the time to poll Kennesaw State's winners and runners-up of the "Distinguished Teacher Award." So a letter was sent asking each person to address, in 200 words or less, the subject, "How I Avoid Burnout." I sat back eagerly awaiting answers. When the replies were not quickly forthcoming, I decided to prime the pump a bit. On the elevator, I asked one of my potential contributors face to face, "Well, how do you avoid getting burned out?" "What makes you think I'm not," came his more or less good-natured reply. Another colleague answered that my request for this little essay was the thing that almost pushed her over the edge. As I said, it *seemed* like a good idea at the time.

Finally replies began to arrive, and good ones they were. One writer claimed that asking people who talk for a living to write something in 200 words or less was tantamount to imposing a vow of silence. But then she proceeded to pen this concise, thoughtful contribution:

*"Burnout" is not unique to the teach-*

*ing profession. Teaching, by its very nature, is repetitive. As a result, it becomes difficult to muster enthusiasm for one's 50th lecture on cell structure and function; or to enter a class with unbounded enthusiasm at the prospect of explaining cell division for (what seems like) the 100th time!*

*How do I attempt to recapture the enthusiasm of my youth? To rekindle the excitement of the graduate student who thinks she knows it all and must tell it to everyone? At times I think I've tried everything. Here are just a few approaches that have worked for me:*

- *Design new ways of solving old problems.*
- *Relate biology to the everyday life of the student by making it ENJOYABLE, APPLICABLE, FUNNY (especially funny).*
- *Remember that they are hearing this information for the first time.*
- *Keep pace with the advances in my discipline and how they affect my students — bring this to the classroom!*
- *Remember my instructors who were dedicated to excellence.*
- *Remember those who were not.*
- *Always remember that TEACHING IS LEARNING — my students can teach me as much as I can teach them.*

*Since I can rely on an intelligent and loving husband who listens, encourages, and cares, managing "stress" and balancing demands becomes simple. — Kathy Fleiszar, Professor of Biology*

Nearly every contributor alluded to stress as one of the principal burnout-producing culprits. It is also quite clear that much of this stress is self-generated. Without question, Kennesaw's great success as a teaching institution is due largely to the fact that we are a faculty of overachievers. But this phenomenon has its downside, for sometimes we lose control of our professional lives. When this takes place, we may blame the department chair, the administration or the system in general; but sel-

dom do we face up to the fact that we got ourselves into this bind, and we have to get ourselves out. Observe how one chemistry professor developed her own treatment formula:

*Since I began teaching at Kennesaw State College I have lived by two dictums: 1) If I don't do it, it probably won't get done; and 2) The needs of my students come before my own needs. Last year, it became clear to me that if I were going to remain in teaching, something had to change. What I have tried to do is to erase from my consciousness the two dictums by which I've lived. This year I am serving on the Strategic Planning Committee, the Graduate Policies and Curriculum Committee, and a subcommittee of the GPCC looking at graduate assistantships. I have turned down offers to serve on two other committees (something I would not have done in the past). I am allowing other chemistry faculty the opportunity to share in duties at the departmental level, rather than volunteering for the lion's share of the duties myself. I have instituted office hours four days per week in the morning and afternoon so as to provide even, but limited, access to me. My directed study students no longer dictate when we will work together. I tell them the hours I will be available and we work from there. I no longer give my home phone number to my students. I have instituted "Wonderful Wednesday." This is the day I use to read and study in the library or at home. I am actually able to keep current in my reading for my research project (a luxury I never allowed myself before). I must admit that I battle guilt about some of these changes at times, but I know that I will not have the energy to remain in teaching if I don't begin to consider my need for some privacy and for some contemplative time. — Patti Reggio, Associate Professor of Chemistry.*

Do you agree that Dr. Reggio could never be accused of abdicating her responsibility? Three committees seem

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more than enough; research is continuing, and she is still accessible to her students. It is still a busy, productive schedule; the point is, she has regained control.

Without a doubt, there are factors not of our own making which have the potential for producing stress, discouragement and, ultimately, burnout. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is to transcend the hurtful influences of those things over which we have no control. The next contributor has found a way to create his own sphere of quality, which, though not impervious to outside influences, still allows for meaningful professional achievement over which he is in charge:

*I once experienced the "burned out" feeling and did consider getting out of teaching. This was the day my high school principal, whom I had just heard cheerfully authorize spending \$6,000 to replace the gym mats because they "don't look so good," refused to raise the annual science department budget \$150 to implement a new laboratory-based curriculum we had spent all summer preparing. But, by then I knew that teaching was all I ever wanted to do and the feeling lasted for about twenty minutes. So, why don't I feel burnout now when faced with discouraging situations? Or when I too frequently confront stress? Or when I am so utterly exhausted from precariously balancing my responsibilities that I drop a few? My answer is simple. I only do what I choose to do. I won't take a job or a responsibility that doesn't deeply interest me, or that doesn't have genuine value to me in and of itself, or that I don't believe I can accomplish expertly. I may overload myself because I have many interests; I may overestimate myself, but I don't abuse myself by continuing to work on things that could make me resentful. I won't do anything professionally merely to please someone else or merely to have an accomplishment to cite. I long ago learned that being true to myself is the only way for me to serve others effec-*

*tively. At the very least, it has kept me happy and productive for a very long time in the noblest profession of all. — Ben Golden, Professor of Biology.*

Someone (I can't remember who) has defined a rut as "a grave with the ends knocked out." It is a condition we in the teaching profession often unwittingly and unwillingly create for ourselves. Digging a real ditch is about as hard a job known to humankind. The rut teachers dig is easy. All we have to do is take the path of least resistance, ignore what's happening in our field and avoid new approaches. During a long career, unless we remain vigilant, we may, time after time, find ourselves needing to climb out of yet another self-made grave. (It could give a new meaning to the term, "retrenchment.") Notice, in the following passage, the things this political science professor does to remain vigilant:

*For me, the key to maintaining interest and enthusiasm in teaching is the fact that I like what I do! My work is both my avocation and my vocation. My interest in political science dates back to my childhood and has never waned. The courses I teach require constant change in order to keep them current. I therefore, participate, on a regular basis, in professional programs which enhance my knowledge of my discipline as well as my techniques of teaching. The fact that I continue to find the course material relevant and interesting, I believe, is transmitted to the students. I also do consulting work in my field, and find, that not only do I benefit intellectually from the stimulus of the work, my students also benefit. They are very interested when I use examples from my own work which illustrate the applied side of the discipline. My interest and enthusiasm in teaching is also enhanced by the opportunities to design and teach special topic courses. Collaborative work in special topics and projects with my colleagues also offers opportunities for growth and*

*development as a teacher.*

*I follow a very simple rule that I believe is responsible, in large part, for my continued satisfaction in the work I do, which is that whenever I begin to bore myself, I know it is time to restructure, for if I bore myself, I certainly must bore my students. My job allows me the flexibility of change, and that's why I truly believe (most of the time) that I have the greatest job in the world — I am a college professor. — Helen Ridley, Professor of Political Science.*

According to the *Book of Proverbs*, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." How anyone survives in the teaching profession without a sense of humor is one of life's great mysteries. Some believe it to be unprofessional to laugh *about* our circumstances, to laugh *with* our students and to laugh *at* ourselves. But laughter takes some of the sting out of the harshest of realities. I offer the following example, in closing, from Dede Yow, of the English Department:

## HOW I HANDLE BURNOUT IN 200 WORDS OR LESS

by

Paula P. Yow

Assistant Professor of English

*How do I handle burnout? Well, every Spring quarter about midterm, I wake up real early in the morning and I say to myself, "I'm going to fall to pieces by the end of the week; I just know I am." And I do. I sweep into my Department Chair's office and begin to rant, "I haven't written a word, thought a thought, or read a book in months. How am I supposed to stay intellectually alive, emotionally balanced, spiritually serene with no time to think or write?" "Sit down," he always says calmly, benevolently. I do. We talk. I go home and eat my vegetables, push my bourbon to the back of the cabinet, and read my Emily Dickinson.*

*That's how I handle burnout.  
Every Spring. 🍀*