

BRAIN STRAIN

MENTAL HEALTH 101 - Part One

Feeling the Flames of Burnout



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The Final Straw

Pat was good at his job. He was a very dedicated, well-respected Principal who ran an organized ship and cared deeply about staff and students. Pat had a reputation for knowing staff well, remembering their spouses' and children's names, and making the effort to get to know each student. As a Secondary School Principal in a community of 20,000, Pat was very visible and active in the community. Pat had dedicated his career to enhancing the education experience for secondary students, and was often asked to speak at conferences about the amazing impact he has had in his District.

Over the past few years, Pat has found his role to be challenging. The volume and complexity of his role continues to grow alongside the demands he faces from students, staff, parents and the community. There have been additional pressures placed on the school with new initiatives from the Ministry, funding allocations from the District, and the expanding needs of his learning community – especially his most vulnerable students. These pressures have all had an impact on Pat's level of empathy, degree of control, sense of fairness, and self-satisfaction in his ability to do a good job.

This past September, Pat was not looking forward to going back to school. Usually, after the summer break, Pat was eager to reconnect with staff and students. However, Pat had felt less excited about the new school year the past two Septembers. When school wrapped up in June, Pat experienced unusual fatigue and frequent headaches, which he attributed to a lack of sleep. He was anxious about getting everything done to close off the year, as it seemed difficult to keep track of all the loose ends. His physician felt the headaches and anxiety were due to stress and prescribed some temporary medication. The expectation was that over the summer, with rest, the headaches and anxiety would be resolved. Generally, they dissipated. But with the return to school, the ailments had resurfaced within weeks.

Pat was not feeling his regular passion for the job and felt more burdened than energized. His patience was low, and managing his emotions felt challenging. Quick to anger and carrying a pessimistic outlook, Pat

felt very distraught at the leader he was becoming. But, deeper down, Pat was scared. Although previously taking pride in his organizational skills, Pat now struggled with forgetfulness and procrastination. Pat lacked the internal motivation to put in the effort needed to do a good job — doing the minimal to get by and not really caring about the impact. At a deeper level, Pat was shocked at his own behaviour, as this was not the professional he knew himself to be.

Pat's relationship with the recently-retired District Superintendent had been good. The new Superintendent for the District was from outside of the province, and was taking considerable time from Pat's schedule to get acquainted with the community and education agenda.

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Pat was slow in getting information to the Superintendent when it was requested. During a tense meeting with the new Superintendent, Pat felt his professionalism was being scrutinized and that nothing he had accomplished in the past was even being considered in the conversation. Pat left the meeting shaking, distressed and numb. Worse yet, the next morning Pat could not get out of bed, and was unable to find the energy or motivation to go to work.

A Slow Burn

Pat suffered from burnout.

Job burnout is a special type of work-related stress — a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity.

Burnout is a legitimate medical diagnosis, according to the International Classification of Diseases, or the ICD-11, the World Health Organization's handbook

that guides medical providers in diagnosing diseases.

Burnout now appears in the ICD-11's section on health problems related to employment. Physicians can diagnose someone with burnout if they meet the following symptoms:

1. feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
2. increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
3. reduced professional efficacy

Burnout emerges when job and life demands extend beyond an individual's ability to cope with the stress. People in careers focused on caregiving — including educators — report the most prevalent rates of burnout. Over time, jobs that require too much of employees will cultivate feelings of negativity and hopelessness such as when Principals struggle to meet impossible deadlines, deal with difficult Board members, attempt to address unreasonable parent demands, or cope with the emotional toll of professional caretaking.

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It's a common misconception that the culprit behind burnout is simply working too long or working too hard. However, research indicates that other factors, both individual and organizational, can be just as detrimental. For example, a comprehensive report on psychosocial stress in the workplace published by the World Health Organization identified consistent evidence that "high job demands, low control, and effort–reward imbalance are risk factors for mental and physical health problems." Ultimately, burnout results when the balance of deadlines, demands, working hours, and other stressors outstrips rewards, recognition, and relaxation.

Source: www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/burnout-and-the-brain

The Perfect Fire Storm: Who is at Risk?

Risk factors related to burnout can arise out of personal traits, working conditions, or - in the perfect fire storm - a combination of both!

Source:
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>
<https://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/>

Personal Traits and Circumstances

- Perfectionism – feeling that work performed is never good enough
- Personally identifying strongly with work
- People-pleasing – being everything to everyone
- Working in a helping profession
- Feeling inadequate about the ability to contribute
- Feeling unappreciated and not valued
- Low social support, feeling isolated at work and in your personal life
- Feeling the effort put forth is not being recognized or rewarded
- Perceiving a sense of unfairness

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Job Factors

- High workload, including overtime
- Lack of control, an inability to influence decisions that affect your job, no flexibility, lack of the resources needed to do your work
- Unclear job expectations, a lack of clarity about the degree of authority you have or what your supervisor or others expect from you
- Dysfunctional workplace dynamics, working with the 'office bully', feeling undermined by colleagues or a boss that micromanages your work
- Extremes of activity, chaotic jobs where constant energy is needed to remain focused
- Work-life imbalance, with work that takes up so much of your time and effort that you don't have the energy to spend time with your family and friends or do hobbies or activities that help you refresh

Is Pat's Situation Unique?

No.

In fact, research would suggest that school administrators are at a higher risk of stress and burnout, even more than that seen with private sector managers. The last fifteen years have seen significant changes in education systems that have impacted the roles and nature of Principals' and Vice-Principals' work. From Kim Weatherby's research in 2020 on Principal and Vice-Principal Stress and Burnout, the rapid integration of information and communications technology into the work and life of students and educators, and the growing diversity of students and needs have all been the key drivers in impacting the roles of administrators globally. Add to that the many factors specific to BC such as strained labour relations, work intensification, staff shortages due to the Supreme Court of Canada ruling on class size and composition, budget constraints and other educational initiatives, have all contributed to increased levels of stress.

Source: Principal and Vice-Principal Stress and Burnout, Kim Weatherby, 2020

These workplace realities can be particularly hard on very committed individuals. Principals and Vice-Principals are dedicated and passionate educators who have chosen to take on a role with significant responsibility and impact. Thereby, it is critical that they are operating at their best. Handling difficult tasks, juggling many needs, and solving complex problems with various personalities are all part of the intricate role of school administrators: these factors often make our great leaders thrive. However, as demonstrated in Pat's case, our minds and bodies are not designed for the levels of constant and excessive stress that many school leaders experience.

Source:
<https://www.edcan.ca/articles/burnout-principals-and-vice-principals>

Stress not only affects the ability of school leaders to shape and enhance their school culture and learning environment, but also makes it difficult to retain and recruit new Principals and Vice-Principals. This path to burnout strains their well-being and, sadly, often leads to work absence due to physical or mental disabilities.

Am I Burning Out?

In our case scenario, Pat showed many signs of burnout. Do you believe you are experiencing the early signs of burnout? Reflect on these questions:

- Have you become cynical or critical at work?
- Do you drag yourself to work and have trouble getting started?
- Have you become irritable or impatient with staff, students or parents?
- Do you lack the energy to be consistently productive?
- Do you find it hard to concentrate?
- Do you lack satisfaction from your achievements?
- Do you feel disillusioned about your job?
- Are you using food, drugs or alcohol, or screen time to feel better or to simply not feel?

- Have your sleeping habits changed?
- Are you troubled by unexplained headaches, stomach or bowel problems, or other physical complaints?

Source:

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>

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concentrate?

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If you said 'yes' to most of these questions, you may be at risk of, or suffering from, burnout. It is important to speak to your physician as these symptoms can also be related to other health conditions, including depression. They can also lead to other health challenges as your body's reaction to ongoing strain and stress does not start and stop in the mind. Ignored or unaddressed job burnout can have significant consequences, including:

Fatigue
Insomnia
Strained personal relationships
Depression
Anxiety
Alcohol or substance abuse
Heart disease
High cholesterol
Type 2 diabetes (especially in women)
Stroke
Obesity
Infertility
Vulnerability to illnesses



Can Burnout be Cooled?

Part Two of Mental Health 101 — 'Dousing the Heat' — will appear in BCPVPA's *Leading: Back to School* magazine in September. We will speak to mental health experts about how an individual who has experienced burnout can recover and avoid recurrence. *For now, please know that recovery is possible!*

If you feel you are burning out, one thing you can do today is seek help. Like any flame, the longer you 'burn', the greater the damage and the more time and effort needed to 'douse the fire'. See your physician, a counsellor, or go online and learn about micro-behaviours that you can implement today to help you slow your burn.

If you have questions or are looking for resources related to this topic, please do not hesitate to reach out to me (rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca).

Take care, and stay 'cool'!