

BURNOUT: PREVENTION AND SPOTTING THE SIGNS IN FE SETTINGS

A GUIDE FOR FURTHER EDUCATION STAFF

WRITTEN BY EDUCATION SUPPORT

Introduction

Most of us get stressed at work at some point. Burnout occurs as a result of sustained stress that never subsides. This is due to prolonged periods of intensity and excessive demands on energy, strength and resources.

Herbert Freudenberger coined the term in the 1970s. He recognised that professions which involve a strong sense of morality or purpose, and commitment from workers who sacrifice themselves for the good of others, were most at risk.

Burnout can lead you to feeling unable to carry out your role, a lack of confidence in ability or identity, or simply that you cannot give any more to other important areas of your life.

We know that prevention is better than cure, so in this guide we will unpack ways to prevent burnout in further education (FE) settings before it takes hold. We also share how to spot the signs and what to do if you, or others, need support. Whilst it is important not to blame those experiencing burnout, it can be useful to know how to identify the signs and protect yourself and colleagues.



How might burnout affect FE settings?

Physical and emotional impacts

Education Support's report 'Supporting Staff Wellbeing in Higher Education' found that **emotional exhaustion and burnout in the FE sector was high, impacting over 60% of colleagues**. FE staff reported physical symptoms such as feeling fatigued and suffering from frequent headaches to emotional impacts, experiencing self-doubt or a lack of creativity.

Pressure to perform

A constant pressure to improve, along with the demands still lingering from the COVID pandemic will also affect staff working in FE settings in different ways. In the above report, **62% of further education staff reported regularly working over 40 hours a week** and **21% working more than 50 hours per week**.

Staff retention issues

Education Support's 'Teacher Wellbeing Index 2022' found that **FE Staff were the highest percentage (61%) that had actively sought to change or leave their current job**. The reality is when staff reach burnout and don't receive the support they need, leaving their role may feel like the only option available to them. But with the right support and spotting signs early, it is possible to turn things around and keep valuable staff members in their roles. However, we know leaders have some of the highest levels of stress in the workforce and they need to balance their wellbeing alongside the needs of staff. Put simply, it is not possible to help others effectively while leaders are struggling themselves.

Collegiate relationships

It can be challenging to build strong relationships in FE settings where burnout is prevalent. High workloads and stress can make it difficult for FE staff to find the time and energy to engage in activities that foster connections. Yet collegiate relationships are a fundamental pillar for building protective resilience and improving wellbeing across the FE workforce.

Learner experience

A highly stressed and burnt-out FE workforce will have an impact on the overall learner experience. **FE staff cannot deliver the support learners deserve when they are struggling with their own mental health.**



Ways to prevent burnout

For Individuals

Eva Szigethy (2014) proposed that there were three stages of burnout and that it is important to identify when you are experiencing signs from stage one as these are easier to recover from than the more severe symptoms in stage two and three.

Recognise the signs:

Stage one (sporadic)

might feel like:

- **Mental fatigue at the end of the day**
- **Feeling unappreciated**
- **Feeling of dread**
- **Feeling detached**
- **Procrastinating and taking longer to get things done.**

Stage two (more frequent)

might feel like:

- **Feeling discouraged or frustrated**
- **Physical symptoms i.e. poor sleep, headaches**
- **Feeling ruled by a schedule.**

Stage three (persistent/severe)

might feel like:

- **Mental health conditions i.e. depression, anxiety disorders**
- **Physical health conditions i.e. heart disease, raised blood pressure**
- **Feeling disconnected from the job and people at work i.e. compassion fatigue.**

Signs of stress or burnout: NHS Every Mind Matters

Stress and burnout can sneak up on you. According to NHS Every Mind Matters you can also keep an eye open for these signs:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Having racing thoughts or difficulty concentrating
- Being irritable
- Feeling constantly worried, anxious or scared
- Feeling a lack of self-confidence
- Having trouble sleeping or feeling tired all the time
- Avoiding things or people you are having problems with
- Eating more or less than usual
- Drinking or smoking more than usual.

If you are concerned about any of these symptoms in yourself or another person, it is important to seek support from your GP or a medical professional as soon as possible. You can also access your Employee Assistance Programme via your HR Team. Further signposting to additional support can be found at the end of this guide.



Set healthy boundaries

If you suspect you are experiencing or heading into burnout, it might be time to consider your boundaries at work. Remember, setting realistic boundaries at work has benefits for everyone. It will stop you from over promising (then under delivering) and protect your energy. Saying no when something doesn't align with your own priorities is okay.

See our guide on [**'Talking to colleagues about their mental health in FE settings'**](#) if you are concerned about a colleague who might be suffering from symptoms of burnout.

Tips for setting boundaries in FE settings might look like:



Setting reminders

Very practically, an alarm on your phone will help you remember to take a break or stop working at the end of the day



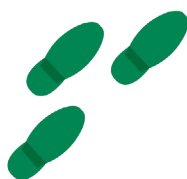
Taking back your mornings and weekends

Where possible plan the night before or at the end of the week, so you can approach your mornings (including Monday!) calmly



Strict email boundaries

Don't put work emails on your personal phone if you can avoid it. Can you only check your email at work or during pre-determined times at home if you work remotely? Be strict with yourself! Put your availability or office hours on your email auto-signature and out of office message



Clocking off routine:

Having an end of the day ritual enables us to separate ourselves from work and helps us to get offline or out of our FE setting, e.g. five minute desk tidy and exit or a walk around the block. Have a defined finishing point and leave



Set your non-negotiables and communicate them

i.e. 'I will go on my lunch break at 1pm every day' or 'I must finish work on time to pick up my child from school'



Talking to your manager about workload

Make time to have a conversation with your manager if workload is an issue. What can you do realistically in the time you are at work?



Questions to ask yourself when establishing your boundaries:

- **Am I comfortable saying no?**
- **Do I stick to my working hours?**
- **Do I check my emails outside of work?**
- **Do I make myself available 24/7?**
- **Do I often take on others' workloads?**
- **Do I often take on work outside of my job description?**
- **Do I delegate when necessary?**

Check-in with yourself regularly

Ensure you make time to 'check in' with yourself – perhaps by using a **wellness action plan**. Having an awareness of how stress affects you as an individual is invaluable to understanding yourself. Knowing what is going on and when to take a step back or implement strategies that work for you i.e. talking to a friend, exercise, meditation and journaling can be helpful in alleviating stress before it builds up and becomes a problem.

Focus on your physical health as well

Exercise reduces stress hormones (like cortisol) while increasing endorphins, giving you a natural boost. Remember, you don't have to run a marathon – try to focus on finding a way of moving your body that feels good for you. Good quality sleep can also set you up to better manage stress (although stress can also create feelings of anxiety that get in the way of a good night's sleep). Find out more about **getting a good night's sleep** and tips for practicing good sleep hygiene.



FE leaders and managers

How do you deal with your own stress? The best action FE managers and leaders can take to encourage staff to take care of themselves is to role-model good mental health practices themselves. Take a look at these proven ways to deal with your stress below and ask yourself: am I already doing any of these? How can I share them with my team?

Run, swim, dance (whatever you enjoy – the aim is NOT to train for the Olympics!). In their book, **Burnout: solve your stress cycle**, the Nagoskis note that movement is ‘your first line of attack in the battle against burnout’. 20-30 minutes a day is ideal, but anything is better than nothing!

1

Move

2

Social interaction

Talking to colleagues can help boost our mood and reassure us that the world is a safe place to live. Laughing together—and even just reminiscing about the times you’ve laughed together – increases relationship satisfaction

3

Connect with others

A twenty second hug with someone you hold dear has been shown to lower stress levels as much as exercise. And it doesn’t have to be physical affection – simply speaking to someone with whom you share a special connection can make a huge difference to how you feel

4

Breathe

Deep, slow breaths can help regulate the stress response. For a simple, practical exercise you can try

- breathe in to a slow count of five
- hold that breathe for five
- exhale for a slow count of ten
- pause for another count of five

5

Sleep

It can be difficult to sleep when we are feeling stressed. But getting a full, uninterrupted night sleep wherever possible can be a great tool in the fight against stress

6

Cry or share how you’re feeling

There is no shame in crying! Crying may not change the situation that caused the stress, but allowing yourself to cry after a stressful event is proven to help by releasing feel good hormones. It can help you relieve physical as well as emotional difficulties

7

Get creative

Engaging in a creative activity you enjoy today – wherever it be music, art or sport has been shown to lead to more energy, excitement, and enthusiasm tomorrow.

Alongside role-modelling it can help to have a psychologically safe environment where people:

- **Are trusted and feel safe**
- **Can be honest with managers and colleagues i.e. if they are struggling with stress levels**
- **Are able to speak up when they need to**
- **Have the freedom and security to try new things and make mistakes**
- **Feel safe enough to be creative and take risks**
- **Can be themselves, in order to perform at their best without any risk to their mental wellbeing.**

Find out more about psychological safety in our guide **'Psychologically safety in Further Education settings – a guide for FE leaders and managers'**.

Cultivate a kindness culture

According to Dr. Pragya Agarwal, practising kindness in the workplace creates a positive ripple effect throughout the organisation's culture. When we establish a work culture of kindness and understanding, we notice not only improvement in employees' engagement but also their mental and physical health. In the world of education, where we are overworked, over-inspected, and overwhelmed, fostering kindness and nurturing positivity is fundamental to survival and will significantly improve the quality of lives.

Tips for cultivating kindness:

1. Model kindness

Lead by example and show your learners and colleagues what being kind looks like.

'Thank you for your help on this project, I really appreciate and value your time and input.'

2. Notice and encourage kindness

Recognise and praise colleagues when you notice them being kind and supportive to one another.

'I noticed you helped another team member struggling with the new computer system this week. That was very kind and a great example of team working, well done.'

3. Cut some slack

Don't blame and shame when a mistake is made. Instead try to work collectively to resolve any issues. 'How can we work together to get this fixed?' 'What can we learn for the future?'

4. Be kind to yourself

Cut yourself (and others) some slack by not expecting perfection. Aim for 'good enough' and speak to yourself as a friend.

'I did my best today with the resources and time available to me. Good enough is good enough.'

Getting support when you need it

Good working relationships are important when identifying and supporting those with burnout. If you notice that you, or a colleague, are starting to feel any of the symptoms of burnout remember it is important to reach out for support:

- **FE staff can call the Education Support helpline** open **24/7** for immediate, confidential emotional support on: **08000 562 561**
- **It can also help to reach out to family and friends** to go through the **early burnout prevention tips** and put practices in place to intervene
- **Managers or occupational health** will be able to work with you to see what help is available i.e. flexible working might be suitable for a time. It might help to make plan or write down what you want to say before any meetings
- **Go to your GP – you can ask for an emergency appointment**
- **If you need immediate support** and are experiencing a mental health crisis there are also short-term crisis services available such as walk-in **Samaritan** branches
- **For a colleague in crisis - call 999** or they can go to **A&E**.

Moving beyond burnout

The most important step in recovering from burnout is to give yourself enough time and allow yourself to be human. In time, it can help to reflect on what led to your burnout. Our lives constantly change, and priorities shift. Constant readjustment of our values helps to keep clear, healthy boundaries, stick to practices that we have chosen as fundamental to our mental wellbeing and ultimately improve work life balance, ensuring we are at less risk from burnout again in the future.



Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their **free and confidential** helpline **24/7** on **08000 562 561**. Or check out [educationsupport.org.uk](https://www.educationsupport.org.uk) for free resources and tools to help you and your colleagues.

Our partners



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Thank you

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