

Resistance to Self-Compassion: The Road to Burnout

by *Sandra Murray, NSTU Counsellor*

Teaching is a highly stressful, and emotionally draining profession. With all the mounting pressure and demands on your time at work and at home, things can be overwhelming. Over the last number of years, I have had more teachers than previously, who are seeking support because they are experiencing the manifestation of burnout.

Teacher burnout is one of the largest issues facing the teaching profession today.

But burnout doesn't happen overnight, it is progressive. Often, we ignore it until it is too late. If we are able to recognize the steps to burnout, we may be able to alleviate its onset and help in the recovery from it.

This is important, because avoiding the subtle messages of the later stages of burnout make recovery time that much longer and more difficult. So the question that I would like you to consider is not, "Why am I experiencing these feelings and thoughts?" but rather, "Why am I ignoring these feelings and thoughts?"

When you withdraw because of mounting external stressors you do so in phases, and most of the time without awareness of what is occurring. For example within Phase 1 an individual becomes extremely high functioning. The person is committed to all tasks and projects, always available, always doing what is asked, all the while losing sight of limits and boundaries that would ensure self-care. Then Phase 2 slowly creeps into your life. And you may begin to avoid certain people or tasks, have lapses of concentration, and begin to doubt yourself. Avoiding certain tasks is very natural, as we like to move away from a perceived painful duty and move towards pleasure—or not doing a necessary onerous duty. But when it is combined with other traits of withdrawal, it is a concern.

When we begin to doubt ourselves, Phase 3 rears its ugly head. Wherein we begin to lose enthusiasm for things that were previously very important to us, like work, family, and friends, we are then in survival mode—not fully enjoying life. People and tasks now become major irritants, and lines become blurred between work and personal life. We become abrasive, and behave in ways that we would not normally behave. We engage in behaviours that are not aligned with our values.

Phase 4 is where we disengage, and lose what little patience we have left, and contemplate quitting our jobs or leaving significant relationships. We feel hopeless at this point and signs of depression and anxiety along

with anxiety attacks present themselves. This is not a "yellow flag" zone, it is a "red flag" zone. Again, if we are at this point, healing can definitely take place, but it requires a longer time than if some issues had been addressed in earlier phases.

Some of the recommendations to prevent Burnout and to heal from symptoms are deep breathing exercises, increased water intake, sleep, healthy diet, meditation, exercise, nature, laughter, and mindfulness strategies. While these are general recommendations, they do not take into account our core belief systems, things that are preventing us from being self-compassionate within the first phases. As educators, and within the helping profession, we easily extend compassion to others, but not so easily to ourselves. This is where our belief system needs to be examined, and speaking with a therapist, can help excavate and examine our resistance to self-compassion.

Kristin Neff, PhD, a guru for educators assisting in developing self-compassion, along with Christopher Germer, PhD, have co-authored a workbook entitled, *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook: A Proven Way to Accept Yourself, Build Inner Strength, and Thrive*. Within this workbook are many questions to help you examine your belief system. On pages 20 and 21, they give you examples of what your inner-critic may be yelling at you

to stop any self-compassion occurring. For example: "Doesn't self-compassion just mean throwing a pity party for poor me?, Isn't self-compassion for wimps. I have to be tough and strong to get through my life. I need to think more about other people, not myself. Being self-compassionate is way too selfish and self-focused."

All these thoughts should be examined as to their validity, and observed as your "old story,"—things that are no longer serving you well. We fuse with these thoughts and think that if we let go of them it will have dire consequences. I would like to challenge that cognition, and replace it with the self-compassion of thought—if I ignore these thoughts, and not be kinder and gentler with myself, that that will have dire consequences to my beautiful being.

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References:

- CTRI Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute Inc – www.ctrinstitute.com *Phases of Compassion Fatigue*
The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook: A Proven Way to accept yourself, Build Inner Strength, and Thrive., Kristin Neff, PhD and Christopher Germer, PhD The Guildford Press, 2018

