Identifying and tackling teacher burnout

Debbie Metters identifies some of the symptoms of burnout and suggests some ways of preventing it.

Burnout is a psychological term that refers to mental exhaustion through over-work or excessive and repetitive activity. It’s a chronic stress that can lead to a lot of mental and physical problems such as fatigue, ineffectiveness and lack of interest in daily activities. And burnout as a teacher is all too easy to ‘contract’.

You may well be suffering from teacher burnout if you are experiencing two or more of the following symptoms that last for longer than a couple of weeks:

1. Chronic tiredness
In the beginning, you may start to feel more tired than usual and your teaching performance may start to dwindle as a result. Later on you may even experience insomnia as a consequence of always thinking about work or dreading what is to come: Are you worried about explaining a difficult grammar rule? Did you not go over your advanced vocabulary list last night? Have you planned that third class well enough?

2. Feelings of irritation or disinterest
You find yourself becoming annoyed by a certain individual in class or the group in general start to bug you. Your class may become uninteresting to you. You might even feel that nothing really matters and you may even start to justify the thoughts by telling yourself the students will learn even more next year. If these thoughts plague you during your teaching days then you are most likely on your way to burning out.

3. Lazy attitude towards homework
You have got to the point where your first-day promise of dishing out homework twice weekly is a distant memory. You don’t even have the energy to confront the student who swore that they did the work but lost it on the way to class. You have a tendency to forget to give homework nowadays or when you do remember it is given out in a half-hearted, unenthusiastic manner with no deadlines.

4. Boredom
The interactive whiteboard that held a whole host of treasures at the beginning is starting to lose its appeal and as a result your group of students don’t even remember it’s there anymore. You’ve even become dulled by personal examples and class games.

5. Detachment from the world of teaching
Firstly, you might start to lose your enjoyment and love of something that once made you feel alive, slowly but surely forgetting that first time you stepped into a sea of eager faces and taught your first successful lesson. This may turn gradually into a feeling of disconnection from your environment, including students and fellow teachers.

6. Day dreaming
You can’t stop counting the days until your next holiday, even if it is months away. You find yourself looking at the calendar on an almost hourly basis, convincing yourself that it’s not long before you are next on an exotic beach digging your tired toes into white sand gazing happily out on to translucent waters.

Aside from dreaming about what exciting summer you’re about to embark on, the rest of the symptoms related to teacher burnout aren’t very pleasant. The idea should be to tackle these symptoms before they take a hold. Just like knowing the answer to that tricky grammar question before it’s even asked. Once the fight against teacher burnout starts it’s hard to put an end to, but quashing it before it sneakily creeps up can be achieved more easily than you might think.
Taking regular outside breaks

Science tells us that taking regular breaks, even the briefest of brief ones, can put our focus back on track. Researchers from the University of Illinois (see Science Daily, 2011) found that they can dramatically improve focus for prolonged periods. For a teacher this can take many forms, one of which is ensuring that your academy or school has regular access to a room in which you can sit comfortably, switch off and not have to worry that an overly keen student or disconcerted parent is round the corner waiting to pounce on you. You must then, of course, have the option to take breaks. According to European law, if a worker is working a six-hour shift or more they are legally entitled to a break. Be kind to yourself and give your mind and body that rest.

Inside-breaks

Taking a break could also be done inside the classroom too. Teaching for a whole hour continuously isn’t productive to anyone, teacher nor student. People who are under a lot of stress or exam pressure have a tendency to forget that the brain only works efficiently in short bursts. Keep this in mind when you are drilling grammar.

An inside-break could come from students taking over the class by giving talks to peers, presenting, or letting one student judge a whole group discussion. This gives your own brain time to rest as well. Of course, take some time to carry out error correction, but also let yourself breathe for a few minutes. You might be the teacher, but you have the same internal workings as anyone else in the class. However, kids classes can be draining, but still you can take advantage of writing or drawing time where the kids are lost in their own world scribbling away, hopefully fastidiously, on their notebooks.

Reducing teacher talk time

One of the first things I learnt when qualifying as a TEFL teacher was to avoid teacher monologues. Not only is this bad teaching practise, but it’s also boring for all involved. Encouraging student talk time is absolutely essential to student learning and also takes the pressure and some onus off the teacher.

Leaving your work behind

Don’t take your work home with you. I’ve seen this time and time again and it never works. I’ve done it before and I will never do it again. A friend and I decided to take 50 reports home each and complete them (in Spanish) before we went out for dinner. It ended up taking three hours and we couldn’t enjoy the rest of the evening and went to bed dreaming of mistakes and complaining parents. So giving yourself a window of opportunity at work to do work is a must if you want to avoid letting your work life disrupt the time spent away from the workplace.

Learning to love the English language

A friend of mine is in love with the English language. He loves teaching and seldom succumbs to the symptoms of burnout. He takes pride in his work, both inside the classroom and out. He is a rare breed who even laps up teacher preparation. What wouldn’t you give to be like him?

If you are teaching as a means to an end (and the end is travelling the world for example) or you are not a serious pro in the ELT world with a degree in the intricacies of the language, then you will need to study and be able to make it fun while you do so in order to avoid burning out. Interesting phrasal verbs and grammar points are always more fun with personal examples. These things should be taught with both you and your students in mind. Giving learning and teaching the personal touch means learning to love the teacher in you.

Teacher burnout doesn’t need to be a continuous battle that you end up losing a month before the end of term. Taking steps to respect what your mind and body need as well as making your teaching time interesting and developing a love of what you do means saying ‘No’ to burning out.

Reference


Debbie Metters, a former Education Liaison Officer for Northumbria Police, moved to Spain, Cádiz, four years ago to carve out a career in the fields of English teaching and later, writing. She has classroom experience with a variety of different students and levels and recently qualified as a Cambridge Speaking Examiner. Alongside general English she also teaches business English courses throughout the year. At present she is living in Madrid and working on her writing in relation to ESL material, English teaching and education articles alongside heavily documenting her travels in the form of blogs and assorted travel pieces online.