

Burnout-Proofing the Work

Sustainable Self-Care & Ethical Boundaries for School Social Workers

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This is not a bubble-bath talk

We will be direct, practical, and kind to ourselves—and honest about the systems around us.

Name the problem precisely
By the name of the thing

Protect care with boundaries
Ethical, non-negotiable

Leave with one next move
Small enough to act today

BOOK ABSTRACTS

Pass is always available • Protect confidentiality • Take care of your body • Speak from "I"

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Count your hats from last week

Stand if you did any of these in the last five school days. Stay standing for every one that applies.

1

Classroom

2

Classroom responder

3

Case manager

4

Attendance detective

5

Family navigator

6

Meeting translator

7

Resource finder

8

Policy interpreter

9

Data clerk

10

Colleague support

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PART 1

Name It Precisely

1

We use "burnout" for at least six different experiences. Each has a different cause—and a different fix.

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Six Experiences We Call Burnout

Burnout

Workplace mismatch

Compassion fatigue

Cost of sustained empathy

Secondary trauma

Exposure to others' trauma

Moral distress

Know the right action; cannot take it

Moral injury

Betrayal of deeply held values

Overload

Too much, too fast, too long

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Different Problem, Different Fix

Experience	What it's really about	What actually helps
Burnout	Mismatch with work	Change conditions + recovery
Secondary trauma	Trauma exposure	Trauma-informed supervision
Moral distress	Blocked ethical action	Voice, consultation, repair
Overload	Demand exceeds capacity	Reduce, postpone, resource

Self-care can't fix a values problem. And a yoga class can't fix a caseload.

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PART 2

It's Not You. It's Also Not Not You.

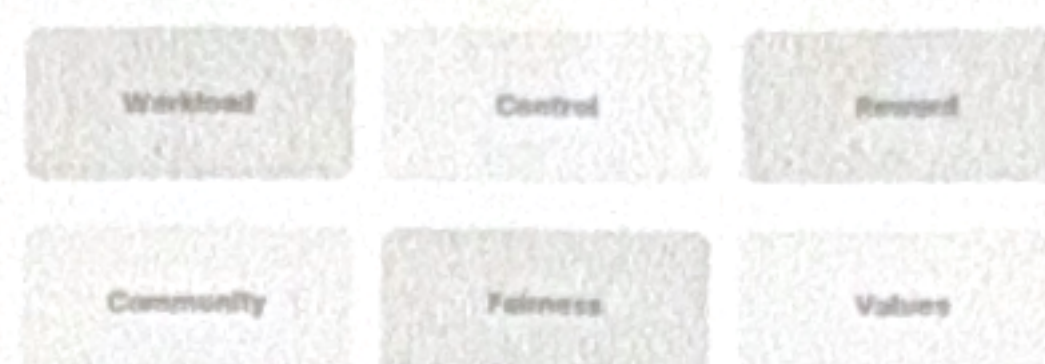
Burnout lives in the gap between people and their conditions.



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Six areas of Worklife

Handbook & Letter



RATE EACH AREA 1-5

Circle your highest score.
That is your target for this
plant.

Where's your Mismatch?

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What Schools Add to the Load

1:250

SSWAA recommended ratio

Your ratio: 1:_____

Ratios don't capture acuity.

Crisis interruptions

Urgency needs the day.

Role ambiguity

Everyone defines your job.

Documentation drag

Care becomes clicks.

Resource scarcity

Needs outrun options.

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Moral Distress in a School Building

Small groups: What is the ethical tension? What is in your control? What needs collective voice?

A. A student needs more care than the system can offer.

B. Confidentiality collides with pressure to disclose.

C. Discipline policy conflicts with your clinical judgment.

D. A family need is urgent; your caseload is already unworkable.

MORAL RESIDUE + THE CRESCENDO EFFECT: Unresolved episodes build. Veterans can feel worse than new staff. — Epstein & Harnic

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PART 3

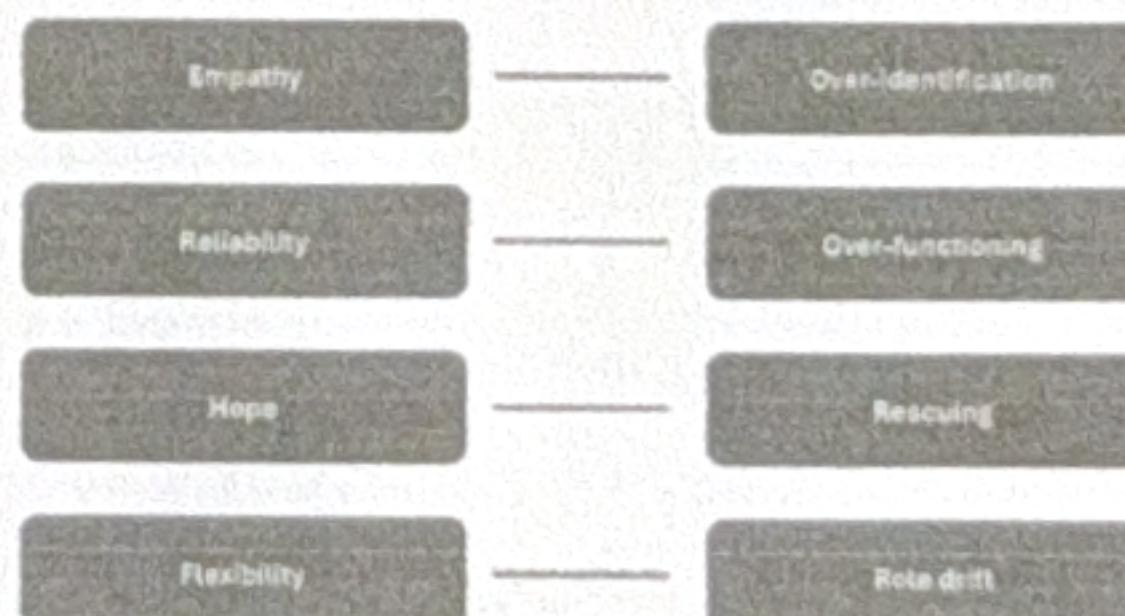
The Helper Identity

Why the people best at this work are most at risk—and what boundaries have to do with ethics.

CARE
↕
LIMITS

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Your strengths have a shadow side



THE WOUNDED HEALER

Lived experience can deepen
empathy—and, unexamined,
blur boundaries.

Shadowed Strengths

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Boundaries are an Ethical Obligation

Commitment to clients

Serve with competence, dignity, and clear professional judgment.

Integrity + self-care

Monitor impairment and seek support before practice is compromised.

REAMER: CROSSINGS vs. VIOLATIONS

A crossing may be thoughtful, limited, and clinically justified.

A violation exploits, harms, or serves the professional's needs.

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Where Boundaries Erode in Schools

1

TIME

Always available

2

ROLE

Everything becomes yours

3

ACCESS

Personal channels

4

EMOTION

Carrying it home

5

SYSTEM

Compensating behavior

Which one is leaking most for you right now?

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Language that Holds the Line

Careload

"I can take this on. Which current priority should move?"

After-hours

"I'll respond during school hours; here is the on-call pathway."

Role drift

"That need matters. My role is X. Y is the right next step."

Urgency

"I can offer A today or B by Friday. Which is more useful?"

Name the trade-off. Offer a path. Don't over-explain.

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PART 4

What Actually Protects

Recovery, meaning, and collective voice.

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Recovery is Not the Same as Rest

Four recovery experiences - Sonnentag & Fritz

Detachment

Mentally leave work

Relaxation

Lower activation

Mastery

Learn or stretch

Control

Choose how time is used

WHICH ONE IS MISSING?

Most helpers over-invest in relaxation and under-invest in detachment and mastery.

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What Sustains People who Stay

Meaning

See the human impact.

Community

Be known by colleagues.

Efficacy

Notice what moved.

TRY THIS

Each Friday, write one moment that reminded you why you do this work.

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From Individual Coping to Collective Voice

- 1 Name the condition
- 2 Gather patterns, not just pain
- 3 Bring allies + a specific ask
- 4 Track the response and escalate

Advocating for your conditions is burnout prevention. It's also advocacy for students.

Your One-Page Sustainability Plan

1 My clearest risk is...	2 The mismatch I will target...	3 One boundary I will practice...
4 One recovery experience I need...	5 One collective ask I will make...	6 The person I will tell...

Tell one person in this room what you wrote for #6.

Not to Care Less. To Be Able to Keep Caring.

Thank you for the work you do.

Jen Schwytzer, LCSW

Workshops, staff retreats, and leadership training
on burnout prevention and team culture.

www.jenschwytzer.com

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