

Fighting the Burnout: Simple Ways to Keep Moving Forward

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Many times student affairs professionals can become lost. It is not that we do not wish to be in the field, but when we are in our offices late or attending a late-night event instead of taking a break, we sometimes wonder why we continue to pursue this field. In 2014, we attended the Southern Association for College Student Affairs (SACSA) Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. At the time, we were both Residence Hall Coordinators and heavily involved in the fraternity and sorority community at Eastern Kentucky University. When we arrived at the conference we were very excited to gather new information we could take back to our department and community. As we were visiting the various breakout sessions offered, we noticed a constant theme of stress and burn out. In fact, we will never forget the look on everyone's faces when one of the guest speakers told us that student affairs ranks in the top three of the most stressful careers. In another session, a female attendee stood up and said, "If I don't something different, I will leave this field by next year." We suppose we were in denial that the field of student affairs was so stressful. However, when we really stopped and thought about our work life balance, we were stressed out. Like most professionals, we were putting students first and not taking enough time for ourselves. As the conference continued we were able to take away a few very effective life hacks that we found to be beneficial in combating stress and building sustainability in our field.

Life Hack #1: Just Say No!

Most professionals can identify with that overwhelming feeling of being spread too thin. One life hack we walked away with from the conference was the ability to say "No!" and feel good about it. As student affairs professionals we are often called upon for additional tasks. While it is important to volunteer and do our part, we simply cannot do it all, and that is okay. By saying no, you are actually giving someone else the opportunity to say yes and building their experience. The second piece to this is the ability to teach your student leaders. "Nevertheless, whether your main focus is students, the art of professing, or content, an excellent teacher must have passion" (Sweet, Blythe, Phillips, & Daniel 2014). Be excited to share! Many students crave leadership opportunities, and it can be great professional development for them to work closely with you on projects. On the flip side, it can sometimes feel like we are spinning our wheels with advising student organizations that are not following best practices. However when we put the power back into the hand of the student leader (who wants to be there) we can truly fight apathy. In Sullivan's book *Motivating the Middle: Fighting Apathy in College Student Organizations*, he explains that student organizations are divided into thirds, and instead of focusing all of your time and energy on the bottom-third, the top-third can motivate the middle-third, so that the middle-third can become part of the top-third (Sullivan 2012). If we can get our top student leaders to understand this concept, we, as advisors, will be less stressed out.

Life Hack #2: Free Your Mind...And the Rest Will Follow

Another life hack that we learned about was the power of mindfulness meditation. "The practice involves sitting comfortably, focusing on your breathing, and then bringing your mind's attention to the present without drifting into concerns about the past or future" (Corliss 2014). As student affairs professionals, we often take our students' problems home with us at night, which can create anxiety and worry. "Dr. Elizabeth Hoge, a psychiatrist at the Center for Anxiety and

Traumatic Stress Disorders at Massachusetts General Hospital and an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical school says that mindfulness meditation makes perfect sense for treating anxiety” (Corliss 2014). Take fifteen minutes for yourself before each work day to quietly practice mindfulness meditation, and “create the calm.”

Life Hack #3: Remember Why You Came

We often times feel a sense of nostalgia in our positions, grasping for memories that will remind us of why we are in the field. Have you ever thought about how positive memories can contribute to healthy balance in life? Baldwin, Biernat, and Landau (2015) suggest “nostalgia promotes psychological health and well-being” which could not be any more true than it is for student affairs professionals. One solution we have found to be extremely helpful is to have the “good stuff” lying around waiting. You might be thinking that we’re referring to something vastly different than we truly are – no, not *that*. We’re referring to a folder of memories. Often times when we’re feeling down or needing a recharge, we pull out our “good stuff” folders (and yes, it is literally labeled “good stuff”). In this folder we have letters, cards, pictures, and other mementos from colleagues, staff, and students reminding us of the impact we can make and are making as we go throughout our day-to-day operations. Having this sense of nostalgia and moments to appreciate the past impacts made can contribute to “boosts in self-reported self-esteem” in turn creating a greater sense of renewal (Baldwin, Biernat, Landau, 2015). So the next time you are feeling like you need a recharge, pull out old photos and letters from your students and recognize the impact you have made. And if you do not have anything now, start collecting!

Life Hack #4: Tell Me All Your Secrets (To a Healthy Work / Life Balance)

If you find that keeping letters and photos is not enough or does not work for you at all, another technique we would recommend is to seek advice from individuals who have a healthy work/life balance and do not seem like they are going to pull their hair out all the time! One of the hardest things for humans to do sometimes is to seek advice. It is almost as if we fear we are failing someone (maybe ourselves) if we do not accomplish everything on our own. When we are working with fraternities and sororities, one of the things we tend to remind students of is that they are in a room full of brothers and sisters who are there to support them and to help them be successful. It is no different for us as professionals; we have a whole department (division, even!) there to help us be successful. It is nearly impossible for us to do it on our own! Remember: students are relying on us to provide services to them to lead to their success! In order to be the best we can be for our students, we must first take care of ourselves or we are doing a disservice to them by not coming to the table with our head on straight!

References

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