

Addressing the Burn

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The profession of fraternity/sorority advising is notorious for perpetuating the norm that the harder we work, the more hours we clock, the more events we attend, the better professionals we are. We tweet and post status updates about our long hours, and one-up one another at the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) Annual Meeting regarding the issues we are addressing on our campuses. Given this norm, it is not surprising so many fear addressing their burnout or the burnout of colleagues. Many accept burnout as a part of the job, assuming it falls under “other duties as assigned.” While some stress and long hours are to be expected, sustained burnout can impair individuals and be a detriment personally and professionally. This professional impairment could damage or end a career in fraternity/sorority advising.

Professional impairment is a concept stemming from the counseling profession. “Professional impairment occurs when there is a significant negative impact on a counselor’s professional functioning which compromises client-care or poses the potential for harm to the client” (American Counseling Association, 2002, p.1). Within the context of fraternity/sorority advising, impairment or extreme burnout can mean the professional is not in a place to make good decisions. Professionals experiencing burnout may also experience insomnia, lack of enthusiasm, and feelings of ineffectiveness. They may be susceptible to an increase in the use of drugs and alcohol, as well. Burnout can also contribute to an increase in personal relationship problems among professionals’ friends and family members (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996) identified three subscales as part of the Maslach Burnout Inventory: General Survey, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy.

Emotional exhaustion develops as an individual’s emotions are drained, and it is often described as fatigue, wearing out, loss of energy, or depletion. Professionals suffering from exhaustion may be observed by others as having low energy. Students, or colleagues who work within a fraternity/sorority profession, may also feel the professional is more disconnected from them and their work. Cynicism “reflects indifference or a distant attitude toward work” (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996, p. 209). Professionals experiencing cynicism may not care if their work is done poorly. Professionals who have a high score in professional efficacy will feel confident in their work; they believe they are effective in their work. A fraternity/sorority professional who is experiencing burnout may believe they are no longer effective in their work, especially when it comes to creating community change (e.g. “things around here are *never* going to change.”). A high degree of burnout will be found when a professional has high scores in exhaustion and cynicism but a low score in professional efficacy. Within the general survey, burnout is defined as “... a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one’s occupation and doubtful of one’s capacity to perform” (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996, p. 20).

Naturally, we want others to see us as individuals who can handle anything in our jobs. This pressure to perform can create fear, reluctance, or a complete inability to assess, recognize, or admit when we (or a colleague) are experiencing burnout. When considering either our own burnout or the burnout of a colleague, it is important to be able to recognize those triggers or signs as feelings of burnout. Personal triggers may take some self-reflection. For personal assessment, I call this “snack or a nap” reflection. When I realize my patience is wearing thin, I ask myself if I am either hungry or tired (or both), as both of those feelings can have a huge effect on my mood and how I react to others. I can address both easily, but reflection calls me to question: “how many days this week have I felt this way?” Any more than two, in my experience, and I know I am heading down the burnout path and need to re-evaluate how I am spending my days. When recognizing burnout in others, focus on when their behavior is out of the ordinary. If they are generally the first to volunteer for something, but have stopped stepping forward and just roll their eyes during a meeting—which you’ve never seen them do before—it may be time to check in. Checking in with yourself and with a colleague can start with the same question: “Are you doing okay?” It may seem simple, but I am not convinced we ask it enough in our profession.

While you may never completely avoid feeling burnout (with many things we cannot control), you can avoid traveling down the path to impairment. Most researchers on burnout point to the use of wellness practices to avoid and bounce back from burnout (Maslach, 1978; Maslach & Goldberg, 1998; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Borysenko, 2011). Wellness looks different for every individual, and there are a number of models you can use. The majority of models focus on a balance between the physical, mental, social, occupational, and spiritual aspects of life.

For many professionals, it may be more realistic to think about this in terms of setting boundaries and priorities as opposed to finding a balance. Balance may not prioritize your personal wellbeing as well as boundaries can. Perhaps leaving work early every Wednesday to attend a dance class can address both your physical and social needs. Setting these boundaries will help you avoid being on the job 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

In discussing wellness with colleagues over the years, two best practices have been consistently shared:

1. Set boundaries that make sense for you, so you are able leave work at work. The work will still be there in the morning, and there are very few things that must absolutely be addressed the moment they hit your email. Figure out what those are and leave the rest to be addressed when you get back into the office the next business day.
2. Find an outlet outside of your professional community. Whether that is reading fiction for fun, building friendships with those who do not work on your campus or in your organization, traveling when you have the chance (do not waste those vacation days), or a group fitness class, it all matters.

Wellness will look a little different for every person. For some, it means physical exercise and healthy eating, while for others it may be more about social engagement away from campus.

Reflect on the times in your life when you felt your healthiest and at your best. Consider what actions you were taking during those times to promote your own feelings of health. Once you have an idea of what wellness looks like for you, communicate that to others in your life. Talk to your supervisor about your non-negotiables for the job, set boundaries for students and stick with them. Remember, you teach others how to treat you. This may involve a shift from how you are currently working, and you will need to remind others that these changes will help you to be the best professional, which will produce better work. We are the only people who can shift the norm of our profession. Think of what we could accomplish if we prioritized our time on the job and came in each day as our healthiest selves.

References

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