Stress and Burnout in Nursing Faculty
[Departments: Faculty Issues]

Shirey, Maria R. MS, MBA, RN, CNA, BC, FACHE

Author Affiliation: Principal, Shirey & Associates; Adjunct Associate Professor, Graduate Program, Nursing Administration, College of Nursing and Health Professions, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, Ind. Correspondence: 10700 Coach Light Drive, Evansville, IN 47725 (mrs@mail2maria.com).

Abstract

Nursing faculty are at risk for stress and burnout that threaten to worsen the current nursing faculty shortage. The author discusses the importance of preventing nursing faculty burnout and presents specific burnout prevention strategies.

Stress is part of the everyday landscape of organizations. A person's ability to positively confront stressors, however, determines the individual's success in minimizing or averting related stress reactions. In the nursing faculty role, individuals face multiple stressors that, if not handled in a proactive manner, may result in serious stress reactions characterized by negative behavioral, psychological, and physiological outcomes. Burnout, in particular, is a negative consequence of stress.

Job-Related Burnout

Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job that include 3 dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism (depersonalization), and inefficacy. Ideally,
burnout should be prevented or addressed constructively such that employee and organizational health and well-being may be maintained. Failure to positively address burnout results in illness and disability. Possibly more consequential may be an organization's inability or reluctance to recognize burnout. Organizations that fail to address the phenomenon of burnout wind up retaining within their workforces "passion extinct" individuals who act like "deadwood" collecting paychecks, in essence, harming the organizations by tarnishing others and impeding progress.

Exhaustion as a dimension of burnout represents the most obvious manifestation of this complex syndrome. Symptoms of burnout include physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Persons experiencing physical exhaustion report a lack of energy and feelings of being tired during the day accompanied by an inability to sleep at night. Emotional exhaustion is manifested by a person's feelings of being depressed, helpless, and hopeless. Mental exhaustion in individuals is generally observed in the form of negative attitudes toward work and life. A mentally exhausted individual is typically impatient toward others and demonstrates a cynical reaction toward emerging problems.

Although exhaustion reflects the stress dimension of burnout, focusing on exhaustion alone fails to capture the relationship components of burnout. Exhaustion, combined with negative coping strategies (distancing), results in the individual's emotional and cognitive separation from their work and from others. These dynamics result in cynicism or depersonalization that disengages employees and further strains already weakened relationships. According to Maslach et al., distancing is such an immediate reaction to exhaustion that the progression from exhaustion to cynicism (depersonalization) represents a consistent theme of burnout research. This progression from exhaustion to cynicism is observed across a wide range of organizational and occupational settings.

Inefficacy, the third dimension of burnout to be discussed, is characterized by a person's feelings of reduced personal accomplishment. According to a meta-analysis of job burnout, inefficacy seems to be a function of either exhaustion or cynicism, or a combination of both. Work-related situations associated with chronic, overwhelming demands contribute to exhaustion or cynicism that likely erodes an individual's sense of effectiveness. Similarly, in almost a vicious cycle dynamic, exhaustion or cynicism interferes with personal effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, Maslach et al. assert that there are 2 theories of burnout causation. One theory holds that it is the best and most idealistic workers who experience burnout. In effect, those dedicated individuals who do too much in support of their ideals and who are "on fire" eventually lose their flame and "burn out" when their sacrifice has not been sufficient to achieve their goals. A second theory contends that burnout is the result of chronic exposure to job stressors. Maslach et al. suggest that debate continues as to whether burnout results from overload (ie, too many demands with too few resources) or from underload (ie, tedium and monotony).

The study of burnout is further complicated when one incorporates the unique qualities of individuals: demographics, personality, and job attitudes. In a review article on job-related
burnout, Maslach et al. concluded that burnout seems to be more of a risk earlier in one's career. Gender alone has not been demonstrated to be a strong predictor of burnout. Marital status, however, has been established as a link to burnout with unmarried (especially men) individuals most at risk. Individuals with higher levels of educational preparation seem to be particularly at risk for burnout. From a personality standpoint, those with a lower hardiness level, poor self-esteem, Type A personality, and external locus of control (attributing events and achievements to powerful others or to chance rather than to one's activity and effort) are more prone to burnout. Similarly, individuals with job attitudes associated with high expectations and idealism are more at risk for burnout.

Measurement of Burnout

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson is the recognized instrument of choice to measure burnout in North America. Because the MBI possesses strong psychometric properties and has been tested in multiple human service settings for over 20 years, much of the burnout research outside North America has been conducted using translated versions of the MBI. Variations of the MBI also exist with an educator version known as the MBI-ES, available and tested using nurse educator subjects.

The psychometric properties of the MBI have consistently supported the 3-factor structure (exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment) across occupational settings and continents. The findings generated from the MBI throughout the world, however, demonstrate national differences in the average levels of burnout. For example, North American workers have higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism than their European counterparts.

Burnout and Nursing Faculty

Individuals in the caring professions, particularly teachers, nurses, and social workers, are more at risk to experience job-related burnout. Nursing faculty, in particular, experience stressors as a result of high job expectations associated with the teaching/service/research paradigm, heavy workloads precluding personal/professional life balance, pressure to maintain clinical competence, and feelings of frustration associated with a perceived inability to satisfy the demands of multiple constituencies. Stressors on nursing faculty are compounded by lack of empowerment structures within hierarchical organizations of higher learning and by the steep expectations associated with promotion and tenure. Interestingly, occupational stress in the nursing faculty role seems to be a phenomenon. Long-term solutions for stress and burnout in the nursing faculty role, however, seem to elude us.

Given the findings of the general literature on burnout and the literature specific to nursing faculty, the role of prevention becomes a key. It is imperative then to address the profile of the "at risk" faculty member and to implement strategies to prevent burnout in the academic setting particularly at a time of faculty shortage. Based on the literature, it seems that faculty members who are new to the teaching role seem most at risk. Even more vulnerable are those new faculty members who may be single, possess a low hardiness level, have a Type A personality, and hold high, idealistic expectations.
Strategies to Prevent Faculty Burnout

Three major categories of strategies seem to offer promise in preventing faculty burnout: mentoring programs, renewal techniques, and organizational engagement efforts. These 3 strategies address both the individual and the organizational factors that combined contribute to burnout. Maslach et al. note that it is paradoxical to look at burnout only from the individual perspective as research has clearly found that situational and organizational factors play a bigger role in burnout than do the individual factors.

Mentoring programs, particularly those geared toward new faculty, help the new educator to socialize into the academic role. Dedicated mentoring programs can also assist new faculty to successfully navigate the university system and the promotion and tenure process.

Implementing self-renewal techniques into daily practices is crucial to minimizing burnout. By creating a hopeful future through renewal, maintaining a positive discourse, and building a sense of community, the energy resulting from renewal can serve to enhance feelings of self-efficacy and combat burnout. In fact, so important is renewal in personal and professional life that Pesut's call to action, as Sigma Theta Tau International's president, challenged all nurses to create the future through renewal. Pesut's 150 ways to answer his biennial presidential call to action represents an exemplar for those in faculty roles to incorporate these strategies as a vehicle for self-renewal.

Organizational engagement efforts play a key role in the long-term solution to stress and burnout in the workplace. This approach requires leaders within organizations to combine both supportive managerial practices and educational approaches to align faculty with the goals of the organization. Engagement efforts require promoting job-person fit by “matching” individual and organizational profiles with the 6 domains of work life: sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work. The evolving research on the relationship between full engagement and burnout suggests that individuals might be more tolerant of a greater workload if their work is valued, if they feel well-rewarded, if they are treated fairly, and if they feel energized within a supportive community. The importance of full engagement of employees seems to also be gaining popularity in the nonresearch literature.

Conclusion

Understanding the concepts of stress and burnout is important in order to promote the well-being of both nursing faculty members and the institutions in which they work. Although stress may not be entirely eliminated from everyday work life, the adverse consequences of stress such as burnout can indeed be averted. Prevention of burnout begins with recognizing the phenomenon of burnout and with instituting mentoring, renewal, and engagement strategies that contribute not only to the well-being and success of nursing faculty members but also toward the creation of healthy work environments for practice.

References


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