

Student Burnout*

Student stress is a given (Biggs, Brough, & Drummond, 2017; Ossola, 2015). The problem for schools is how to avoid student burnout. One definition of burnout is “as an emotional state of exhaustion, cynicism, and depersonalization engendered by an exposure to a high level of chronic stress” (Walburg, 2014). Student burnout is a worldwide phenomenon and is not restricted to any cultural subgroup. It can affect students at any level and throughout their education.

Some Symptoms and Effects of Excessive and Prolonged Student Stress

Many factors are correlated with student burnout. Murberg & Bru (2004) reference four dimensions of school-related stress: difficulties with peers at school, parent and/or teacher conflicts, worries about school achievement, and school pressure.

Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach (2009) describe students experiencing academic burnout as manifesting emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction of personal accomplishment. Commonly cited symptoms include frustration, disabling anxiety, extreme exhaustion, feeling overwhelmed, negative feelings about oneself, interpersonal problems, inability to attend to necessary tasks, declining performance, apathy, disengagement, depression and other health problems (Murberg & Bru, 2004; Salmela-Aro, Savolainen, & Holopainen, 2009; Silvar, 2001).

Examples of Research Findings

Research suggests that burnout leads to higher risks for suicidal ideation, school dropout, lower school engagement, and achievement (Ang & Huan, 2006; Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Silvar, 2001; Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, & Nurmi, 2009).

Kim, Jee, Lee, An and Lee (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of studies focusing on the relationship between student burnout and social support. They report a negative correlation between social support and burnout. The strongest correlation was between school and teacher support; a weaker, yet significant correlation was found between burnout and parent and peer support. They suggest this could be because the relationship between teacher and student is relatively stable, whereas relationships between students and their parents and peers are more susceptible to conflict.

Kiuru, Anuola, Nurmi, Leskinen, and Salmela-Aro (2008) reported that belonging to a high achieving peer group offers more protection against an increase in school-related burnout compared to belonging to a low achieving peer group.

Murberg and Bru (2004) found that girls reported more academic stress related to worries about achievement and school results and more psychosomatic symptoms than boys; boys reported more academic stress relative to conflicts with parents and teachers.

*The material in this document is an edited version of a project report by Emily Cheng as part of her involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Addressing the Problem

As Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) stress in their review of job burnout,

most discussions of burnout interventions focus primarily on individual-centered solutions, such as removing the worker from the job, or individual strategies for the worker, in which one either strengthens one's internal resources or changes one's work behaviors. This is particularly paradoxical given that research has found that situational and organizational factors play a bigger role in burnout than individual ones. Individual-oriented approaches (e.g. developing effective coping skills or learning deep relaxation) may help individuals to alleviate exhaustion, but they do not really deal with the other two components of burnout. Also, individual strategies are relatively ineffective in the workplace, where a person has much less control over stressors than in other domains of his or her life. There are both philosophical and pragmatic reasons underlying the predominant focus on the individual, including notions of individual causality and responsibility, and the assumption that it is easier and cheaper to change people than organizations.

All this is reflected in how schools address student burnout. That is, most of the resources on countering student burnout emphasize personal steps students can take (see examples in the online resources listed at the end of this document). Schools, of course, are advised to watch for student's who are exhibiting symptoms and to provide various supports (including referrals for special help). As to what schools should do to prevent the problem, the emphasis is on making students aware of the potential stressors and suggesting what students and their families should do to cope with them.

All this is fine, but a person-environment fit model of stress emphasizes more than concern for the degree to which an individual is able to match environmental demands and requirements. It also emphasizes the impact of the degree to which the environment does or doesn't provide for an individual's motivation and capabilities. Both types of mismatch can affect an individual's well-being and development of problems.

From the perspective of our Center's work on addressing barriers to learning and teaching, our emphasis is on improving the match by first attending to ways the environment provides for individual motivation and capabilities – including enhancing coping/resiliency. Then, for those for whom problems still arise, schools need to ensure there is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports (see Adelman & Taylor, 2017, 2018).

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A Few Other Related References

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Examples of Online Resources Focused on Personal Coping

Tips for Preventing Student Burnout. <https://www.fnu.edu/tips-preventing-student-burnout/>

Dealing with Study Burnout.

<https://www.einstein.yu.edu/education/student-affairs/academic-support-counseling/medical-school-challenges/study-burnout.aspx>

5 Tips to Overcoming Burnout as a College Student.

<https://www.concorde.edu/blog/burnout-in-health-care-degree>

Top High School Students' Stress and Coping Mechanisms.

<https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2015/August/nyu-study-examines-top-high-school-students-stress-and-coping-mechanisms.html>

6 Signs Your Child Has Student Burnout and How to Help.

<https://www.learningliftoff.com/6-signs-your-child-has-student-burnout-and-how-to-help/>

For Parents: High School Students Facing Year-End Burnout.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/progress-report/201705/parents-high-school-students-facing-year-end-burnout>

**For more on Burnout, see the Center's online clearinghouse QuickFind at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/burnout.htm>**