

Bouncing Back from Burnout*

Judy Downs Lombardi, in: *Do You Have Teacher Burnout* (1990), suggests the following:

- ? Overhaul your job. Make a list of routine or tedious tasks you do as part of your job and come up with creative new ways to tackle them. Even tasks that seem fun-resistant can become more satisfying if you give free reign to your imagination.
- ? Try new instructional strategies. Rather than relying on safe and predictable methods you've always used, try something different. If you're tired of writing student evaluations, consider switching to portfolio assessment. (To navigate through these new waters, you may find it rewarding to team up with a colleague and share the experience.)
- ? Challenge yourself to keep learning. Even if you're a veteran, there's always more to learn about teaching. Identify an area, such as writing in math class or invented spelling, that you'd like to learn more about, and seek out professional development opportunities. Take a class, attend a conference, or organize a workshop.
- ? Collaborate with colleagues. If you resent or disregard suggestions from colleagues on how to enhance your teaching, you may be cutting yourself off from a valuable idea-sharing and support network. The more isolated you are, the greater the risk that you'll become unsure about what you're doing, suspicious of your coworkers, or short on new ideas. Colleagues can provide helpful feedback and reassurance.
- ? Try changing grade levels. If you've been teaching fifth grade for a while, why not consider trying your hand at kindergarten? Sometimes teaching an older or younger group of students will better fit your training, skills, and interests.
- ? Give yourself permission to be less than perfect. Too many teachers believe that none of their successes count if they have one failure. Accept that teaching is difficult and challenging. Pain and failure will always be part of the profession, just as joy and success will be. Keep in mind that you can only thrive if you give yourself room to make mistakes and learn from them.
- ? Also, if you overdo, overachieve or push yourself or your students too hard, your self-imposed pressures and demands will only stunt your growth because you'll push yourself to exhaustion.
- ? Try not to wrap up your identity with your job. Remember that you are not just a teacher--you are a person who has chosen to be in the teaching profession. Cultivate outside interests and hobbies.
- ? Realize that you can help students but you can't save them from society's ills. As difficult as it may be to accept, you can't solve all of your student's problems--you can't keep them from feeling the pain of divorce, economic hardship, and so on. Teachers can, and should, give students room to feel, think, and bear consequences, but they can't rescue students or fight their battles for them.
- ? Learn to care for yourself. As caretaker professionals, teachers often over care for others and under care for themselves. Nurturing your students is important, but you must first nurture yourself. Self-preservation is an essential, healthy habit, so pay more attention to your own needs and well-being. Conserve and replenish your emotional and physiological resources--they're limited!
- ? Practice techniques for stress reduction. If you're feeling the strains of teaching, practice strategies for relieving tension. Remember to carve out time to relax, pursue your hobbies, and spend time with family and friends. If you feel like you can't cope, consider seeing a trained counselor.
- ? Examine other areas of education as natural extensions of teaching. Perhaps taking more college courses would enable you to become a reading specialist, school psychologist, diagnostician, staff development trainer, consultant, guidance counselor or other staff support person. Teaching experience is often the best avenue to these specialties.
- ? Think through your career goals. Is teaching still right for you? Most teachers can probably think of a colleague who should have changed careers a long time ago. Don't wait until you're completely disenchanted to assess where you are going and whether it's time for a change in professions.

Dr. Judy Downs Lombardi, a professor at the University of Tampa, works with student teachers and teachers, and is always on the lookout for signs of burnout.