From Burnout to Demoralization: 
Our Profession and the Perfect Storm of the Pandemic

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Session Agenda

• The current state of our work
• The pandemic
• Burnout
• Demoralization
• Re-moralization

The Perfect Storm

• Rare and unpredictable meteorological phenomenon
• Unexpected combination of circumstances
• Several adverse weather factors colliding with each other
• Convergence amplifies interaction
• Elevates effect beyond that if occurring independently
• Often damaging, critical, and even devastating
High Schools: The low pressure system

- Factors in high schools affecting readiness and college expectations
  - Low expectations, over-accommodated, focus on success
  - Mastery Model
    - "No low grades"
    - "No non-essential work"
    - "Reduction in assignments compared with peers"
  - Lack of resilience
    - Students shielded from failure and consequences
  - The Dignity of Risk
  - The Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations

Gen Z Characteristics: Making landfall

- "The Loneliest Generation"
  - Born between 1997 and 2012
  - Resistant to adult duties and responsibilities
  - Have been denied opportunities to build resilience
  - Digital natives – used to having the world at their fingertips
  - Despite ubiquitous social media, they have underdeveloped social skills
  - Despite broad digital connectivity, have not cultivated meaningful relationships
  - Subject to the "compare and despair" effects of social media
  - Used to having many options to choose from, more agency

Parents: The high pressure system

- High expectations of parents seeking any advantage for their student
  - The consumerization of "the college experience"
    - College may well be the largest investment they will make
  - Seeking a customized experience and a customer service model of delivery
  - "The college experience" seems to be more important than learning
  - Parents may enter combative due to fighting for accommodations in K-12
  - Quick to threaten complaints and litigation
  - High expectations of resources on campus (private tutors, one-on-one time with professors, etc.)
  - Pressure for students to track into a certain degree, career trajectory
Thermal turbulence: The Varsity Blues Scandal
- Can college admission be purchased?
  - Showed how easy it is for wealthy people to game the system
    - Ableism and privilege at the roots of the scandal
      - Falsified student’s athletic history and abilities to get them a spot on an athletic team
      - Falsified a learning disability to get student specific accommodations on SAT/ACT
      - Sent them to a psychologist who was paid to write up a certain outcome
        - Told them to “be stupid” to obtain appropriate discrepancies
          - “I need to tell your daughter that when she takes the test… to be stupid. The goal is to be slow… not as bright, so we show discrepancies. What happened is, all the wealthy families figured out “if I can get extended time, my kid can do better on the test”. Most of those kids don’t have issues. But they’re getting extra time. The playing field’s not fair.”
            — Rick Singer, college admissions counselor

Thermal turbulence
- Can accommodations be purchased?
  - Expensive private evaluations – evaluator bias?
    - Are diagnoses/accommodations expected in exchange for payment?
  - Private consultants advising the accommodations process
    - Gaming the system?
  - Letter mills and false certifications such as Emotional Support Animals
  - Unprecedented pushback and involvement from medical providers, consultants, coaches, etc.

Atmospheric pressure
- The Black Lives Matter Movement
  - Seeks to highlight racial discrimination and inequality, especially with regard to police brutality and racially-motivated violence
- The Me Too Movement
  - Social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment; use of personal stories to empower the young and vulnerable to speak out
- The Time’s Up Movement
  - Celebrities sharing personal stories about sexual misconduct in Hollywood and holding perpetrators accountable
- Political Division
  - Americans have rarely been as politically divided as we are today; joined by the British with the political division over Brexit, etc.
- Russia-Ukraine War
  - Politically, socially, emotionally-charged atmosphere with pockets of unity and division
The Pandemic

The Pandemic: Our worst fears

- The Covid-19 pandemic brought us face-to-face with our biggest fears, all at once:
  - Fear of change
  - Fear of isolation
  - Fear of sickness (self and loved ones)
  - Fear of death (self and loved ones)
  - Fear of uncertainty
  - Fear of failure
  - Fear of being unable to protect our loved ones
  - Fear of inadequacy
  - Fear of loss of freedom
  - Fear of rejection/being judged
- Hijacks our natural “fight or flight” response

Pandemic anxiety

- A different type of anxiety
  - We typically have anxiety when thinking about the past or the future
  - Episodic versus chronic stress – Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers
  - Clear and present lingering anxiety – "battlefield anxiety"
  - Destruction is invisible and ongoing
  - “Cascading disaster”
  - Ambiguous loss
    - Loss of routine, rituals, of “way of life”
    - Loss of problem-solving abilities, lack of solutions
    - Loss of trust in institutions
    - Loss of freedom to move about our lives
    - Loss of work-life balance
The Great Resignation

• Term coined in late 2020 by Texas A&M business and management professor Anthony Klotz in response to the intersection of growing quit rates and the burnout and rethinking of work-life balance due to Covid
  • “The Big Quit”
  • “Institutional Churn” – lateral moves between departments and universities
  • In July 2021 4 million people quit their jobs (US Bureau of Labor Statistics); roughly 33 million people have quit their jobs since Spring 2021
  • Reskilling and upskilling employees may mean more strain on universities as they hire new hires seek additional education, training, and certification
  • Faculty quit rates spurred ‘Quit Lit’ – staff not typically covered

Response to anxiety

Patterned responses to managing anxiety

• Underfunctioning
  • External locus of control
  • Emotional
  • Pull back, zone out, plead for assistance
  • Passive, disengaged, forget how to prioritize
  • Too much feeling to do

• Overfunctioning
  • Internal locus of control
  • Micro-managing, take control, forget how to delegate
  • Dive in, control, fix it, take over
  • It’s easier to do than to feel

The Great Resignation in context

‘Resignation’ can have more than one meaning in this context:

• An act of giving up or retiring a position
• The acceptance of something undesirable but inevitable (disillusionment)
• Voluntary relinquishment or sacrifice without struggling
  • “I'm tired of arguing about it. I don’t think it’s a reasonable accommodation, but I’m not going to argue with the student about it anymore.”
  • “I don’t have time to consider all these ESA requests. I’m going to approve them and let Housing deal with it.”
• “I guess I just don’t get lunch breaks anymore.”
• “I am resigned to the fact that administration is not going to include our voice in higher-level decisions.”
Employee resignation

- Employees reevaluating work/life dynamics after working from home
- Employees found they could be productive working from home
- Employees felt the benefits of spending less time on commute, having meals with their families, comfort of wearing different clothing, etc.
- Employees felt their employers did not prioritize their safety/health/well-being
- Employees felt job insecurity due to furloughs, lay-offs, hiring freezes
- Employees were given more responsibility without resources or authority
- Employees needed a "refresh" – new opportunities, shed the past
- Employees felt unheard or that their opinions and voices didn't matter

Burnout

Burnout has no medical definition or status in most countries; saying that you have burnout is similar to saying you are an 'artist' or a 'Yankee's fan'. (Malesic 2022)

From the ICD-11
"Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."
Definition of ‘burnout’
Will depend on who you ask, and what they need it to be
- Worker: I need it to validate my experience, to explain my exhaustion, my discomfort, perhaps diminished performance
- Employer: I need it to explain low morale, low productivity, high turnover, high attrition; perhaps to identify underperformers
- Marketer: I need it to justify expenditures on products or services
- Researcher: I need it to illustrate social trends, understand and predict human behavior
- Clinician: I need it to define a new era of therapeutic practice

Dimensions of Burnout
- 3 dimensions of burnout:
  - Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
  - Increased mental distance from job or feelings of negativism or cynicism
  - Reduced personal efficacy; ineffectiveness

Burnout and the Brain/Body
Burnout has been associated with:
- Loss of concentration
- Decreased creativity
- Problems with memory and recall
- Difficulty with problem-solving skills
- Problems with interpersonal relationships
- Physical health problems
- Headaches, hypertension, nausea, sleep difficulties, etc. = higher rates of sick leave
Burnout (2)

“The dreary familiarity of most writing on burnout shows how our collective thinking about this problem is stuck. We keep reading and writing that same story, despite the harm that story is causing us. Many authors tell people who already feel worn out and ineffectual that they can change their situation if they just try hard enough.”

Malesic, 2022

The Culture that Creates Burnout

- Culture of labor economics: profit motives
- Outsourcing and temping expansions
- Growing service sector – demands on time and emotions
- Work tied to social, moral, and spiritual flourishing
- Belief that works dignifies us, shapes our character, sets our values
- Boast about “hustle” culture – Brené Brown field research
- Vagueness: Pride vs Shame
- Burnout culture is a failure to honor workers’ humanity
- Who benefits?

Burnout: Pride vs Shame

- Paradox of burnout: it is a negative condition, yet workers seem eager to apply it to themselves
- Hero quality to pushing yourself to exhaustion, a commitment
- Busyness signals status and virtue in a work-obsessed world
- Burnout = ambitious; rugged, ceaseless hustle
- Burnout as self-praise
Burnout (3)
• Fiverr “In Doers We Trust” subway ads

Burnout
Hero or Victim?

Burnout’s unintentional messages
• Possible unintentional messages around burnout
  • “Too bad you couldn’t be more resilient.”
  • “If only you had more stamina.”
  • “If only you had conserved your personal resources sufficiently.”
  • “I guess you aren’t as tough as your colleagues.”
  • “Maybe if you set better boundaries for yourself.”
  • “Are you using your time wisely? Work smarter, not harder.”
  • “Have you tried deep breathing and yoga? Maybe a massage?”
  • “You should take better care of yourself.”
  • “Perhaps therapy would help.”

Burnout
• Localizes the source of the problem (burnout) within the individual
• Individual is lacking or is doing something incorrectly
• Onus for fixing the problem is on the individual
• Perhaps well-intentioned but flawed approach of asking stressed workers to save themselves

“You can’t deep-breathe your way out of a pandemic; you cannot stretch your way out of terrible class sizes; you cannot ‘individual behavior’ your way out of structural problems.”

Chelsea Prax, American Federation of Teachers
Where does the problem exist?

"That quote, the only disability in life is a bad attitude, the reason that I bitch is... his amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. No amount of standing in the middle of a bookshelf and radiating a positive attitude is going to turn all those books into brains."

— Shiloh, Young

Toxic positivity

• A dysfunctional approach to emotional management that happens when people do not fully acknowledge negative emotions, particularly anger and sadness
  • "Positivity given in the wrong way in the wrong dose at the wrong time."
  • Negative emotions are downplayed or disregarded
  • Invalidates the authentic human emotional experience
  • "Don't worry, be happy!"
  • "It could be worse."
  • "Look for the silver lining."
  • "If I can get through this, so can you."

Toxic positivity: The Stockdale Paradox

• The Stockdale Paradox was named after Admiral Jim Stockdale, who spent 8 years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He was tortured more than 20 times during his imprisonment from 1965 – 1973... When asked who didn’t make it out, Stockdale replied “Oh, that’s easy. The optimists.” Stockdale explained that the optimists would believe that they’d be out by Christmas, and Christmas would come and go. Then they’d believe they’d be out by Easter, and that date would come and go. And the years would tick by like that. They died of a broken heart.
  
  Brene Brown, Dare to Lead

• Having "gritty faith" that you will prevail despite the "gritty facts" of reality
Demoralization

"America's educators aren't burned out. We are demoralized. The solution lies in understanding the difference.”

Doris Santoro, Demoralized 2018

Demoralization (2)

- People in our field tend to have moral reasons for starting and/or staying – social justice, civil rights – morality is tied to the work
- Demoralization happens when you are in situations with chronic and ongoing value conflicts that you can’t resolve
- Demoralization is systemic, caused by systems in place that we cannot control
- Demoralization occurs when we are forced to operate in systems that aren’t functioning properly – policies and conditions make it impossible to do what is good, right, and just
- Occurs when we believe that we are complicit in either a disservice to the student or to the profession
Demoralization (3)

Retreat participant:
“Helping understand the difference between demoralization and burnout has helped me immensely mentally. It has allowed me to reflect on the harder times of teaching and reaffirm that I’m not tired of teaching, I’m tired of all the BS that I have to fight while simultaneously teaching.”

Demoralization (4)

Burnout – implies that personal issues are impacting/impairing their professionalism
Demoralization – professional issues are impacting/impairing their ability to do good work and thus affect them personally as well

“The sense of powerlessness to protect the profession they love felt devastating and overwhelming.” – Doris Santoro, Demoralized

Demoralization – survey results

- Over-enrollment without hiring additional staff
- Angry students and parents with unreasonable expectations
- Faculty needs prioritized above staff needs
- Threats of lawsuits and complaints (and actual lawsuits and complaints)
- Access is not a shared responsibility on campus
- Heightened need to document, offer appeals, just say yes for retention
- Being given responsibility without resources or authority
- Isolation (remote and one-person offices)
- University decisions made without staff input, but expecting them to deal with the ramifications
- Lack of opportunities for advancement
Demoralization (5)

- Landscape of privilege around accommodations
- Spending time responding to complaints instead of being proactive
- Scams and scandals – letter mills, watch lists, Operation Varsity Blues
- Trying to tease out preference/comfort from need/disability
- Hiring freezes with high turnover and attrition rates
- Parents, therapists, lawyers joining student meetings
- Managing parent and student expectations

The ‘Diss-ing’ of Disillusionment

- Grand-scale changes and uncertainty Disrupted
- Increased case loads Distended
- Isolation, functioning remotely Disjointed
- Lack of moral agency Disempowered
- Professional disregard Disregarded
- Voice silenced or unheard Dismissed
- Angry parents and students, appeals Disputed
- Chasm between job and work Disillusioned

Your job versus your work

Your job is governed by the rationale and systems of exchange which allow you to get paid for your labor. To put it perhaps too simplistically, your work is the stuff that feels vital and necessary to the underlying purpose of why you labor.

"The solace of the work is no longer sufficient for the degradations of the job."

Collective Trauma Response

- You've reached the end of the disillusionment phase when you are able to acknowledge that no amount of heroics can change the fact that this loss occurred, while also goodness still exists in life.
- These efforts of rebuilding and restoration phase are different from heroics, because they exist beyond disillusionment, in full awareness of loss, which includes times of grief, unexpected remembering, and times of memorial, alongside new initiatives.

Re-moralization

- Taking back our moral agency
- Moral rewards are a natural, renewable resource that is found in doing good work
- “Good work” – we engage in good work when we believe
  1. the work serves a social purpose that contributes to the well-being of others
  2. the way the work is conducted is aligned with that social purpose
- Good work is not done in isolation from others
From Demoralization to Re-moralization

“Demoralization occurs as a result of a number of factors that impinge on a (teacher’s) ability to do good work. These factors may be changes in policy, curriculum, and personnel. Therefore, re-moralization involves addressing those changes in relation to one’s vision of good work, not just changing one’s attitude or perspective.”

Doris Santoro, Demoralized

- Burnout is a huge, nameless, faceless blob of a problem that seems all-consuming…but re-moralization feels like it can be targeted and confronted.

Re-moralization (2)

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Santoro: Strategies for re-moralization

Authentic Professional Community at the center/base
- Being with like-minded colleagues and identifying allies
- Strength in support, sustainable base
- Professional values, instead of personal ones
- Avoid individual vulnerability and isolation
- Allows for cycling through different resources and experiences
- Is the basis for professional ethics
- A sounding board, not an echo chamber
**Re-moralization (3)**

To "re-" anything is to remind yourself of why you do what you do and for whom. It feels like there is an "again" coming. – Doris Santoro

- Return to your "why".
- Reconnect with your authentic professional community.
- Revisit what it means to do good work in difficult/uncertain times.
- Recommit to your purpose and to standing in your integrity.
- Resilience
  - In what areas do I need to practice acceptance, flexibility, and perseverance?
  - Mindsets vs skillsets
  - Resistance
  - In what areas do I need to stand firm on professional and personal boundaries?
  - Access my moral center and maintain my integrity

**Re-moralization (4)**

Cultivating resilience is an important achievement and builds an individual's capacity to face life's challenges – it calls for us to accept, accommodate, adapt.

As a response to demoralization, calls for resilience can be experienced as ineffective and insulting. Strategic resistance may be necessary to address the institutional, systemic origins of a moral problem.

Doris Santoro, *Demoralized*
### Systemic change — survey results

What systemic changes need to take place?

- Increased pay, respect, budgets, resources, staffing
- Increased buy-in from faculty and administration
- Opportunities for advancement
- Formalized education pathways that lead to the work
- Make accessibility a shared institutional responsibility
- Realistic work load expectations
- Flexible options for staff (remote work, flexible hours, etc.)
- Inclusion in larger conversations and decisions

### Sources (1)

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