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Shining on others, I burn myself: time to disagree with Hippocrates

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After 2years of varying forms of lockdown, working (mostly) from home or under intense pressure, we have returned to in-person meetings. Yet, this transition was more intense and demanding than we considered. Yet is this true? Might it be that the pandemic revealed a deeper issue we face in academia, and unravelled a tremendous mismatch between work and personal life? We proudly say that as academics, we can work anywhere and anytime. More so, we do, and we are likely proud of it. Is this how we want to spend the rest of our careers and be role models for future generations?

QUIT-LIT

Quit-lit, 'an emerging genre of academic writing focused on authors' reasons for leaving academia', is real.[1] More and more accounts of young, emerging and even established academics who decide to pursue different careers are emerging. Let's be honest; our career perspective is not that shiny. Academic roles are increasingly competitive and often without long-term job security. This poses a constant pressure to perform, and a prospect riddled by disappointments; for instance, a manuscript is rejected, or a grant is not funded. It is easy to consider a move to another career, often in industry, meaning many aspiring and current talents are lost. This extends beyond younger academics, as we see our more experienced peers bear a significant burden in academia, which appears to have become more intense—or at least visible—recently.

ARE WE BURNING OURSELVES OUT?

Let us call it out by its name. Burnout is not an uncommon issue in our 'profession'. The WHO acknowledges burnout as a disease in the ICD-11.[2] Not me, you might think. But have you ever tried to complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory [ref]? You would probably score high, just as we do. The issue is that while burnout may be considered a disease, it is easy to blame the individual while the system is the main culprit.[3 4] Look around. We academics are curious, passionate, driven and caring individuals. The academic system in which we constantly compete to survive breeds an obsessive passion, which—according to literature—is linked to burnout onset.[5] A study conducted by Gallup[6] showed that the top reasons for burnout relate to how people are managed, and these include:

- Unfair treatment at work.
- Unmanageable workload.
- Lack of role clarity.
- Lack of communication and support from the manager.
- Unreasonable time pressure.

Now imagine your own work. Do you recognize some of these factors? We do.

CHANGE THE SYSTEM TOGETHER

Does this mean we should give up hope? Well, not necessarily. In academia, collaboration often underscores meaningful achievement.[7] Gone are the days of lone academics attempting to solve the wicked problems we face as a society. Based on our scores out of the Maslach Burnout Inventory,[8] we each share some suggestions reflecting our experience within academia. We hope to start a conversation (or dare we say 'movement') whereby others share their own suggestions too. While each individual contribution may be small, what is stopping us from changing the system together?

Patrick Owen, early-career researcher

I find myself at low risk for burnout. This conflicts with my belief that I, like many academics, could be one misstep away from burnout at any time. One strategy I use to avoid such an event is starting every working day with two hours of writing something 'important to me'. Whilst initially difficult to integrate into my schedule, I now build my day around this 2-hour block. Even when I have the most chaotic day, I find it easier to tackle with the feeling of accomplishment I get from my morning 'me time'.

Fiona Wilson, associate professor and physiotherapist

In summer 2022, I scored very highly on the burnout inventory. A slow creeping of pressure over years, culminating in the stresses

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of leading a health sciences department through a pandemic, challenging work relationships, supporting patients, poor management of boundaries (too much weekend working). I took my first summer holiday abroad in 8 years and disconnected and reviewed my values and ambitions. I rested properly. I decided to step away from a clinical workload (for now) and invest better in managing my own stress. I am now more realistic about my capacity and my ability to say 'no' has improved. Connecting with colleagues outside my university on projects makes me feel connected and supported by our wonderful SEM community. A global support group who help me keep things in perspective.

Evert Verhagen, professor

I received a red score on every subscale of the inventory. Despite my tight schedule, I assume I have everything under control. So, this was upsetting. To delude myself, I keep telling myself that this is just how academia 'rolls'. I received all signs around me, among others from my wife, that I am always occupied by work. I recently took a long leave of absence to work with a personal coach. This has shifted my perspective. I now realise that I am setting a poor example for people with whom I work. I learnt that saying 'no' is not a sign of weakness, it is the opposite. I acknowledge that I deserve to be myself and should not be taken hostage by occupational demands. Although I must admit it is not easy, it has helped me towards finding a healthier balance.

Irina Z, researcher and sports medical doctor

I experienced a severe burnout a few years ago. I hope no one else has to go through what I did. Up to that point, I had never heard of the term. Imagine you are enthused about your job and your life. Then 1 day, you find yourself energising everyone around you with no awareness of the significance of your achievements or any inner guidance as to how to proceed. It was tough for me to decline requests given my managerial responsibilities. I couldn't sleep when I had tasks to perform. Other things became secondary while I was attempting to complete everything. The pandemic break saved my life. Now, I want to raise this important topic in our community. Speaking up will help make the problem more visible and, thus, easier to tackle.

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Collaborators N/A.

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