



Tutor Burnout: How it is Caused and How to Combat it

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RhetTech Undergraduate Journal

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Abstract

Emotional labor has been described in many different ways. One being the amount employees have to regulate their emotions during their work activities and how well one exhibits professionalism when emotionally flustered. Constantly suppressing negative thoughts and emotions and releasing positive thoughts and emotions can be very draining. This type of emotional labor is present in many occupations, including that of writing center consultants. There are many different causes of this as well as tools to combat burnout that this article will cover. It concludes by suggesting that these tactics to address emotional labor are useful for all college students.

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Introduction

As a psychology major with the goal of becoming a counselor, burnout is something that I have heard a lot about and witnessed first hand, but never actually experienced myself. However, as I began working in the writing center as a consultant, I started to notice many of my colleagues express feelings of being burnt-out. I found this very interesting because my colleagues and I have only been tutoring for a couple of months. The mere timeline of feeling burnt-out in this case puzzled me to a point of curiosity, and I wanted to learn more about the phenomenon of burnout and how to go about combating this. This article was written for the purpose of examining literature that discusses the nature of burnout both in and out of writing centers as well as pulling together some tips and guidelines for coping with burnout.

The idea of occupational “burnout” due to jobs with high social requirements is not a new term or idea amongst scholars by any means. The literature encompasses this idea through vocabulary such as “people work,” “emotional labor,” “burnout,” etc. The phenomenon is based on how many individuals one works with (other than colleagues and superiors) and how much one’s occupation causes them to hold back their negative emotions and release their positive emotions (Mann, 2004; Yilmaz, Altinkurt, Guner, & Sen, 2015). The more a job requires these emotions, the higher the burnout rate will be. For example, jobs such as 911 operators, nurses, doctors, social workers, policemen, and teachers all require emotional labor. The burnout level varies for each of these occupations because of their difference in emotional labor amount and intensity (Mann, 2004).

Hiding Emotions

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The term “display rules” is defined as “behavioral expectations about which emotions ought to be expressed and which ought to be hidden.” For example, a waitress smiling at a customer or a telephone operator using a polite tone at all times are both examples of display rules. This does not actually mean that the waitress is happy and pleased to see the customer or that the telephone operator is enjoying the conversation. These actions are simply taught to employers by administration or through socialization (Mann, 2004). Some display rules are taught by administration (Rowell). For example, the fact that every Chick-fil-A worker says “my pleasure” insinuates that this has been taught to them in their training and is not a mere coincidence. Other times, display rules are taught through socialization. This is when individuals make rules for themselves based on behaviors that they believe are valuable, rather than rules of behavior that are taught to them from administration. For example, during an interview of writing center consultants, evidence of display rules through socialization was exhibited as it was found that the majority of consultants believe it’s important to be polite to clients with whom they are working despite it not being taught to them by their administration (Rowell, 2016). Since these students were not taught this information, it is shown that these values have internalized over time due to U.S. values and customs.

Sometimes following these display rules can cause an employer’s actions to be at odds with his/her emotions. This act of covering up one’s true emotions with false facial expressions creates a state of emotional dissonance. This is simply when one’s internal emotions do not match their expressed emotion and can be accomplished through surface area acting or deep acting (Mann, 2004). Deep acting is when one tries to actually feel the emotions that they are portraying and has many negative effects as it causes an internalization of the work role (Mann,

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2004; Yilmaz, Altinkurt, Guner, & Sen, 2015). It is important to be able to separate the work role from other aspects of one's life. Therefore, when one is actually feeling emotions in a work environment that they typically wouldn't feel or taking on others' emotions as their own, it will start to affect their personal life in ways that create stress.

Connecting this to the Writing Center

Transference is an issue that occurs often in jobs involving emotional labor such as the writing center. Transference is the act of a client or patient looking at a provider as if they have knowledge in many different fields just because they are knowledgeable in a singular field of service. This typically happens as a client builds trust for a provider. (Baumlin & Weaver, 2000). For example, a client expecting a tutor to be knowledgeable in chemistry just because they are working on a chemistry lab together is a prime example of transference. Because of the nature of writing centers, student workers tend to harbor less authority than professors or teachers (Harring-Smith, n.d.; Baumlin & Weaver, 2000), therefore lowering the amount of this transfer that would take place. Although this is good, transference does still take place in writing centers. When a tutor cannot meet the expected needs of the client, they tend to feel a sense of guilt over something which should not be expected from them. Guilt can also arise if a consultant feels as if a session "failed" because of poor strategy choices on their part (Rowell, 2016).

The topic of transference plays beautifully into the idea of expectations. False expectations play a huge role into the amount of frustration that is present in a session. Research suggests that consultants often become frustrated when a student comes in and his/her work does not meet the standards that the tutor expected to see. Clients tend to feel frustrated when their expectation of the type of help that they should receive from the session does not align with what

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help they are actually receiving during the session. These unmet expectations are shown to decrease productivity during sessions (Rowell, 2016).

Tips for Combating Burnout

As is seen through the literature, the burnout rate is high in jobs that contain a high degree of emotional labor. However, there are strategies of coping with emotional labor that can greatly affect one's feeling of being burnt-out and they will be described individually below.

Personal accomplishments:

Prioritizing and working towards personal accomplishments is an important aspect of emotional health within jobs that have a high burnout rate (Mann, 2004; Yilmaz, Altinkurt, Guner, & Sen, 2015).

Breaks:

Taking breaks is an important part of jobs with high burnout rates. Try not to schedule yourself more than five or so hours at a time so that you can be refreshed for every session. Be intentional about not letting your session run over so that you have time to recharge before the next session (Haring-Smith, n.d.; Rowell, 2016).

Know Your Client:

Taking a few minutes to get to know your client can make a huge difference during a session. This knowledge of their personality can work as a tool in choosing a strategy to use during the session and also puts both client and tutor at ease (Haring-Smith, n.d.).

Humor:

Humor has been a supported coping strategy for emotional labor because of its ability to create an "arousal lag" in which tension decreased dramatically after a brief and sharp increase in

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arousal (Mann, 2004; Rowell, 2016). In this case, don't be afraid to crack a joke during a session!

Releasing Negative Emotions in a Physical Way:

Negative emotions are going to arise during sessions, and it is important to release these in a healthy manner to avoid dwelling on them. Many jobs that do not involve face-to-face contact such as 911 operators will hit a desk or squeeze a stress ball to release negative emotions as they come. This is harder for face-to-face interactions, but even taking a second to “go grab a tissue” in which you can clench your fists or take a few deep breaths may do the trick (Mann, 2004).

Surface Acting:

At the end of the day, there is going to be some emotional dissonance. However, presenting positive emotions through surface acting is significantly better for your health than feeling as if you actually need to feel the feelings you're presenting. Therefore, if you don't feel positive and go lucky that day, don't force it. Learn how to surface area act (Mann, 2004; Yilmaz, Altinkurt, Guner, & Sen, 2015; Rowell, 2016).

Emotional Awareness:

Becoming aware of your emotions and your emotional triggers during a session helps emotional control. This can be done through self-reflection, journaling, meditation, etc. (Rowell, 2015).

Clarify expectations:

Make sure the client knows what to expect from a session. If a client is expecting something that does not fall under WRC objectives, politely explain to him/her what the WRC

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does offer and why they do not offer what the client may have come for. It is also important to expect reasonable things from yourself as a tutor. . (Mann, 2004; Rowell, 2016).

Conclusion

The information in this article serves as an amazing resource to improve the emotional health of college students. Although the coping strategies mentioned above are specifically designed for individuals working jobs with high burnout rates, they can also be applied to many other forms of stress, as stress is the root of emotional labor. Some of the strategies can be used directly, such as taking breaks and using humor, while others may need to be tweaked a bit, such as getting to know your professors and fellow students rather than your clients. This information can prove especially helpful to the large majority of college students that work part time service jobs while attending school, as emotional labor can cause them a tremendous amount of stress, or those who plan to work in a field with a high burnout rate. Employing coping strategies, such as the ones mentioned in this article, can lead to a much emotionally healthier college population.

Emotional labor can be very stressful and has been proven to contribute to higher burnout rate. However, this does not mean that emotional labor is entirely or innately bad. Emotional labor is needed for some of the most important and respectable jobs, in order to have the positive impact that they have on society. We simply must be aware of how to help others in the best way and how to take care of ourselves so that we are able to remain emotionally healthy even amidst working jobs that require a lot of emotional labor. By understanding how emotional labor can be harmful to one's emotional health and learning different coping strategies that will help reduce

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any potential negative effects, we are taking the first steps in learning how to balance emotional labor and emotional wellness.

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Armor Up Against Tutor Burnout

Tips for Consultants

During a Session

- Be a surface area actor NOT a deep actor.
- Clarify expectations!!!
 - Does the client know what to expect?
 - Are *you* expecting too much of yourself? Know your role.
- Spend a few minutes getting to know your client.
- Release negative emotions in a physical way.
- Humor – reduces tension.
- Take advantage of breaks.
- Become aware of how many sessions you can handle in a row. If that number is 5 don't schedule more than 5 hours at a time. Remember, you want to be refreshed for your own sake and your clients.
- Get to know the consultants that you work with and share stories. It can be extremely encouraging and therapeutic to talk about your experiences together (just be careful to not cross the line of trashing clients).
- Ask clients for feedback and use this to self-reflect and/or to serve as encouragement for yourself.

During Downtime

- Prioritize your own personal accomplishments -- occupational, educational, family based, etc.
- Self-reflect on tutoring sessions -- this can be done through journaling or simply replaying conversations in your head. Learn your own emotional triggers so that you become a more emotionally aware human and are better able to combat “irrational” thoughts and feelings.

Tips for Administrators

- Give positive feedback often through evaluations and/or client reviews.
- Encourage communication after negative sessions.
- Include built in breaks and/or a maximum time limit for consecutive shifts.

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