Teacher Burnout: Causes, Symptoms, and Prevention

by [Fiona Tapp](https://www.wgu.edu/heyteach/article/teacher-burnout-causes-symptoms-and-prevention1711.html)

<https://www.wgu.edu/heyteach/article/teacher-burnout-causes-symptoms-and-prevention1711.html>



Teachers, don't let your frazzled minds fizzle out now.

Teaching is a rewarding yet demanding career. With long hours and a heavy workload, it's easy to fall prey to teacher burnout. Without proper support, teachers are in danger of being overworked and not taking care of their own mental and physical health needs.

**What Is Teacher Burnout?**

[*Psychology Today*](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201311/the-tell-tale-signs-burnout-do-you-have-them) describes burnout as "a state of chronic stress that leads to physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment." Teachers are usually high achievers who like to work hard and are always looking for ways to improve. These traits are commendable but can mean that educators fall prey to perfectionism and don't leave enough time for rest and recuperation.

In her new book, [*The Weekend Effect*](https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062440181/the-weekend-effect), Katrina Onstad argues that we live in a "cult of overwork," and being a workaholic is often celebrated as a virtue when it shouldn't be. Teachers, especially, need to be reminded that they're more than their job. While teaching does become part of your identity, you still need to nourish the other parts of yourself that demand attention and care.

**Signs of Burnout**

True burnout is much more than simply feeling tired or overwhelmed, and can lead to [serious depression](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0072470/). That's why it's so vital to be vigilant about the warning signs.

* Fatigue and sleep issues: A full day of teaching is enough to make anyone feel tired, but if you're experiencing fatigue before you even get to school, you may need a break. However, those experiencing burnout often struggle with [insomnia](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022399908000470), which can turn into a vicious cycle.
* Repeated periods of forgetfulness and intense trouble concentrating: Burned-out teachers may find it hard to complete normal tasks and have trouble concentrating on their work. A lack of sleep can amplify these symptoms even more.
* Appetite and weight issues: Any drastic weight loss or gain should be investigated by your doctor, as this is often a sign that you need to focus on your overall health.
* Depression and anxiety: If minimized or ignored at the early stages, teacher burnout can intensify into feelings of anxiety and depression. Always speak to your doctor if feelings of sadness or anger are affecting your daily life.

**How to Avoid Burnout**

To avoid becoming a victim to teacher burnout, educators need to build balance into their lives. One way to do this is by setting clear work boundaries. Perhaps that means you won't check your emails after 6 p.m., or you'll only grade papers until a favorite TV show starts, or maybe you'll never work on Sundays. Whatever schedule you set for yourself, stick to it to ensure balance in your life.

Another way to avoid burnout is to take time off. Onstad suggests that we need to reclaim our weekends and remember that a full life includes time for recreation, hobbies, personal relationships, and downtime. Make sure you have some time every weekend where [school is the last thing on your mind](https://www.wgu.edu/heyteach/article/3-essential-steps-take-true-vacation-teaching1803.html). Each year, aim to take a vacation, even if you're staying at home. And take some of that much-deserved time off to catch up with friends, go on a date, or just hang out without thinking about school. (As a side note, if you're sick, call in sick and take the day off. Don't be a martyr—your students will be fine, so take care of yourself.)

[The American Medical Association](https://wire.ama-assn.org/practice-management/once-endangered-doctors-lounge-revived-battle-burnout) recently reported on a resurgence of doctors' lounges and how they can be used to battle burnout. Teachers, who also work in people-focused occupations, should look to build a sense of community and solidarity by using their teachers' lounges in a similar fashion. Time spent there can be a chance to recharge and reconnect with colleagues.

The act of teaching is giving opportunities, ideas, knowledge, and guidance to students. But you can't do this effectively if you're running on empty. Take care of your needs, balance your life for optimum health, and regularly check in on your own mental wellness. That's the best system for [beating burnout](https://www.wgu.edu/heyteach/article/10-ways-avoid-teacher-burnout-infographic1612.html)—or avoiding it entirely!

Teacher Burnout Quiz

**How Many Hours** do you Work on Average Each Week?

* 35 hours (about 9am to 5pm each day)
* 40-45 hours (e.g. 8am - 6pm each day)
* 50+ hours a week (e.g. 7am to 6pm and evenings)
* I work every moment I am awake - I don't know how many hours that is

**How do you sleep** on the average day?

* I sleep easily, I get 7 hours minimum each night
* I don't sleep enough in the week, but I catch up at the weekend
* I sleep less than 6 hours a night pretty regularly
* I suffer from insomnia and have trouble sleeping

What kind of **social life** do you have?

* I have a social life - I get out reguarly and spend time on 'me'
* I feel like I have a balance between my work and home life
* I don't have much time for my life - the job takes up most of my time

What is your **mood** on the average day?

* I am happy, and enjoy a bit of banter with my students
* I am easily irritated by the behaviour and attitude of my classes at school
* I find myself feeling irritated at school, and in my home life too.

How **tired** do you feel most days?

* I work hard, but I have the energy to do it
* I find myself getting tired most days, but I catch up at the weekend
* I am tired all the time - and often can't wait for the next holiday or break from school to rest

How **clearly can you think** when you are at work?

* I am clear headed when working at home and at school
* I find myself struggling to concentrate, but only when i'm tired
* I struggle to concentrate on my work almost all the time

What kind of **conversations** do you have with co-workers?

* We might moan a bit, but it's all light hearted fun
* I find myself complaining quite a bit, but we help each other feel better
* The conversations I have are almost always complaints - and I can't see a resolution to any of the problems we discuss.

Do you suffer from any of the following **physical symptoms**?

* Regular headaches or stomach aches
* Heart palpitations or chest pain
* Dizziness
* Shortness of breath
* I experience none of the above

