

## Preventing burnout at work

Loraine Kennedy reports.



The Leadership and Management SIG Pre-Conference Event (PCE) at the IATEFL conference in Harrogate in March 2014, attended by around 40 managers, put the spotlight on this subject for the first time. The key questions that underpinned the programme for the day were:

- How can you support your teachers and ensure that they do not burn out?
- How do you prevent burnout in yourself as a manager?
- How do you become more resilient to the pressures of constant change?

These are important questions to ask in the modern, stressful world of work, and although there is an increasing amount of attention being paid to this subject in the business world, we are only beginning to scratch the surface of the issue within the English language teaching profession.

### The organisation's responsibility in preventing burnout

George Pickering started off the day by asking the audience to consider the meaning of 'stress', 'burnout' and 'resilience'. He reminded us that stress is the natural physical and emotional response to anxiety and dangerous situations in life, and is as such, a normal occurrence in life. Burnout, on the other hand, is neither essential nor useful to life; it is in fact the state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. And so, although an optimum level of stress can enhance one's performance, anxiety or burnout is to be avoided at all costs.

Resilience, on the other hand, is the capacity to recover quickly and effectively from life's difficulties. It is a desirable behavioural characteristic to develop. So, the pertinent question to ask, therefore, is how do you reduce undue stress and burnout, while developing the resilience needed to cope with life's pressures?

As the first speaker of the day, George Pickering pointed out that this isn't only an important matter at the individual, personal level, but an issue that every organisation should pay attention to. Neglect of staff wellbeing can result in ill health, high employee turnover, mass absenteeism, poor workplace relations and poor management decision making. Stress and burnout at work can be caused by a number of factors

including people-related issues, excessive workload, endless tight deadlines, and the relentlessness of email communications. High pressure at work can lead to an increase in the number of preventable mistakes being made, which in turn can lead to an unhealthy degree of stress. And so the vicious circle commences.

George suggested that certain types tend to be prone to stress, such as the over planners, or those that take on too much, or else those amongst us who are acutely competitive or driven towards continual career advancement.

When looking at resilience, George referred to the work of Salvatore Maddi (2004) who concluded that resilience showed itself through three characteristics:

- **Commitment:** when your self-belief is strong and you hold a firm sense of purpose
- **Control:** when you are able to positively influence events affecting you
- **Challenge:** when you hold a positive attitude to change

George also pointed out that managing and dealing with stress is a shared organisational responsibility between individuals, team members, line managers, and senior managers. The organisation must demonstrate that it cares about the wellbeing of its staff, that it takes the matter of anxiety and stress seriously. It is not the responsibility of individual managers alone. There are a number of things an organisation can do to demonstrate its commitment to staff wellbeing:

- Add a reference to staff wellbeing to the organisation's mission statement
- Have a health and wellbeing policy
- Take an interest in individuals at work at the personal, one-to-one level

**PCE speakers: Ágnes Enyedi, Andy Curtis and George Pickering**



- Demonstrate appreciation and recognition of individuals' contributions at work, e.g. thank you notes
- Carry out stress risk assessments that include staff surveys

### Teacher stress and burnout

The second speaker, **Ágnes Enyedi**, focused her talk on teachers; how managers might observe and pick up on stress related signals from teachers, and how to establish team related activities that help prevent anxiety and burnout occurring. She pointed out that burnout can be contagious, whereby stressed people can negatively affect and influence those around them, resulting in a widespread loss of energy and motivation. She asked the audience what they thought it felt like to be burnt out. She then explained that excessive stress and burnout resulted in individuals giving up, being no longer interested in their work, lacking the motivation to continue, and becoming increasingly isolated and lonely. Ágnes reminded us that feeling very tired is not the same thing as burnout; burnout is a long term condition of fatigue caused by depersonalisation, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of accomplishment or appreciation.

Through a list of true/false statements, Ágnes was able to remind us that burnout is not necessarily caused by years of overwork and that in fact the burnout rate for young new teachers is statistically higher than for experienced teachers. This of course is understandable when you consider the stress that many novice teachers experience in the first year or so of their careers. It highlights the importance of paying attention to the wellbeing of new teachers in school.

Ágnes reminded us that burnout is both a psychological and physiological condition, a recognised medical condition, not easy to spot in people because they often fight it, hoping to overcome the anxiety that is building up. As they strive to stay on top of their work, they hide their worries from others, and thus the situation worsens.

It is important to appreciate that stress and burnout are not necessarily the automatic result of working extra hard, or putting in long hours. Many people work at a superhuman level, but are able to manage their workload and their lives well enough to their own satisfaction. In fact they often thrive within this high tempo environment. On the other hand, burnout is an emotional state that results in someone no longer being able to cope. Plus, it isn't a condition that affects either men or women specifically; both sexes can be affected by it equally, though Ágnes warned us that women might be more prone to hiding it and covering it up at work.

Ágnes listed a number of signs of burnout in individuals at work that managers and peer teachers need to look out for:

- Moaning, groaning, complaining
- Change in behaviour; e.g. over motivation and enthusiasm can be a compensation reaction to stress
- Absenteeism, missing deadlines, days off, extended sick leave
- Acting on automatic pilot
- Avoiding contact with others, avoiding eye contact

Although none of these signals might necessarily in itself be a sign of burnout, a manager with a keen eye for spotting anxiety at work will be able to identify the progressive state of deterioration in others over a period of time.

But what should you do if you have concerns about a colleague at work? Ágnes said that the best way to respond to someone who is overly stressed at work is not to show sympathy, but to be collegiate and appreciative about their work. It is also important to avoid situations in which individuals become isolated or alone. You can do this by bringing people together in the staffroom. She made the valid point that although teachers are trained to manage their classroom, there is no training received on how to manage the staffroom, or on what to do if you have concerns about a colleagues' emotional health at work. Ágnes recommended that the strategies of classroom management be applied to the staffroom as well, techniques such as working in pairs and small teams, asking pertinent questions and listening closely to the answers, checking your work, and self and peer evaluation.

### The manager's perspective

**Andy Curtis**, the third speaker of the day, focused on managers. He pointed out that burnout at work is on the increase, but that ELT organisations have not till now taken responsibility for human wellbeing. Nowadays, depression is second only to musculoskeletal disorders. We have a responsibility in the profession to look after the mental health of managers.

He introduced the term 'presenteeism', which is the state of coming to work but not being productive; when people regularly leave work, but they won't quit. What's worse, he asks, the absent person or the presenteeism person? Andy said that the presenteeism problem is more challenging and more destructive.

Andy shared a personal experience story with the audience which illustrated the difficulty a manager has recognising burnout in a colleague, even one that you work closely with all the time. He stressed that managers cannot be made to feel responsible for the wellbeing of those around them, that as educators we are not professional counsellors or medical experts. The important thing is to be alert to the signs of burnout and unhappiness in colleagues. Then if you have concerns about another person's emotional wellbeing, that you report the situation to a senior manager or seek advice

from a medical expert. Too often managers became stressed because they attempt to deal with another team member's emotional wellbeing alone. They think that as the line manager it is their responsibility to deal with the problem. But it isn't. Seek advice when you feel you need to.

### Panel Discussion

A panel discussion followed the presentations.

### Avoiding anxiety and burnout

So what are some of the things that you can do to avoid becoming overly stressed at work, whether you are a teacher or a manager? The speakers and members of the audience drew up this list of suggestions.

- Write a gratitude list: things to be grateful for in your life
- Address any negative questions or thoughts about yourself that go round your mind e.g. Why did I do that stupid thing? Stop being so hard on yourself
- Establish positive rituals in your life – ensure you make time each day to do something that gives you pleasure and helps you relax
- Develop effective reflective practitioner skills
- Write a journal
- Reflect on a critical incident or critical moment that occurs at work, whether that be an incident in the classroom, or at a meeting, for example. Then write about it.
- Work closely with a peer that you trust

- Join a community of practice – for collaboration and support
- Carry out a personal SWOT analysis – consider your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Focus on your strengths and opportunities.
- Establish a coaching and mentoring framework for teacher and manager support and development
- Show appreciation and recognition for the work of others

This PCE provided an excellent opportunity to focus on the importance of emotional wellbeing at work. Whether you are a manager or a teacher, it is crucial that together we identify ways to establish a supportive workplace that pays close attention to the physical and psychological wellbeing of everyone. That means for YOU as well as those around you.

### Reference

Maddi, S. R. (2004) Hardiness: An operationalization of existential courage. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44 (3): 279–298.

**Loraine Kennedy** is now based in Berlin and runs her own educational training, coaching and consultancy services, after five years as Centre Manager of Bell International Institute in London, part of the Bell Educational Trust. Loraine has been in ELT for many years, most of them spent in management roles overseas and in the UK. Email: [kennedyloraine00@gmail.com](mailto:kennedyloraine00@gmail.com)



## **The SIG PCE in Manchester: 10th April 2015**

### **People management: managing challenging situations, groups and individuals**

Managing challenging people and situations are some of the most difficult tasks and responsibilities of the academic manager. This PCE will look at some important aspects of people and conflict management through the discussion of case studies. Under the guidance of facilitators, groups will be invited to come up with solutions to challenging situations. Individuals will have the chance to:

- Reflect on their own performance in managing challenging situations;
- Listen to the ideas and best practices of other managers;
- Learn from the suggestions of the seminar facilitators.

The overall aim of the day will be to build up a set of best practices to take away which will help academic managers improve their people management skills.

The PCE will be facilitated by Andy Hockley, Jenny Johnson, Loraine Kennedy, George Pickering and Josh Round.

Go to the IATEFL Annual Conference site for details and registration information.