

The Perils of Passion Exploitation: Prioritizing Self-Care as Labour Activism

Jorden Cummings
College of Arts & Science

To state the obvious, being a faculty member is demanding work. Associated stressors include increasing precariousness of positions, obtaining tenure and promotion, increased workloads combined with cuts to support staff, time pressure, ambiguous definitions of success, incivility and bullying, and generational differences with students (e.g. Clark & Sousa, 2018; Spooner & McNinch, 2018). This is only a sample of the stressors we are exposed to; these challenges are worse for faculty from underrepresented groups. Researchers have demonstrated that stress for academic workers has grown over the last twenty years, and it is higher than that of the general population (e.g., Watts & Robertson, 2011). Prolonged stress can lead to burnout, physical illness, and mental health concerns.

Much of this stress stems from higher education's prioritization (globally) of neoliberal, extractive capitalist values. We see these values reflected in the increased use of non-tenure-track positions, prioritizing some areas of scholarship (that are more likely to be "profitable") over others, an obsession with met-

rics and quantification, and encouragement for us to create revenue-generating projects and partner with industry. Then there are the messages academia sends us that devalue rest, time to think, wellness and balance while emphasizing that our publications measure our worth.

Some of us come to work in higher education because we see ourselves as "having a calling." When we have a calling and can pursue it successfully, it can be a wonderful experience. In contrast, being blocked from a calling – for example, because your employer doesn't provide enough resources for you to do it well or because your work environment doesn't feel interpersonally safe – can lead to burnout, despair, and quitting altogether. Our institution is no exception, as our recent workload report showed high numbers of people thinking about quitting.

This dedication can also lead us to be vulnerable to "passion exploitation," a form of labour exploitation that we often don't label as such (Kim et al., 2019). Passion exploitation can include

working extra hours without compensation, sacrificing family time for work, doing tasks irrelevant to our job descriptions, and assuming that extra work is enjoyable for those with this passion and thus not a burden.

Unfortunately, this is an old story. In my literature review for my forthcoming book, *Workable Self-Care for Higher Education*, citations about the stress of academia went back to the 1980s and beyond. This led me to the question: If this has been known for so long, why hasn't it changed? Or, framed differently, who benefits from this situation, such that it would be perpetuated instead of altered? In one framing, the answer is the employer (as well as the institution and higher education systems more broadly).

Employees who perceive their work as a higher calling are more likely to push themselves beyond their limits to accomplish their work, even without adequate resources. They will go above and beyond teaching their classes. They will volunteer for committees regardless of having the time. They will attend conferences out of pock-

et. They will come to work sick or injured. They will give to others, even when they are burnt out. How many colleagues do you know who have continued to work when a medical leave would have been in their best interests?

Employees who continue to slog in a stressful environment do not have the time or energy to advocate for change. Because working in these conditions requires all our energy and then some, they find it difficult to attend University Council (or other related meetings), participate in their union, or even discuss with their colleagues how this system needs to change so that we can be effective and well. In the words of Noam Chomsky, this stress as status quo creates a labour force that is more easily controlled and “cut[s] back on the possibilities of doing authentic research and serious teaching, which [from a business perspective] is an expensive waste of time” (Spooner & McNinch, 2018, p. 58).

Self-Care as Labour Activism

In this context, prioritizing the wellness of ourselves and others via practicing self-care becomes a critical aspect of labour activism. I’m not referring here to the fluffy, commodified, soothing self-care of bubble baths, smoothies, or a glass of wine after work, but rather deep, meaningful self-care that meets our needs as humans and transforms our lives. In the work we’ve done in my lab, these are replenishing behaviours and activities that draw from and feed our core personal values. The stuff that makes life worth living, even when that stuff is hard to do.

This includes everything from working on activities or topics that are personally meaningful to us, even if these activities are undervalued by our employer, to getting enough sleep or having a beloved hobby. How many colleagues do you know who don’t take their full annual vacation? Or whose role demands that they be always available, even on vacation? (Don’t even get me started on the myth of a full, detached-from-work parental leave).

Making space for that self-care in our lives includes setting boundaries and saying no, refusing to accept burnout as “part of the job,” and pushing back against unreasonable expectations.

This is hard stuff. We can’t do it from a place of illness or burnout. Nor can we be effective change agents to push back against the policies, choices, and priorities that lead to stress and burnout in higher education without first filling up our energy reserves. Only then will we have the energy to speak up at meetings, attend University Council and USFA gatherings, be on committees that impact our context, and support colleagues when they need us.

Where to Begin

Revamping our self-care is a process that takes time. It involves lots of practice, steps forward and backward, and developing a new relationship with ourselves.

1. ***It’s the system, not you.*** If my writing resonates with you, recognize there is nothing wrong with you. You are

not defective if you struggle with stress, burnout, or lack of balance as an academic worker. The consequences you experience are a feature, not a bug, of working in academia.

2. ***Talk to others.*** Shining light on an issue is how we connect with others, form relationships based on supporting one another, and develop a critical mass of people to generate tipping points in systems. Talk about your challenges, your self-care successes, and failures. Talk about how hard it is. Especially talk to your students – socialize them to expect academia to do better.
3. ***Evaluate your workload in the context of your values.*** Ask yourself if they match and, if not, how to make them match.
4. ***Seek helpful resources.*** Not fluff pieces on how to eat more vegetables and make resolutions in January, but evidence-based resources on self-care, habit change, and workplace balance. This includes (shameless plug alert) www.teachmyselfcare.com where my work in this area is disseminated online.

References

- Clark., A & Sousa B. (2018). *How to be a happy academic*. London, UK: Sage.
- Kim, J. Y., Campbell, T. H., Shepherd, S., & Kay, A. C. (2019). Understanding contemporary forms of exploitation: Attributions of passion serve to legitimize the poor treatment of

workers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 118(1), 121-148. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000190>

Spooner, M. & McNinch, J. (Eds.) (2018). *Dissident knowledge in higher education*. University of Regina Press.

Watts, J., & Robertson, N. (2011). Burnout in university teaching staff: A systematic literature review. *Educational Research*, 53, 33-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2011.552235>

VOX is published periodically on demand as a forum for the expression of opinions of members of the USFA on topics of interest to the membership. Submissions to be considered for publication may be sent to the USFA office or usfa@usaskfaculty.ca to the attention of **VOX**, or the Editor, Jim Waldram, at j.waldram@usask.ca.

Articles should be about 1000 words. Letters to the Editor, commenting on previous articles, should not exceed 200 words. The Editor reserves the right to determine the suitability of all articles and letters for publication in **VOX**.

All opinions expressed in **VOX** are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the position of the USFA or the Editor. All articles and letters remain the property of the authors, and permission to reprint them should be obtained directly from them.