

Preventing Burnout

A Guide for Clinical Educators Supporting Students on Placement



Faculty of
Medicine, Dentistry
and Health Sciences

This resource was developed by the Collaborative Practice Centre, Contemplative Studies Centre, Melbourne School of Psychological Science and the Department of Medical Education.

Looking after your own wellbeing enables you to show up for students and clients. Supporting wellbeing on placement is not about doing more - it's about doing small things consistently, within your role, and within your capacity.

What is burnout?

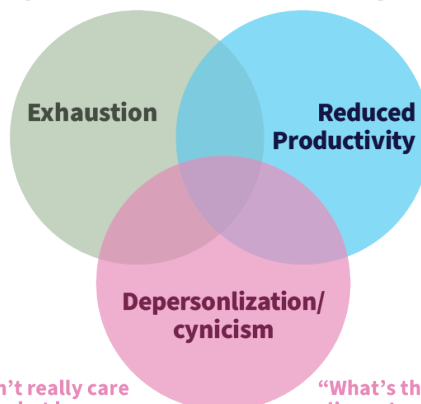
Burnout is a work-related syndrome that develops over time and in response to chronic stressors. It exists on a spectrum, which means you don't just wake up one day burnt out. It can also be experienced in many different ways in response to many different stressors.

As measured by the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*, burnout has three core dimensions:

- **Emotional exhaustion** – feeling depleted, overwhelmed, or unable to give any more
- **Depersonalisation / cynicism** – emotional distancing, reduced empathy, or a cynical attitude towards work, clients, or students
- **Reduced personal accomplishment / professional efficacy** – feeling ineffective, unproductive, or lacking impact

“I feel like my work is breaking me down”

“I feel like I have nothing left to give”



“I don't really care about what happens to some of my patients/clients”

“What's the point? I'm not making a difference”

Maslach Burnout Inventory

Burnout is not a personal failing. It reflects a mismatch between demands and available supports and tends to progress gradually if unrecognised (Von Harscher et al., 2018).

Burnout, empathy and compassion

Caring is both a health professional's greatest strength and our greatest vulnerability.

- **Empathy** involves *feeling as* another person:



- **Affective empathy:** emotional resonance (e.g. feeling sad when you see someone else who is sad). Importantly, this has two components: empathetic concern and personal distress. The former reflects feeling other people's pain while the latter reflects being distressed by the other's pain
- **Cognitive empathy:** perspective-taking and understanding another's experience

When we are experiencing adaptive levels of empathy, we both feel (empathic concern) and understand (cognitive empathy) other's pain without being too upset by it (personal distress). In cases of burnout, people often are overwhelmed by other's emotion (personal distress) and increase thinking about feeling (cognitive empathy) while also reducing a willingness to emotionally connect with it (empathic concern).

- **Compassion** involves *feeling towards* another person, with a motivation to help

Compassion fatigue refers to emotional and physical exhaustion associated with prolonged caring roles and is more accurately described as decreased empathy relating to burnout.

It's not usually our desire for people being helped that is fatigued but rather our ability to emotionally connect with them and feel capable of helping. It often presents as reduced empathy (notably, reduced empathic concern, with potentially increased personal distress), feelings of helplessness, and burnout.

Compassion fatigue is not a lack of care - it is often the result of caring deeply without adequate means to replenish one's own resources.



You cannot *drink* from an empty cup.

FILL YOURSELF UP. YOU'RE WORTH IT.

What contributes to burnout (and what doesn't)

Burnout is influenced by systems and context, not just individual coping.

Common contributors include:

- High workload and competing demands
- Limited autonomy or control
- Isolation or lack of collegial/social support
- Role ambiguity or unrealistic expectations
- Emotional labour and repeated exposure to distress

These are often present in mental health and drug and alcohol settings.

Burnout is not caused by:

- Being weak or "not resilient enough"
- Caring too much
- Lacking professionalism

Caring for others by caring for ourselves

As health professionals, caring is your superpower, but it can also be a vulnerability. Always putting others first can lead to you becoming depleted, undermining your ability to help others.

Caring for yourself, as a supervisor, can strengthen student learning, team culture, and your own professional wellbeing.

By developing self-awareness and reflecting on your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours you can better understand your own wellbeing needs, as well as how you most effectively help others.



Mindfulness can be used to develop self-awareness. Mindfulness is “intentional awareness generated by remembering to pay attention to the whole of your experience while differentiating what is helpful vs. unhelpful for you”. In short, it is awareness generated by paying attention on purpose.



By practicing Mindfulness over time, you build greater awareness of:

- **Yourself:** habits, tendencies, and state of being
- **Others:** patterns, styles, effects on you
- **The world:** see what is really happening and how you can or cannot influence it

Just note that mindfulness is a practice you need to do repeatedly. A one-off activity isn't especially helpful. Also, mindfulness may not necessarily fix your problems; it may simply make you aware of things you need to change to look after yourself better.

Student wellbeing on placement: why it matters

Student wellbeing on placement has significant implications for how students relate to clients and colleagues and the quality of care they can provide. It also affects their ability to learn, develop confidence, and establish a professional identity. This has longer term impacts on whether students decide to choose a career within mental health settings as well as how they manage stress that can lead to burnout.

Skills that support wellbeing (such as self-awareness, boundary-setting, and help-seeking) need to be taught and modelled by Clinical Educators. Placement offers a unique opportunity to embed healthy practices early, helping to shift the culture of practice over time (Hassed, 2007).

Supporting student wellbeing through Self Determination Theory (SDT)

Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) highlights key psychological needs that support wellbeing and motivation:

- **Belonging and connection** (feeling supported by people around you and able to support the people around you)
- **Competence** (feeling capable or seeing one's potential to feel capable in the future)
- **Autonomy** (feeling able to make decisions that are guided by internal values; ownership over one's actions)

Clinical educators and workplaces can support these needs by:

- Creating psychologically safe learning environments
- Being clear about expectations and pathways for support
- Encouraging reflective practice and autonomy where possible

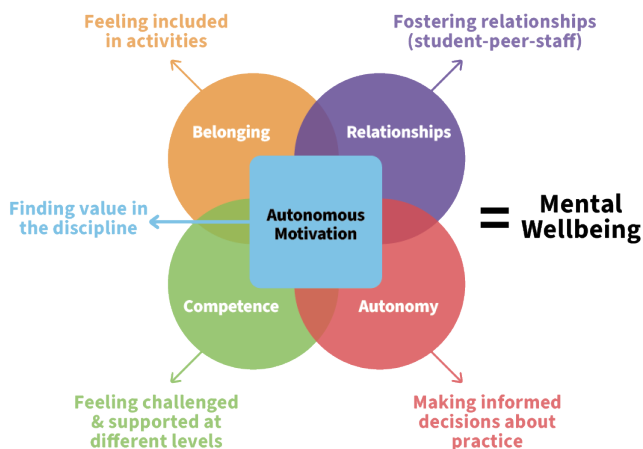


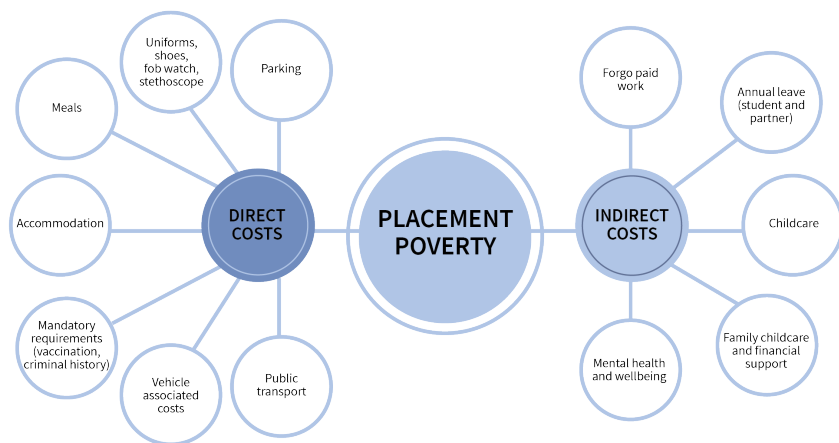
Image modified from Baik et al., (2017)

The broader context for students

Just like you, a student's presentation on placement may be influenced by many factors beyond the workplace, including:

- Trauma histories, which might be topics of vulnerability or strength
- Disability or neurodiversity
- Mental health challenges
- Complex family or caring responsibilities
- Financial strain, housing insecurity, or placement poverty (struggling to maintain financial commitments and needs during placement)
- Existential stressors (e.g. climate anxiety, global conflict)
- Additional challenges for international students (e.g. isolation from family/friends/ supports and work/visa/funding restrictions)

Awareness of this broader context can support compassionate, realistic responses - without requiring you to take on a therapeutic role.

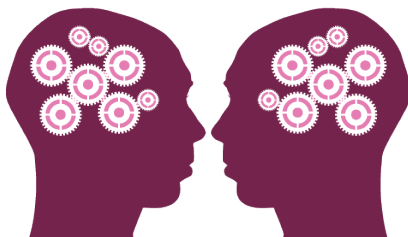


What can you do if you or your students feel burnt out?

You are not expected to be a therapist. Your role is educator, mentor, supporter, and facilitator. Model the healthy approach that you want your students to adopt.

Key principles:

- **Relatedness:** You and your student are not alone: the University of Melbourne is here to support you as a clinical educator and students while they study (some suggestions for support are listed at the end of this document). Professional bodies can also help support you as a health professional. Think about who you can talk with about getting help. If you do not know people around you, introduce yourself and get to know them. Ask your student to think about who they want to talk with.
- **Competence:** Small actions matter. Think about what is in your control, what stressors you can reduce, what boundaries will help. Take note of the things you can achieve rather than the things that you have not yet done. Encourage your student to do the same.
- **Autonomy:** Knowing where to refer is more important than taking on the carer role. Allow yourself, and the student, to maintain ownership over how you, or they, seek help. If your student is hesitant to seek any help, revisit the two points above.



Practical strategies that support both educator and student wellbeing

- Get to know the people around you (names, interests, things in common)
- Create opportunities for students to connect with each other (isolation is a key risk factor)
- Make time for brief, regular check-ins
- Encourage peer and near-peer support where possible
- Acknowledge challenges - sharing appropriate examples of your own learning can give students permission to speak up
- Be explicit about expectations and how/where to ask for help
- Set boundaries/limits around work and communicate those limits to others
- Use group check-ins to normalise reflection and shared experience
- Reflect on where you access support (e.g. supervisors, colleagues, mentors, friends, professional supports)
- Normalise talking about mental health, capacity, and supports
- Be open to new ideas and approach suggestions with curiosity. Try not to just say 'no', think of an aspect you may be able to say 'yes' to

Mindfulness and brief grounding practices can also support awareness and regulation - even in small doses.

Activities that can assist to reduce or prevent burnout

Consider introducing or adapting activities in your workplace such as:

- **Paired discussion**
 - "Caring is our superpower - and our vulnerability"
 - How can always putting others first undermine our capacity to help?
- **Reflecting on Self Determination Theory in practice**
 - How do workplace experiences affect your sense of competence, autonomy, or relatedness?
 - How might they affect students?
 - What is within your control, and what is not?
- **Action planning**
 - What is one action to support your own wellbeing?
 - What is one action to support your student's wellbeing?
 - What is one commitment you can start today?

When to seek additional support?

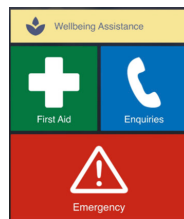
- When distress is persistent, escalating, or impacting functioning
- When safety concerns arise
- When you feel out of your depth or unsure how to respond

Early identification and consultation are key

Where to seek support

University Supports for students

- In the moment: [SafeZone app](#) connects students and staff directly with campus security, first aid, or emergency assistance, 24/7. Users can check in, share their location during incidents, and receive urgent safety alerts
- [Counselling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) – free psychological support such as individual counselling, group programs, workshops, training and online resources
- [Student Health and Wellbeing Digital Hub](#) - information on how students can support their own wellbeing while studying
- [Mindfulness and Meaning @ Melbourne](#) - A free, self-paced online course created by the [Contemplative Studies Centre](#) to aid students in understanding mindfulness and finding meaning in university life
- For urgent help students can call our 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Support Line: Ph. 1300 219 459 or Text: 0480 079 188



Clinical Educator Supports

University of Melbourne supports:

- Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offer a [secondary consultation service](#) if you are concerned about a student's mental health. Ph. 03 8344 6927 (during business hours)
- [Melbourne Academy of Clinical Educators](#) – regular in-person and online events to support and connect clinical educators develop skills
- [Employee Assistance Program](#) - Short term support for University of Melbourne staff



Other supports:

- [Uni Student Wellbeing website](#) – Further information on Self Determination Theory and how you can support student wellbeing as an educator
- [ClinEdAus](#) - Provides open access, contemporary, evidence-based clinical education resources for allied health students and supervisors



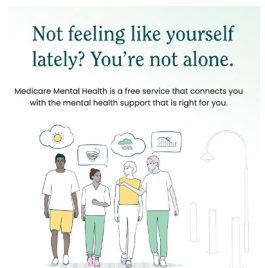
Professional Supports

- [TEN – The Essential Network for Health Professionals - Black Dog Institute](#) - Helping healthcare professionals find resources and support to navigate burnout and maintain good mental health
- [Workplace Mental Health Toolkit](#) - an organisational resource to promote mentally healthy environments
- Dedicated helplines:
 - [DRS4DRS](#) – support for doctors and medical students to care for themselves, their colleagues and their clients. Ph. 1300 374 377
 - [Nurse & Midwife Support](#) - 24/7 national support service for nurses, midwives and students of nursing and midwifery experiencing health and wellbeing issues. Ph. 1800 667 877
- Peer networks - [Hand-n-Hand](#) or profession-specific groups
- Professional associations - these organisations can often guide you to discipline-specific resources
 - [Indigenous Allied Health Australia \(IAHA\)](#)
- [Contemplative Studies Centre](#) - delve into diverse contemplative practices, uncover their impacts, and provide direction for your individual contemplative journey
- [MHPOD](#) - provides free online training and resources for mental health professionals to enhance their skills and knowledge



Other supports

- Local health services and GPs
- Workplace Employee Assistance Programs - Check your employer's internal program for free, confidential counselling
- Community mental health services e.g. [Gayaa Dhuwi](#) (Proud Spirit) Australia –The national leadership body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention
- Government Services e.g. [Medicare Mental Health](#) - connects you with the right mental health support
- Emergency services in acute situations
 - Emergency Ph. 000
 - Lifeline Ph. 13 11 14
 - Beyondblue Ph. 1300 22 4636
 - [13 YARN](#) Ph. 13 92 76 - A 24/7 free and confidential crisis support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



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Email: ISPC-project@unimelb.edu.au

Email: CPC-4Health@unimelb.edu.au

Website: mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/CPC4Health

LinkedIn: Collaborative Practice Centre

Instagram: @CPC4Health

