



Relief for Faculty Burnout

Anti-Burnout Practices for Individuals and Groups

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Message from the Authors

Over the summer of 2022, we as a group came together to consider the experience of faculty burnout, and to think about specific strategies and coping mechanisms available to professors and instructors at small liberal arts colleges. At the time of writing, the past few years of living and working through a global pandemic, national racial reckoning, initial stages of climate collapse, and the changing reproductive politics of the post-Roe v. Wade South have led to extraordinary stresses on all employees in higher education and beyond. Often faculty are at the forefront of addressing these crises, having to manage not only our own responses, but also having to negotiate how to address these stressful issues both in the classroom and one-on-one with students who are increasingly experiencing their own mental health struggles. Burnout among faculty is rampant across campuses, and understandably so. Forming supportive groups, be they related to work or not, is one method of managing this tumultuous time. In our summer work we found a compassionate and understanding group, and through the gathered resources below we hope that this booklet can assist other faculty members in finding encouraging and empathetic colleagues, and ultimately in reconnecting with the meaningful and rewarding aspects of faculty and campus work-life.

If you are experiencing burnout, you are not alone -- and things can get better.

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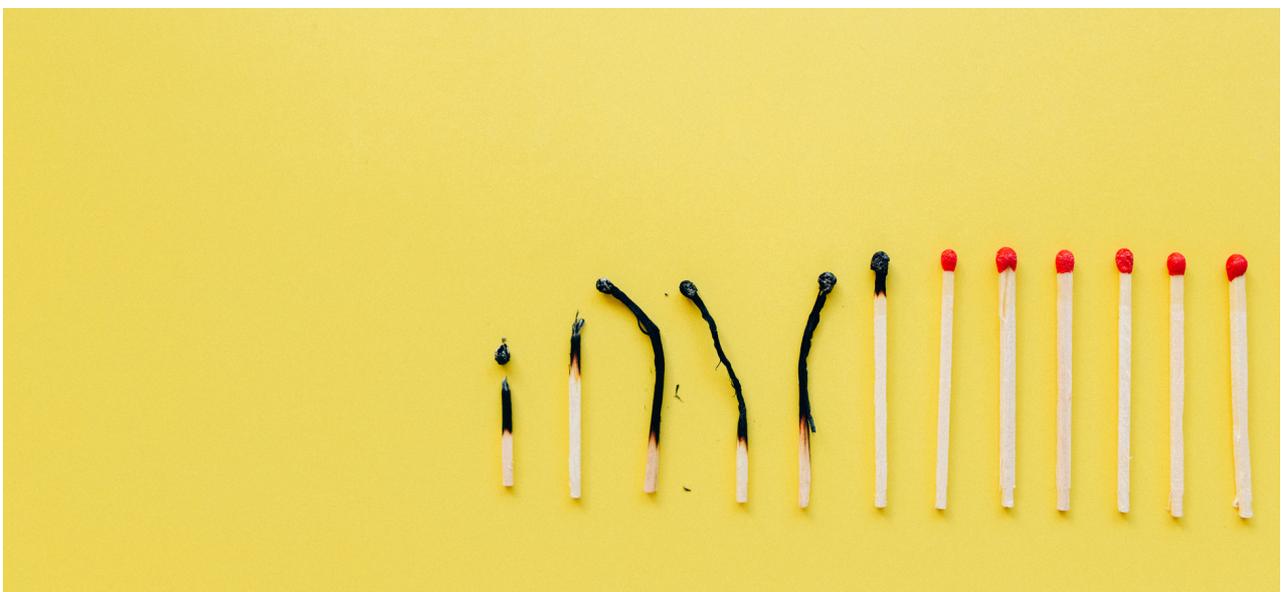
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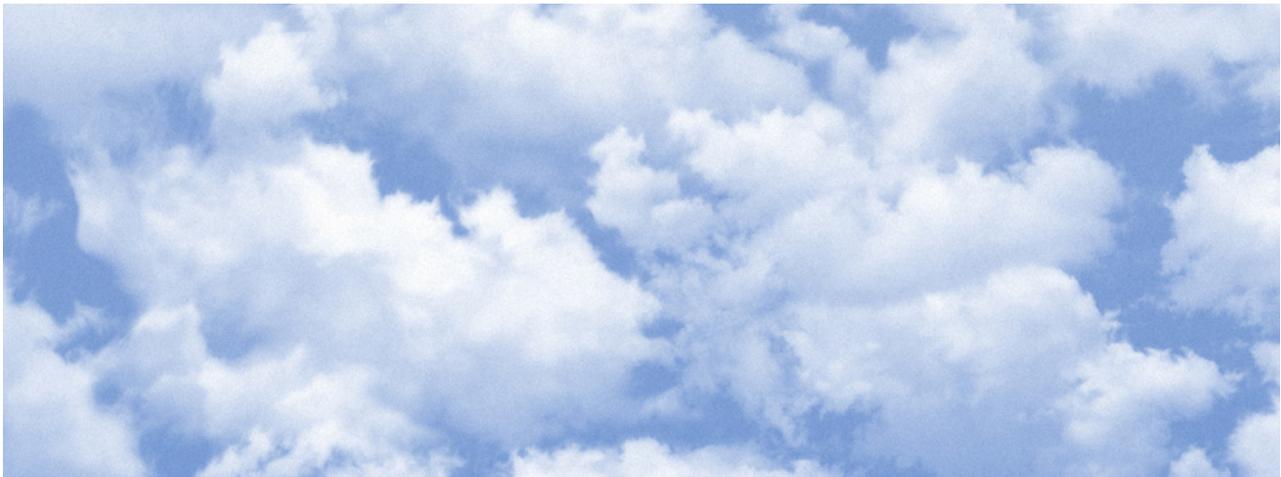
What is burnout?

Burnout is often defined as a syndrome usually resulting from the ineffective management of chronic stress that results in: (1) **emotional exhaustion**, (2) **cynicism or de-personalization** (in academia this often takes the form of seeing one's colleagues or students as problems rather than people) and (3) **feelings of ineffectiveness**.

Since 1981, the primary tool for measuring burnout has been the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). MBI is a three-pronged index that measures (you guessed it): exhaustion, cynicism and feelings of professional inefficacy. Individuals who primarily feel exhausted are classified as overextended. Individuals who primarily experience cynicism are classified as disengaged. Individuals who primarily feel a sense of inefficacy in their job are classified as ineffective (though this should be understood as a classification of the person's experience, not an assessment of their actual professional efficacy). Individuals who score negatively on all three indices are considered burned out, while those who score positively on all three indices are classified as engaged. In a typical study, 10-15% of individuals assessed with the MBI are classified as burned out, and roughly 30% are classified as engaged.

Burnout is often defined exclusively in reference to employment. This narrow definition minimizes or excludes important considerations in the experience of burnout, including the impact of child or elder care responsibilities on health and well-being. [Schaufeli \(2021\)](#) suggests that we focus less on the workplace and more on whether or not activities feel obligatory. When an activity carries an obligation, someone engaged with this activity may begin to experience burnout.

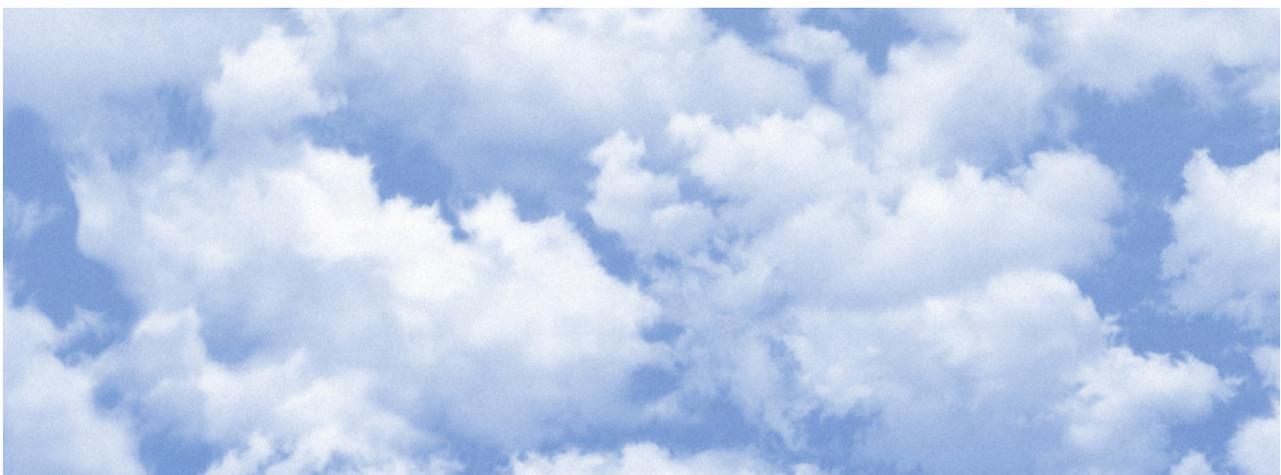




When we feel burned out, we lose our connection to our colleagues, to ourselves, and to our purpose in our work. Although isolation itself does not constitute an independent pillar or dimension of burnout, isolation can contribute to negative feelings and experiences in each of the three dimensions of burnout. When we are exhausted, we may cope by withdrawing from others. When we feel disconnected from others, we may begin to depersonalize our colleagues and our students. When we feel unable to share our experiences and concerns with others, we may become more susceptible to feelings of inadequacy and ineffectiveness in our work.

Thus, **reestablishing connections is a common mitigation strategy for burnout.** If we can reestablish or strengthen our connections to our colleagues, our students, and the meaning in our work, we may find some relief from our experiences of burnout.

In this handbook, we begin by suggesting resources and practices for individuals seeking relief from faculty work-related burnout. Then, we suggest principles and practices for forming and maintaining "anti-burnout" communities in academic groups. Finally, we provide our perspective on appropriate institutional support for faculty recovering from burnout.



Section 1: Understanding and Coping with Your Experience of Burnout

In this section, we provide resources for individual faculty members to understand and reflect on their own experience of burnout. These resources each provide some perspective on the faculty burnout experience, which may help you to frame your own experience – and to realize that **you are not alone** in that experience.

We also provide practical individual strategies for coping with burnout, as a complement to the group strategies described in the rest of the handbook. We provide references regarding evidence-based strategies, and a bank of personal anecdotes with specific strategies that have helped us.

We want to acknowledge that while our experiences of faculty burnout are personal and individual, the circumstances that contribute to burnout are often beyond any one person's control. Furthermore, there are stubborn inequities in individuals' ability to respond to burnout, including the accessibility of coping strategies. Therefore, in this section, our goal is to help individual faculty members find relief from burnout, without suggesting that any individual can "solve" burnout by following some simple formula.

No particular approach will work for everyone, but we hope that you will find something here that resonates with you and helps you find some relief. Take what works for you, and leave the rest.

Understanding Stress and Anxiety

If you'd like to reflect on your experiences of work-related stress and anxiety, we recommend Judson Brewer's ***Unwinding Anxiety: New Science Shows How to Break the Cycles of Worry and Fear to Heal Your Mind*** (New York: Avery, 2021). Brewer is an MD/PhD, formerly at Yale, currently at Brown, who specializes in the science around habits and stress. He proposes a three-step program for people to use to better manage anxiety in their lives. (1) Understand the medical science of how anxiety and stress operate in the mind and body. (2) Understand the ways in which anxiety can become habitual. (3) Practicing mindfulness around those habits.

On Brewer's second point, about the habitual nature of anxiety, see also a short work by a best-selling Buddhist nun: Pema Chodron, ***Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears*** (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019). And speaking of Buddhist approaches to anxiety, it might be worth looking at Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche's two books, ***The Joy of Living*** and ***Joyful Wisdom***.

On Brewer's third point, he cites a book by a psychologist that is also very helpful in understanding how mindfulness practice is helpful in dealing with anxiety: Tara Brach's ***Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN*** (New York: Penguin, 2019). The acronym "RAIN" is a mnemonic device to help remember the basics of mindfulness practice: R= Recognize stress and relax into it; A= Allow and accept the stress without pushing it away; I= investigate the feelings associated with the stressful experience; N= Note the feeling and when ready move on to the next thought.

Understanding Trauma

The word "trauma" is being used a lot these days, much like the word "burnout." Our experiences during the pandemic, political upheavals, and natural disasters can feel "traumatic," but what does that word mean? If you'd like to learn more about trauma and its impact on well-being, we recommend Bessel van der Kolk, ***The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*** (New York: Penguin, 2014). The author is a senior researcher and practicing psychiatrist at Boston University. The book reviews the ways in which traumatic experiences affect the body and the mind.

Positive Psychology

In the 1960s, U. Penn. psychologist Martin Seligman coined the term “learned helplessness.” It described the pessimism experienced by people who were subject to repeated adversity. Thirty years later, Seligman published a book that described learned helplessness and initiated a movement called positive psychology: ***Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). A recent work by a psychiatrist updates Seligman’s key concepts and applies his approach to contemporary situations such as recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic: Samantha Boardman's ***Everyday Vitality: Turning Stress into Strength*** (New York: Penguin, 2022).

Academic Stigmatization of Mental Health Issues

See the heartfelt presidential address by Prof. Ed Russell to the American Society for Environmental History in 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nxU3L2lgww>. You can also read the content of the address: Edmund Russell, "**Presidential Address: A Coevolutionary History of COVID-19: Culture, Biology, and Mental Health,**" *Environmental History* 27, no. 1 (January 2022): 4-29.

Understanding Faculty Burnout

The book ***Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*** by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski (New York: Ballantine Books, 2019) includes a discussion of the difference between stressors and our experience of stress in our bodies, with suggestions about how to address both. The book's website includes free printable reading and discussion guides, including a guide aimed specifically at teachers.

Another book, ***The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives*** by Jonathan Malesic (Oakland: UC Press, 2022) is part memoir and part scholarly consideration of burnout. The author is a former faculty member, who relates and places his personal experience of burnout in the context of burnout as a wider phenomenon. This book proposes systemic solutions to burnout culture, but the personal account of this faculty member's burnout experiences may also help you to feel less alone in yours.

We also include in our recommendations a book that is unpublished at the time of our writing, ***Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal*** by Rebecca Pope-Ruark (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2022). This book is also part memoir and part scholarly consideration of burnout in academia, with individual exercises to combat burnout. The author also describes four pillars of faculty burnout resilience: purpose, compassion, connection, and balance.

Section 2: Anti-Burnout Practices for Individuals

There are a number of evidence-based practices to address burnout. Most of the available evidence comes from the literature on stress-reduction, rather than burnout in particular, and does not focus specifically on academic faculty. There is some consistency in the recommendations for individuals, which include getting adequate sleep, participating in regular exercise, and engaging in mindfulness practices (such as meditation and journaling). For concise information about these practices (with links to supporting evidence), see [this article](#) on evidence-based approaches to defeating burnout. See also these select primary and secondary scholarly sources:

Maslach & Leiter (2016) Understanding the burnout experience: recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry* 15(2): 103-111.

Patel et al. (2019) A review on strategies to manage physician burnout. *Cureus* 11(6): e4805.

Valosek et al. (2021) Meditation effective in reducing teacher burnout and improving resilience: a randomized controlled study. *Front Educ* 6: 627923.

How can we incorporate these recommendations into our daily lives, as faculty? It's all well and good to recommend these individual practices, but it can be difficult to figure out where to begin – particularly if you're feeling burned out! Here, we share some of our own experiences implementing these practices. We hope you find some of these personal anecdotes useful, as you consider how to cope with burnout now – and how to lessen your experience of burnout in the future.

Special Note: If you're looking for resources to help your students (who may also be struggling), we suggest checking out this online curated collection of resources about trauma-informed pedagogy: <https://library.sewanee.edu/c.php?g=1256914&p=9209808>. This resource was generated by another working group from the Associated Colleges of the South in the summer of 2022. It includes a variety of readings and reflections, which you may find helpful.

Outside of the Workplace

Join a Social Group for Fun: I belong to a social dance group. It includes people from all walks of life; we rarely talk about work. Most people in that setting do not identify me with my profession. This activity requires practice and connection with a partner, and is an experience of hugs, laughter, and moving your body to music. **How is this activity anti-burnout?** Social dancing gets me out of my head and into my body whilst simultaneously creating an entirely different identity. In that space, I'm not a college professor; I'm a "westie," someone who enjoys west coast swing.

Establish a Morning Routine: I start my day with some reading or journaling (for pleasure, not for work!), and I try to avoid reading email until my work day begins. I also try to carve out some time each morning to be outdoors, either taking a walk or reading on my balcony. **How is this activity anti-burnout?** Starting my day quietly, with a consistent routine, helps me to stay calmer throughout my day. Even a few minutes of a calm activity makes a difference in my mood.

Exercise & Meditation: I've taken up a number of mindfulness practices to manage stress. I was never on a varsity sports team, and I'm a skinny 56-year-old intellectual. Now, I take fitness classes and play tennis. I also take backpacking trips in remote wilderness areas. Finally, I try to spend 15-30 minutes meditating every day. **How is this activity anti-burnout?** Exercising helps a lot to "take me out of my head." Taking fitness classes also means that I spend time with people who are not professors. They help to provide some perspective.

Schedule Time for Your Family: I have two children and live in a rural area, so strategies I formerly used to combat burnout are not necessarily available to me in my current life. We make an effort as a family to escape the hamster wheel of work and school by taking time every Sunday to go for a hike. Sometimes it's long, sometimes short, sometimes near, sometimes far. It's a fun way to learn about the surrounding area, watch the seasons change, and get some exercise. **How is this activity anti-burnout?** Doing the same thing weekly removes the decision making (and sibling arguments!) from family time, gets us all into the fresh air, and takes us away from work, school, and screen time. Bonus: hiking trails often are without cell service, so there's even less distraction.

Inside of the Workplace

Wellness Days: During the spring of 2021, our institution eliminated Spring Break and introduced wellness days. Five wellness days were spread out over the semester, and classes did not meet. No one was expected to be present or submit work. We were on break. I continued using wellness days, on my own, last year. I set aside some days with no classes for my own breaks from doing work.

Outdoor Visiting Hours: During the pandemic, I started holding open visiting hours outdoors, in a shaded seating area just outside of our building. Sitting outside helped me feel safer, and provided some unexpected anti-burnout benefits. Spending time outdoors mid-day helped me feel more relaxed. I also had an easier time connecting with more students, who would just drop by on their way out of the building. And I decided to spend this time reading books about pedagogy (which really inspires me), whenever students weren't visiting. This helped me set aside weekly time to re-connect to the meaning in my work.

Writing Time: During the first half of the semester, I am almost always able to make time for my own writing. Most days, I can find about 30-60 minutes to make a little progress. Even if it's just housekeeping, like ordering materials through interlibrary loan or checking citations, this kind of activity usually puts me in a state of "flow," even briefly.

Form a Supportive Inter-Campus Group: During the pandemic I formed a writing group with friends from my graduate school and field work days. Based on strategies from [The Writing Workshop](#), we meet over Zoom every other week and share either a chapter, article, outline, or other piece of writing; sometimes it's 40+ pages of a third revision, other times it's a single page first draft outline of a grant narrative. We are committed to reading and providing helpful, non-judgmental feedback, but we also know that once a month we each have the opportunity to receive feedback. The once per month reading is also a great motivator. Our group of four are in a similar field, but on different campuses and departments. It's been inspiring to share successes and failures and to have a supportive group of friends.

What NOT to Do: There are also things not to do at work. For example, in 2016, I started to check news and social media quite often. It was a distracting waste of time. Around 2018, I stopped looking. Bad things have still happened, but it still feels better to focus on my teaching, writing, and service while I'm at work.

Section 3: Anti-Burnout Practices for Faculty Groups

As we mentioned at the beginning of the handbook, burnout often results from disconnection – from ourselves, from the meaning in our work, and from each other. Faculty groups can be a solution, by providing an opportunity to form a community around meaningful topics or goals. However, the way that we form and facilitate group meetings will impact whether or not the group provides a refuge from burnout – or makes it worse. Based on our working group conversations, we provide here some general principles for forming and facilitating faculty groups.

Forming Anti-Burnout Groups

Groups should be formed with a clear focus, purpose, or goal. Ideally, this goal should permit all group members to leave each meeting feeling more connected to the group community, more engaged with the meaning in their work, or more effective in that work. For example, you might form a group focused on sharing faculty scholarship. Rather than focusing exclusively on final achievements (like publishing a finished manuscript), focus on incremental progress and inspiration. Did you learn something new? Are you planning or piloting new projects? This approach shifts the focus to the meaning of the work, and away from the final product. So, rather than focusing on whether or not you've checked a box towards tenure or promotion, you are focused on what interests and inspires you about your scholarship.

Groups should be genuinely voluntary, and not linked to evaluation. Groups should stem from the genuine interests and engagement of the members. While limited institutional support may be desirable (for example, a small budget to provide food and drinks), an anti-burnout group should not be institutionally tracked or mandated. If group members feel that they must attend, for reasons that are not intrinsically meaningful to them, then the group may actually worsen burnout.

Groups should be as inclusive as possible. Because burnout is often associated with feelings of isolation, anti-burnout groups are all about connection. So, it's important to consider how to be as inclusive as possible, while still accomplishing the goal of the group. For example, providing alcohol at group events can be fun for some, but may exclude non-drinkers and those with a history of substance abuse. Another example: holding group meetings in the evening avoids conflicts with teaching, but may exclude those with caregiving responsibilities. Be mindful of how small decisions may have big impacts on group members (who may already be feeling burned out and disconnected from others).

Choose a consistent time and location, when possible. Choose a regular meeting time once, at the beginning of the semester, and try to stick with it. Weekly emails to schedule the next meeting, while well-intentioned, may contribute to group members' burnout – while a regular meeting time allows everyone to manage their time in advance. Also, be mindful of the location that you choose for your meetings. Meeting in a new place (outdoor spaces or informal meeting spaces, as opposed to classrooms) may help group members to adopt a more positive mindset.

Facilitating Anti-Burnout Group Meetings

Group leaders need to model compassion and inclusivity, and recognize the need for flexibility in running meetings. When planning meeting times and spaces, leaders should consider the potential needs of the group members. The inclusive practice of providing an up-front option to inform the organizer of necessary accommodations such as accessible spaces or nursing breaks is a simple anti-burnout principle. Similarly, be sure to set expectations and ground rules for participation in advance of group sign up. For example, if weekly participation and reading is required, include this in the group announcement. During meetings, make sure that all members are respectful and allow for group members to provide feedback if needed. Microaggressions can quickly lead to burnout. Finally, make sure to stay on schedule. Respecting everyone's time will allow for a feeling of productivity, rather than draining group members.

Harvard University provides a quick guide to [running inclusive meetings](#), and this brief [Forbes article](#) provides further guidance. The [University of Kansas "tool box"](#) for community engagement is a comprehensive, step-by-step guide to organizing productive, inclusive, and respectful community groups. Our teaching skills can also be modified as necessary for groups dedicated to faculty and staff. You can find concise advice about running group discussions through this [Brown University resource](#). Read about the experience of facilitating a faculty writing group through the [AAUP](#) and [Faculty Focus](#). Holding [short and focused](#) check-in meetings with department colleagues can also provide faculty and staff the time to re-engage in their professional work and creativity.

Section 4: The Role of Institutional Support

The reasons for faculty burnout seem clear to us. During the past few years, faculty have been expected to teach well in the midst of unprecedented challenges. Workloads increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, when online and hybrid teaching took the place of in-person teaching. The pandemic also produced a mental-health crisis that had a major impact on faculty and students. As if that were not bad enough, campuses were at the center of difficult discussions about race, gender, and the environment. Political polarization made it difficult to discuss important issues, not only among students, but also among friends and family members. Professors who once felt respected by society instead found themselves in the political crosshairs. The turmoil of the past few years brought instability to campuses that were already rocked by demographic change, declining enrollments, and demands for reform.

As fears of Covid-19 seem to be abating, faculty members and campus leaders may wish to "return to normal." This is an understandable sentiment, but in the past few years many lessons have been learned about our students and ourselves. Members of campus communities have become more sensitive to gender and racial issues, while there have also been more open conversations about our mental states. We have learned to identify burnout and some of the ways it may be addressed. These vary on a case-by-case, individual-by-individual basis.

This booklet introduces some of the ways in which faculty may take better care of themselves. How may institutions take better care of faculty? The first step is for college leaders to acknowledge the stresses of the past few years. The second step is to support faculty efforts at recovery. Many faculty members derive a great sense of accomplishment from their scholarship and from their creative production. This is the time for colleges to show that they are committed to professional development by increasing funding and encouraging professors to pursue their passions. It is also a time for colleges to support efforts by professors to reduce stress. It is not expected for colleges to offer extensive programming. Instead, institutions may offer meeting spaces and small budgets for faculty-led groups that are aimed at improving the quality of professional life on campus. Faculty leadership of new groups will be an essential part of recovery.