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Anti-burnout Puzzle for Academics – guide for university teachers

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Table of content

Instead of an introduction

What is this guide about? This guide addresses the issue of professional burnout in the academic environment. It explores a phenomenon that, according to research findings, remains a taboo at universities, both among teachers and university authorities. While in casual hallway conversations or between classes we may half-jokingly say, “I’ve had enough, I can’t do this anymore, I feel burned out,” in reality no one openly admits to experiencing burnout. Why? Because within university, the stereotype still prevails that acknowledging burnout is a sign of weakness.

The term itself is widely used, sometimes even by young people who have not yet had the chance to truly “ignite” in their profession. But what does burnout really mean? Who can it affect? Does it genuinely apply to academics? What are its potential consequences? And most importantly. can we prevent it?

Scientific research shows that burnout is a universal phenomenon, appearing across a wide spectrum of professions. At its core lies a disruption in the balance between the individual and their work environment. It tends to occur most often in fields where work involves responsibility for others’ health (e.g., medical services) or development (education at all levels).

The Polish–Cypriot–Slovak project *Anti-burnout Puzzle for Academics* seeks to demystify the problem of burnout in higher education. Its main goal is to improve the psychophysical wellbeing of university teachers by developing effective tools for preventing burnout in this group. Research confirms that the dual nature of academic work — combining both teaching and research — makes academics particularly vulnerable to burnout. We aim to address this by changing perspectives: encouraging open discussion about burnout and prevention strategies within university, while also building resilience by fostering personal growth.

What should we know about burnout?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), professional burnout is a set of symptoms resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is not classified as a medical condition, but rather as a factor affecting health and professional functioning. Burnout primarily manifests as a sense of exhaustion and lack of energy, loss of engagement, and increasing distance from duties and colleagues. It is often accompanied by the feeling that one's efforts have lost meaning and fail to produce significant results. In June 2019, WHO officially recognized burnout as a medical diagnosis in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), and since 2022, it can serve as a basis for sick leave.

The literature offers numerous studies on the diagnosis of burnout and its early warning signs. Research indicates that burnout most often affects employees in professions based on supportive relationships with patients, clients, or care recipients. Contemporary concepts define burnout as a "disturbed professional relationship" between the individual and their work, environment, and demands. The spectrum of burnout symptoms also includes disappointment with work, expressed as lack of professional satisfaction, a sense of unfulfilled potential, and unmet expectations. Psychologists emphasize that it primarily affects individuals who are highly engaged, task-oriented, and ambitious. Burnout also occurs when anticipated successes and recognition are replaced by failure and frustration, generating a sense of meaninglessness in one's work.

Burnout does not appear suddenly but develops gradually. It begins with fatigue and decreased motivation, progressing to a more pronounced sense of overload and energy loss. A person experiencing burnout starts to disengage, increasingly struggles to find meaning in their actions, and feels growing distance from their responsibilities and from others.

A characteristic feature of burnout is the simultaneous feeling of exhaustion and reduced effectiveness — work that was once satisfying becomes a source of frustration and helplessness. However, burnout is not limited to professional life; it also affects psychological and physical wellbeing, lowers stress resilience, disrupts social relationships, and may lead to more serious health problems. For these reasons, it is considered a significant challenge for both individuals and organizations. Unfortunately, professional burnout often remains a taboo topic, and formally admitting to experiencing it is frequently perceived as a sign of weakness

rather than as a sign of organizational maturity and awareness of potential consequences for oneself and the institution.

The most frequently cited definition in the literature is that of Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson (1981). According to this perspective, burnout is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, occurring among people who work with others in professional settings.

- Emotional exhaustion refers to a feeling of overload and a lack of energy to continue working.
- Depersonalization involves emotional distance toward colleagues, clients, or service recipients, often taking the form of cynicism or indifference.
- Reduced personal accomplishment is associated with a sense of ineffectiveness and a lack of satisfaction with one's work.

This definition is considered classic and still dominates research and scholarly publications, although contemporary perspectives increasingly emphasize the role of organizational and social factors.

Burnout is fostered by a combination of factors related both to the individual and to the work environment. Among the most important are work overload, having too many tasks relative to available time and energy, and lack of control, meaning the feeling of having little influence over working conditions or decisions. Insufficient social support, the absence of understanding, recognition, or cooperation from supervisors and colleagues also strongly contributes to burnout.

Other risk factors include organizational injustice (e.g., lack of transparency in evaluations, promotions, or task assignments), value conflict (situations in which institutional expectations clash with personal beliefs or work ethics), and inadequate rewards. The feeling that effort and contributions are not reflected in recognition, job security, or compensation. Finally, lack of work-life balance plays a crucial role, leading to chronic fatigue and reduced capacity for recovery.

When considering burnout and occupational stress, it is important to pay special attention to their consequences for both the individual and the organization. Burnout has a significant impact on a person's psychological and physical wellbeing. On an emotional level, it manifests

as chronic fatigue, decreased motivation, feelings of helplessness, and frustration. It can lead to lowered self-esteem, a sense of meaninglessness, as well as symptoms of depression and anxiety. Emotional distance toward others is also characteristic, including loss of empathy, cynicism, or withdrawal from professional and personal relationships.

Over time, physical health effects may also emerge: sleep problems, weakened immunity, and stress-related somatic complaints such as headaches, muscle tension, or cardiovascular and gastrointestinal issues. Burnout can create difficulties in maintaining family and social relationships, and it limits the ability to recover and enjoy life outside of work. As a result, the individual experiences not only a decline in professional quality of life but also an overall reduction in functional wellbeing.

Burnout is not solely an individual problem, it is also a serious challenge for entire organizations. Reduced employee engagement leads to lower quality of work, decreased innovation, and weakened relationships with colleagues or clients. In practice, this translates into more frequent errors, lower efficiency, and poorer outcomes for teams as a whole.

University teachers and the risk of burnout

The work of a university teacher is multidimensional, combining teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. In addition to conducting classes and working with students, key aspects include research activities such as managing projects, publishing, and participating in conferences. On top of this come formal and bureaucratic requirements related to the functioning of the institution. This model of work demands a high degree of flexibility, the ability to balance multiple roles, and strong self-discipline. In the background, there is constant pressure related to performance evaluations, securing grants, building an academic portfolio, and meeting the growing expectations of both the institution and students.

The roles of university teachers can be difficult to reconcile due to the different sets of skills required for their effective execution. Low salaries, heavy teaching loads, job insecurity, rigid criteria for evaluation and career progression, and lack of institutional support are major stressors for this professional group. The pandemic brought isolation, remote teaching, and reduced social contact, weakening peer support. Students' attitudes have also changed. Generation Z exhibits new expectations, entitlement, and demands for immediate responses, increasing teachers' workload.

The development of artificial intelligence and new teaching technologies, while offering opportunities for innovation, adds additional pressure — the need to adapt, continuously update knowledge, and respond to rapidly changing ethical standards. The blurring of traditional academic ethical principles and difficulties in setting boundaries between work and private life further exacerbate feelings of exhaustion, detachment from responsibilities, and reduced professional effectiveness — core dimensions of burnout.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in administrative burdens. Teachers must devote substantial time to reporting, managing research project accounts, and preparing documentation for business trips. Paradoxically, despite well-developed administrative structures at universities, many of these tasks are directly shifted onto the academics themselves. This phenomenon leads to growing frustration and distraction. Instead of focusing on creative work, conducting research, teaching students, or developing their own skills, academics are forced to handle formalities that often have little direct impact on the quality of teaching or research. The feeling of "bureaucratic overload" is compounded by other challenges in the academic environment, such as publication pressure, the necessity to secure

grants, and increasing student demands. Consequently, the role of the university teacher increasingly drifts away from its original purpose, which in turn reduces job satisfaction and heightens vulnerability to professional burnout.

The complexity and multidimensionality of tasks place university teachers among groups particularly susceptible to burnout. Risk factors include excessive workload, lack of work-life balance, chronic time shortages, and a perceived limited influence over institutional conditions. Additionally, some staff experience isolation, insufficient support, or inadequate recognition for their efforts.

Professional burnout in the academic environment has multifaceted consequences for both teachers and institutions. On the individual level, it is associated with decreased motivation and engagement, lower quality of teaching, and reduced research activity. Teachers may experience frustration, feelings of ineffectiveness, social isolation, and emotional distance from students and colleagues. Prolonged burnout increases the risk of health problems, including chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, psychosomatic complaints, reduced stress resilience, and depressive symptoms.

At the institutional level, the consequences of burnout are reflected in declining teaching quality, reduced team efficiency, and decreased innovation and research activity. Absenteeism and staff turnover increase, generating additional costs for recruitment and onboarding of new employees. Over time, burnout can also affect the organizational culture of the university, leading to lower prestige, decreased student satisfaction, and challenges in attracting and retaining talented staff.

However, at universities, professional burnout often remains a taboo topic, even though it affects many employees. One reason is the prevailing culture of success and perfectionism in university, where scientific achievements, publications, grants, and prestige are highly valued. In this context, admitting to fatigue, frustration, or decreased motivation is often perceived as a weakness, discouraging open conversations about difficulties. Stigma and fear of professional consequences also play a role; staff worry that acknowledging challenges may affect their reputation, promotion opportunities, or standing within the academic community. Moreover, limited awareness of burnout means it is often regarded as a natural part of intense academic work, which reinforces silence around the issue and hinders its recognition.

The nature of academic work additionally encourages individualism and pressure to be self-reliant. University teachers are accustomed to making decisions and carrying out tasks largely independently, and success is often measured by individual achievements. Expressing difficulties or a need for support may be interpreted as a lack of competence, intensifying feelings of isolation. The problem is compounded by the lack of systemic support mechanisms. Few universities offer routine tools for diagnosing burnout or provide access to mentoring and psychological assistance.

Ways to prevent burnout

Effective burnout prevention requires university teachers to consciously maintain a balance between demanding responsibilities and their own wellbeing. Setting boundaries, both temporal and emotional, is crucial. In practice, this means limiting work outside designated hours, avoiding constant availability for students or colleagues, and allowing oneself breaks without guilt. Recognizing that rest is an integral part of intellectual work can be the first step toward preventing overload.

Equally important is developing individual stress-management strategies. Regular physical activity, relaxation techniques (e.g., mindfulness, meditation, breathing exercises), and hobbies unrelated to university support recovery and energy restoration. Building and maintaining support networks, discussions with professional peers as well as friends outside academia, helps gain perspective on daily challenges. University teachers can also benefit from mentoring or supervision, which provide space for reflection on their professional role and help counter feelings of isolation.

Preventing burnout also involves working on internal attitudes. Instead of striving for perfectionism and constant productivity, it is valuable to cultivate flexibility and acceptance of one's own limitations. Reminding oneself of the values that initially inspired an academic career, curiosity, passion for knowledge, and the desire to share expertise, helps sustain a sense of purpose despite structural challenges. Ultimately, lecturers who prioritize mental wellbeing not only protect themselves from burnout but also become more authentic and inspiring in their interactions with students.

In burnout prevention, the level of individual actions is particularly important. These are various initiatives that a person can undertake to reduce or minimize the effects of experienced professional burnout. A good starting point is the introduction of regular restorative rituals, such as planned work breaks, short walks between classes, or breathing exercises that quickly lower tension. Conscious time management is also helpful, for example, setting fixed blocks for conceptual work, lesson preparation, or research, while limiting excessive meetings and administrative tasks. Many lecturers follow the principle of "one major task per day" instead of trying to accomplish everything at once.

Another important practice is digital hygiene. This includes setting specific hours to respond to student emails and avoiding checking messages late in the evening. This helps create a clearer boundary between professional and personal life. Similarly, skillful use of work organization tools can reduce chaos and the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Equally essential are actions that build mental resilience. Regular physical activity, spending time in nature, hobbies unrelated to academia, or mindfulness practice help restore balance. Supportive peer groups or mentoring provide spaces to share experiences and challenges, rather than remaining isolated. Finally, a valuable preventive strategy is consciously developing teaching and research competencies. Feeling up to date with changes, for example in the areas of artificial intelligence or working with Generation Z, can enhance a sense of agency and professional security.

What we offer in the Anti-burnout Puzzle for Academics project?

The *Anti-burnout Puzzle for Academics* project was created with university teachers in mind, who are increasingly experiencing overload, chronic stress, and professional burnout. Our goal is not only to counteract these phenomena but above all to build lasting mental resilience and well-being in the academic environment.

Why this project?

Professional burnout among university teachers is a topic that still remains in the shadows. Research conducted by the project team has shown that in academic circles, admitting to symptoms of burnout is often perceived as a sign of weakness. We want to change that. The project aims to break the taboo and create space for open dialogue about the challenges faced by university staff.

Our approach is based on two main pillars:

1. Changing perspective – university teachers and authorities

   We want to look at burnout from a new angle – not as an individual failure, but as a systemic challenge. This requires engaging university authorities and institutional support, but not only that. Equally important are the actions taken by university teachers themselves to prevent their own burnout. Therefore, the project includes:

   - Suggested actions for university teachers
   - A guide for university authorities on burnout and creating a work environment that supports employee well-being.

2. Mental resilience – personal development and acceptance

   Our proposals focus on building mental resilience through:

   - Personal development outside of work, for example through hobbies
   - Conscious focus on what we can realistically change, and cultivating a balanced and calm attitude toward things beyond our control
   - Strengthening the sense of agency and control over one's life, including maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

   To achieve this, we draw on elements of Stoic philosophy – in a modern, practical interpretation. We show that satisfaction and inner balance can be achieved through

intentional actions, regardless of external circumstances. We offer a variety of burnout prevention techniques based on current research and proven stress management practices. We introduce well-being management approaches inspired by “green” trends – such as forest bathing, contact with nature, and using the natural environment as a source of regeneration.

Training offer for university teachers

The project includes two complementary forms of support for university teachers: online materials and in-person workshops. Both formats aim to strengthen mental resilience, support personal development, and prevent burnout.

Online training – short lessons

Online training is available in the form of presentations and short narrated videos. It covers three thematic areas: *Stoic attitudes, Professional burnout, Building psychophysical resilience and changing perspective*. Each area includes 7 lessons lasting 2–3 minutes, allowing flexible access at any time.

Area 1: Stoic attitudes

This module introduces participants to Stoic philosophy in a practical way. You’ll learn how to live in harmony with the world, focus on what is within your control, and develop yourself through reflection and self-improvement. Stoicism helps build inner balance and stress resilience.

Area 2: Professional burnout

This area helps participants understand the mechanisms, symptoms, and consequences of burnout. You’ll learn how to recognize signs in yourself and others, and discover early intervention and prevention strategies. The module raises awareness and encourages discussion about difficult emotions.

Area 3: Building psychophysical resilience and changing perspective

This module focuses on diagnosing your own resilience, identifying preferences, and choosing activities that align with your individual needs. Participants explore the importance of hobbies, contact with nature, physical activity, and social engagement as ways to regenerate and restore balance.

In-person workshops – practice, reflection, development

Workshops are held as live sessions and include 10 independent topics combining knowledge with practical exercises. Each workshop aims to deepen understanding and help participants find personal solutions.

1. Stoicism and work life

   Understanding Stoic principles in the context of academic work. Learn how philosophy can support daily decisions, professional relationships, and coping with pressure and uncertainty.

2. Practice of stoicism (cases)

   Workshop based on analysing real-life and professional situations. Participants practice applying Stoic attitudes to problem-solving and building mental resilience.

3. Self-diagnosis of OB

   Learn tools to identify your own symptoms of burnout, sources of overload, and ways to counteract them. The workshop supports self-awareness and prevention.

4. Diagnosis in others (colleagues from work)

   How to notice warning signs in co-workers, respond with empathy, and support them during difficult times? The workshop develops social skills and fosters a culture of support.

5. Work-life balance and psychological capital – concept and role in the prevention of occupational burnout

   Explore the concept of work-life balance and psychological capital (hope, optimism, resilience, self-efficacy) as resources that protect against burnout.

6. Searching for activities out of work (hobbies, volunteering, …)

   Inspiration for discovering passions and activities that bring joy and regeneration. The workshop encourages conscious and active planning of leisure time as a preventive measure.

7. Forest bathing

   Experience nature as a method of stress reduction and energy recovery. Learn mindfulness techniques in natural surroundings and their impact on well-being.

8. Sport bridge as brain training and an antidote to stress

   Discover how sport bridge supports concentration, logical thinking, and relaxation. Learn the rules of the game and its potential as an intellectual activity.

9. Board games

   Fun and integration as a way to relieve tension, build relationships, and foster creativity. The workshop shows how games can support mental regeneration.

10. CLOSER TO YOURSELF – The wisdom of the body in preventing occupational burnout

    Workshop based on bodywork, mindfulness, and listening to bodily signals. Learn how working with the body can support mental resilience and emotional balance.

The entire offer is designed with the needs of university teachers in mind. It combines knowledge with practice, philosophy with psychology, reflection with action. It presents ideas that can be developed independently and tailored to individual preferences and possibilities.

Appendix. Self-assessment of professional burnout – methods and tools

Below are three examples of publicly available and free tools that allow individuals to assess their level of professional burnout. The selected tools have diagnostic value and/or are used in scientific research.

Self-assessment tools do not replace a professional diagnosis but can serve as a useful tool for reflection and a starting point for consciously taking care of one's mental health in the workplace.

1. Overview of self-assessment tools for burnout

Language	Tool name	Format	Link to test / Download	Notes
English	Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)	PDF	https://different.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Maslach-Burnout-Inventory-MBI.pdf	Classic MBI tool
Polish	MBI Questionnaire (Scribd)	PDF	https://www.scribd.com/document/875462258/Kwestionariusz-Do-Oceny-Wypalenia-Zawodowego	Polish version of MBI
Slovak	MBI – Slovak adaptation	PDF	https://is.muni.cz/th/dl6xh/DP_Chropenova.pdf	Slovak language adaptation
Greek	MBI adaptation – dissertations	PDF	https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/27113	Academic research versions
Multilingual	BAT-PL (Burnout Assessment Tool)	PDF	https://burnoutassessmenttool.be/start_eng/	Scientifically validated BAT
English	Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI)	Fillable PDF	https://www.care-patron.com/files/oldenburg-burnout-inventory.pdf	16 questions, two subscales: exhaustion and disengagement

2. Instructions for Downloading and Using the Tools

Most tools are available as PDF files that can be downloaded by clicking the provided link.

For online tests, users are redirected to a website where they can begin the test immediately.

Some tests require manual scoring, while others provide automatic results.

3. Detailed descriptions of the tools

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The MBI is a classic, scientifically validated questionnaire consisting of 22 items measuring three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

Psychometrics: Widely used in clinical and research settings. High reliability and validity. Requires a license for professional use.

Online version: No official free online version

PDF version with answer key: https://different.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Maslach-Burnout-Inventory-MBI.pdf

Language versions in PL, SLO, GR are available but not easily accessible online.

BAT / BAT-PL (Burnout Assessment Tool)

A newer tool assessing four dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive load, and emotional load. Available in PDF and online formats.

Psychometrics: Validated in many countries, including Poland. Suitable for scientific research. Versions available for employed/unemployed individuals and students. Includes both scientific and practitioner-friendly manuals.

Online version: No online questionnaire version

PDF version: https://burnoutassessmenttool.be/start_eng/
Available in multiple languages, including project languages (ENG, PL, SLO, GR).

Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI)

The OLBI consists of 16 statements – 8 for exhaustion and 8 for disengagement. Includes both positively and negatively worded items. Flexible and widely used.

Psychometrics: Well-researched with good reliability. Suitable for research and partially for diagnostic purposes.

Online version without interpretation: https://psycho-tests.com/test/oldenburg-burnout-inventory

Online version with interpretation and literature: https://www.mdapp.co/oldenburg-burnout-inventory-olbi-calculator-606/

Active PDF version with answer key and editable fields: https://www.carepatron.com/files/oldenburg-burnout-inventory.pdf

Local adaptations available, e.g. PL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326626446_Polska_adaptacja_kwestionariusza_do_pomiaru_wypalenia_zawodowego_OLBI_The_Oldenburg_Burnout_Inventory

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