



Grobler et al 2003, 38

Music Teacher Burnout: How Do We Cope With It?

*Bertha le Roux and
Caroline van Niekerk*

Abstract

Music teachers need to maintain positive feelings about themselves, their jobs, and their students, in order to face the demands of current fast-paced daily challenges, especially in the South African situation. Through constant awareness of the burnout syndrome and the development of intervention strategies based on what is learned from such awareness, meaningful solutions can be found to successful coping. Literature offers considerable assistance in this regard, both by discussing some of the sources of stress affecting music teachers, and suggesting ways of alleviating or coping with stress and burnout.

Significant contributors to burnout include lack of recognition by administration, unclear goals, too much work and insufficient resources, emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. When experiencing burnout, the article suggests positive steps such as seeing a doctor; getting sufficient sleep; setting realistic goals; learning effective time management; arming oneself with self-knowledge; putting yourself first; creating times of emotional nurturing; connecting with a meaningful cause or community group; practising healthy

communication; taking daily exercise; keeping a teaching journal; cutting back on working hours and, lastly, job hunting.

Keywords

Burnout; stress; music teachers; giving professions; coping.

Introduction

Your day began at 6h30 a.m. with an early morning rehearsal/piano lesson or choir practice, and now it is 11h00 p.m. You are just getting home from school or studio and yet another concert. Today was just one in a series of similar workdays that go with the school year. Early practices, late teaching before concerts, exams or festivals... parent/teacher telephone calls morning and night are all part of your life as a music teacher. In addition, there is lesson preparation and planning and all of the other day-to-day activities needed to keep your music program vibrant and growing. You have already put in numerous seven-day workweeks and it is only mid-year. You are drained beyond belief, tense, and irritable. Your back and neck muscles feel like steel cables, your stomach churns, and you toss and turn at night even though you are exhausted. You are spending more and more time at work, but feel as if you are falling further and further behind. You find yourself avoiding students, parents, friends, and family and withdrawing from normal routines. Mentally you are exhausted, and physically you seem to be susceptible to every virus around. No matter how much you do, you do not seem to be appreciated. ... you cannot seem to get the job done, and what is worse, you do not even care if it gets done anymore. Teaching no longer holds the attraction it did for you when you began your career (Hamann & Gordon 2000, 34).

The above scenario is only one description of the many stressors that music teachers face in current daily work and living. It was not written with specific reference to the South African situation, and yet the situation in this country is further exacerbated by the amount and degree of societal change with which people have had to come to terms in the last decade plus. This change includes many facets of music teaching, as the profession has been affected by the sweeping changes in society as a whole.

Iwanicki (1983, 27) noted in the 1980s already that from the mid-1970s, until that point, resources for music education in America had been reduced substantially

due to changing economic conditions and the public's growing dissatisfaction with the quality of its schools. Then already legislators were determining much of what was being taught in schools. Iwanicki's points, made in an article devoted to both understanding and alleviating teacher burnout, resonate clearly with the South African situation.

The private music teacher has a 'freer' choice in comparison to those caught up in a structured, salaried system and hierarchy, in regard to being able to decide which aspects of music teaching he/she wants to focus on or specialize in. However, this choice is also limited, since private music teaching is often of necessity structured around the needs and requests of the paying client.

Since changing conditions worldwide have made music teaching ever more stressful, and especially in comparison to former generations of a genteel education for largely young ladies of a certain societal level, some teachers have simply left the profession. Of those remaining, it is not surprising that some are having difficulty coping with stress and are experiencing symptoms of teacher burnout. Therefore it is essential that modern music teachers know what burnout is, and become able to develop a personal system for resisting or reducing its effects. Through such efforts and practice, teacher effectiveness can continue for many years.

The purpose of this article is to:

- provide current perspectives on music teacher stress and burnout
- discuss some of the sources of stress affecting music teachers, and
- suggest strategies for alleviating or coping with stress and burnout.

Perspectives on music teacher stress and burnout

Christina Maslach (1982:184), a noted researcher and author in the field of burnout, found that individuals in social work, police work or teaching are

especially prone to stress and burnout since they give of themselves and tend to receive little in return (including financially!). Burnout is thus considerably more than one of several “potential job related variables”, as indicated in the title of Hamann et al’s 1987 article in *Psychology of Music*. Researchers have found that individuals most frequently affected by burnout are those who are the most productive, dedicated, and committed in their fields; they are usually highly motivated and idealistic [hence the title of the book, by Freudenberger & Richelson (1980, 214), in which this information is conveyed: *Burn-out: The High Cost of High Achievement*]. Since most music teachers are arguably productive, dedicated, motivated and idealistic in their teaching perspective (witness the scenario described at the beginning of this article), stress is a reality which can be beneficial or harmful, depending on how the teacher responds. For example, if the effort put in by the music teacher in a music lesson, to meet the student needs, leads to increased teacher growth and satisfaction, the effects of stress are beneficial. If such efforts result in emotional and physical illness, the effects of stress are harmful (Iwanicki 1983, 27).

Pembrook & Fredrickson (2000-2001, 149) describe music teaching as a profession that offers many rewards while simultaneously demanding tremendous commitment. Because it is such a giving profession, music teachers may experience even higher burnout levels than the teaching profession in general. Even if music teachers do not leave the profession, burnout still can cause irritability, decreased productivity, and physical health problems, and these are better dealt with pro-actively than reactively.

Defining burnout

Burnout is often described as a syndrome (i.e., according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, “concurrent symptoms ... characteristic combination of ... behaviour”), if not an occupational hazard (cf. the title of Hamann & Gordon’s 2000 article in the *Music Educators Journal*) that is:

- an internal psychological experience involving feelings, attitudes, motives, and expectations
- a negative individual experience that involves distress, discomfort, dysfunction, and negative consequences, and
- associated with emotional and physical exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. It can be described as stress out of control. While some stress is essential to life, prolonged and excessive stress, left unchecked, eventually leads to burnout (Hamann 1990, 31).

What are the signs and symptoms of burnout?

Since burnout is not a sudden, overnight occurrence (cf. its frequent description as a syndrome, as indicated above), it is important to recognize its early signs and warnings and to act before the problem becomes severe – that is, a high-level as opposed to a low-level manifestation of burnout. A variety of factors have been widely identified as comprising the stress which music teachers face. These factors include: interpersonal demands, diversity of tasks required, lack of professional recognition, discipline problems in the music classroom, workload and time pressure, and the amount of paperwork required and lack of resources provided (Mearns & Cain 2003, 71-72).

Hamann & Gordon (2000, 35) refer to the stages of burnout, which they enumerate as four stages, as a cycle. The so-called “Honeymoon” stage is the first level where loss of energy, enthusiasm and job satisfaction occurs. Following is the “Fuel Shortage” stage where inefficiency at work, fatigue and sleepless nights are common experiences. Without intervention, this stage moves over to the “Chronic Symptoms” stage where ongoing exhaustion, physical illness, anger, and depression set in. Finally, the “Hitting the Wall” stage is characterized by professional incompetence, impairment, and by physical and psychological dysfunction. Clearly this last stage represents the highest level of

burnout manifestation, but the second, “Fuel Shortage”, stage is already more than a mere low-level manifestation.

Although it is not set out cyclically, the figure to follow is a graphic illustration, explaining how burnout develops.

Figure 1: **Burnout development** (Jordaan & Jordaan 1998, 562)

The above figure illustrates how burnout develops. The vertical line on the very left indicates personal performance, shown in a percentage level (imagine 0% functioning at the bottom and 100% functioning at the top). The very bottom horizontal line indicates the intensity of the stressor (which can be, for example, and typically, a death, a divorce, a house move, constant pressure at work, constant extra music lessons, choir or band practices, resulting in unrealistic working hours and ongoing emotional or relationship problems). The ending of this line is infinite.

Living a balanced lifestyle will ensure that functioning will be at the most functional level (top horizontal line). At times, and for various reasons, functioning will be for short periods of time either on the underloading or overloading side of the two middle vertical lines. This is perfectly normal. If, however, the factors (a hectic or intense schedule, for example, or prolonged functioning on either right or left side of the two middle vertical lines) continue, and if measures are not initiated to check them, low-level burnout can intensify. As burnout effects intensify, individuals experience increased fatigue and sleepless nights. Relief is found through activities such as increased smoking, drinking, or eating. Dissatisfaction with the job, unwillingness to help others or withdrawal are all common disorders at this stage. The individual loses both the ability and the will to cope with minor daily problems. As seen in the figure, the productivity and functioning percentage of the individual will decrease on either side of under- or overloading (Jordaan & Jordaan 1998, 563-565).

High-level burnout is often associated with a variety of physical problems. These may include minor weight loss or gain, inability to get rid of colds, a rise in cholesterol level, or more serious disorders such as severe and chronic fatigue, migraine headaches, high blood pressure, rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid disease, chronic back pain or peptic ulcers. Psychological disorders often accompany such physical disorders; these may include impatience, irritability, worry, boredom, cynicism, detachment, paranoia, disorientation, psychosomatic complaints, and a sense of hopelessness (Pines et al. 1981, 229, Hamann & Gordon 2000, 34).

Depending on its duration and severity, burnout can eventually lead to dramatically reduced productivity and creativity in the classroom or during music lessons, or complete ineffectiveness or dropout which can result in teaching instability, low self-esteem, and a collapse of communication between the teacher and student, parents, and colleagues (Hamann 1990, 32). In a chronic state of stress, the body will begin to encounter digestive problems, high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes or teeth grinding as physical signs of stress overload (Burnout: Signs Symptoms and Prevention 2005).

When a music teacher is on the verge of burnout, symptoms of hopelessness, feeling like the proverbial candle burning at both ends, constant frustration and detachment from people will prevail. There will be little satisfaction from work, resentment for having too much to do will creep in, the teacher will start to be unsure about choice of job or career and an insecure feeling about competence and abilities will develop (Burnout: Signs Symptoms and Prevention 2005).

Contributing factors to music teacher burnout

Iwanicki (1983, 28-29), Schwab (1983, 21-22), Hamann et al. (1987, 133), Hamann (1990, 32) and Hamann & Gordon (2000, 35) all found during studies

conducted amongst music teachers the following to be significant contributors to burnout:

- **Lack of recognition by administration** - principals, co-workers, teachers in other disciplines, parents, and students. (Although colleagues, parents and students may not be categorized under “administration”, it is particularly the marginalization by those in administrative authority which can be the most undermining.)
- **Unclear goals** from principals, music department heads and fellow music teachers and lack of goals in overall planning.
- **Too much work** and not enough time to do it; not enough equipment, room or budget.
- **Emotional exhaustion** - this can be defined as a process in which an individual overextends him- or herself, becomes overwhelmed by the emotional demands of others, and feels drained and unable to continue.
- **Reduced personal accomplishment** - resulting when music teachers feel they cannot provide the help that is needed.

Although it may be a common belief that burnout is caused by overwork, Leland (2002) agrees to differ with this view. According to his observations, it is specifically frustration that forms an essential part of music teacher burnout.

Burnout is caused when teachers are struggling against factors over which there is little or no control.

...a piano teacher has students who miss lessons, who won't or can't practice correctly or consistently, or who bring in the same old excuses and make the same mistakes over and over despite innumerable corrections. Teachers often confront themselves with the following questions. Why do students take lessons at all if they don't want to learn? Do they think they can play without practicing? What's wrong with these people? Why am I doing this anyway?

Schwab (1983, 22) notes that teaching is an emotionally taxing profession, especially because a teacher's day is filled with constant, intensive interaction with people: at first with students the most, then other teachers, parents and school board members who consistently make demands on the energies of the teacher. This daily scenario is as applicable to music teachers as to any other types of teacher.

How can music teachers cope with burnout?

The first important measure that must be taken in order to cope with burnout is that the teacher should try to identify the source of the problem (Jordaan & Jordaan 1998, 563, Leland 2002). Leland (2002) suggests that any remedy for music teacher burnout can be found either in external conditions or in the teacher him/herself – both possibilities need to be investigated, and with open minds.

When believing or feeling that you may be experiencing burnout, and wishing to do something positive about the situation, the following thirteen suggestions or strategies can be considered:

- **See a doctor** - Schedule a complete physical check-up with your doctor to discuss concerns and any symptoms noticed.
- **Sleep** - The body needs a certain number of hours of sleep a night in order to function.
- **Set realistic goals** - This will add direction, clarity and focus to life.
- **Learn effective time management** - Schedule more frequent breaks while at work or delegate tasks.
- **Arm yourself with self-knowledge** - If you are people-oriented, a perfectionist, or have a low level of assertiveness or a strong need for approval, you may be more prone to develop burnout than someone who is authoritarian and task-focused. Understanding your strengths and weaknesses can help you learn better ways to deal with day-to-day stress. For example, if you know you are the kind of person who has difficulty

saying “no” without guilt, recognize how this pattern affects you and consider talking to a professional or respected peer or mentor about how to avoid taking on more than you can handle (Burnout: Signs, Symptoms and Prevention 2005).

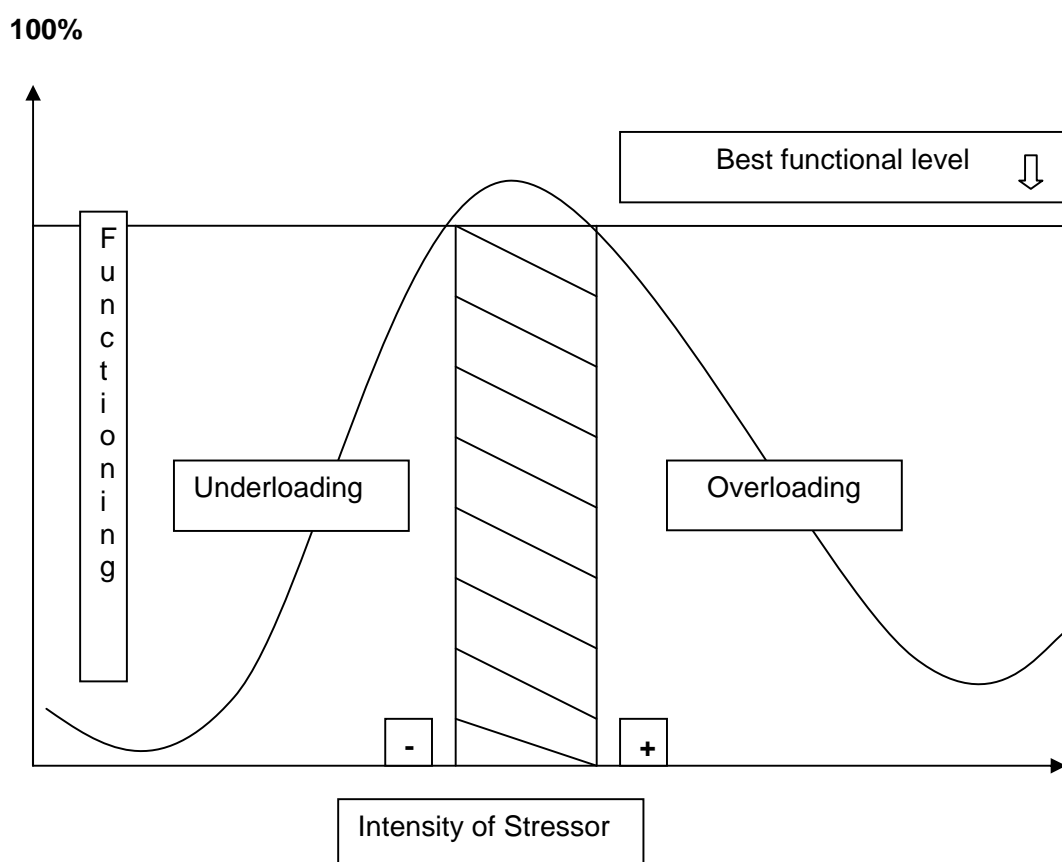
- **Put yourself first** - Study your year planner and decide where you can create “playtime” for yourself. This can include any activity that is not music-related that you enjoy e.g. sport, art, photography, scrap booking, beading or simply going for a walk. Even going away to an inexpensive location for a few days or staying at home for a week with the phone unplugged can make a world of difference.
- **Create times of emotional nurturing** - E.g. going to the hairdresser, wearing clothes you feel good in, looking after your diet and skin, sorting out cosmetics or bathroom essentials. Wear jewelry that has special meaning to you, take an aromatherapy bath or go for a massage. Have a “no evening” of phones and television. Spend time with positive people who will leave you with a feeling of upliftment.
- **Connect with a cause or a community group that is personally meaningful to you** - Joining a religious, social, or support group can give teachers a place to talk to like-minded others about how to deal with daily stress. This can be particularly important for those music teachers who work privately, and thus often enjoy very little interaction with others of their ilk.
- **Practise healthy communication** - Express feelings to others, who will listen, understand and not judge. Burnout involves feelings that fester and grow, so be sure to let emotions out in healthy, productive ways.
- **Do some exercise daily.**
- **Keep a teaching journal.** This could prove to be an effective way to document and let out feelings and frustrations.
- **Cut back on overtime or excessive working hours.**

- **Job hunt** - If individuals feel locked into a less-than-ideal position, a job hunt can help to realize worth and help the individual to understand that there is no need to be locked into any situation.

Conclusion

In order to face the demands of current fast paced daily challenges, music teachers need to maintain positive feelings about themselves, their jobs, and their students. Through constant awareness of the burnout syndrome and the development of intervention strategies based on what is learned from such awareness, meaningful solutions can be found to successful coping.

Figure 1: **Burnout development** (Jordaan & Jordaan 1998, 562)



References

- Burnout: Signs, Symptoms and Prevention. 2005. *Burnout: Signs, Symptoms and Prevention*. [Internet] Available from: < http://www.helpguide.org/mental/burnout_signs_symptoms.htm > [Accessed 25 November 2005].
- Freudenberger, H.J. & Richelson, G. 1980. *Burn-out: The High Cost of High Achievement*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Press.
- Grobler, H.; Schenck, R & Du Toit, D. 2003. *Person-centred communication: theory and practice*. Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press.
- Hamann, D.L. 1990. Burnout: How to Spot It, How to Avoid It. *Music Educators Journal*, 77(2): 30-33.
- Hamann, D.L.; Daugherty, E. & Mills, C. R. 1987. An Investigation of Burnout Assessment and Potential Job Related Variables among Public School Music Educators. *Psychology of Music*, 15(2): 129-140.
- Hamann, D.L. & Gordon, D.G. 2000. Burnout: An Occupational Hazard. *Music Educators Journal*, 87(3): 34-39.
- Iwanicki, E.F. 1983. Toward Understanding and Alleviating Teacher Burnout. *Theory into Practice*, 22(1): 27-32.
- Jordaan, W. & Jordaan, J. 1998. *People in Context*. 3rd edition. Sandton. Heinemann.
- Leland, W. 2002. *Teacher Burnout: How Do We Cope With It?* [Internet] Available from: < <http://www.pianoeducation.org/pnotburn.html> > [Accessed 22 February 2004].
- Maslach, C. 1982. *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Mearns, J. & Cain, J.E. 2003. Relationships between Teachers' Occupational Stress and their Burnout and Distress: Roles of Coping and Negative Mood Regulation Expectancies. *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, 16(1): 71-82.
- Pembroke, R.G. & Fredrickson, W.E. 2000-2001. "Prepared yet Flexible": Insights from Daily Logs of Music Teachers. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, Winter 2000-2001, no.147: 149-152.
- Pines, A. M.; Aronson, E. & Kafry, D. 1981. *Burnout: From Tedium to Personal Growth*. New York: The Free Press.

Schwab, R.L. 1983. Teacher Burnout: Moving beyond "Psychobabble". *Theory into Practice*, 22(1): 21-26.

Sources for further reading

Carlson, R. 1998. *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff... and It's All Small Stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things from Overtaking Your Life*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Cloud, H. & Townsend, J. 1992. *Boundaries: When to Say Yes When to Say No: To Take Control of Your Life*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.

Covey, S.R. 2004. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. London: Pocket Books.

La Haye, T. 1983. *How to manage pressure before pressure manages you*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Books.

Lindenfield, G. 2001. *Assert Yourself*. Hammersmith, London: Thorsons.

Macdonald, G. 1994. *Ordering Your Private World*. Great Britain: Highland Books.

Bertha le Roux is a music teacher, clinician and adjudicator, and currently enrolled for doctoral studies at the University of Pretoria. Caroline van Niekerk is Professor of Music Education at the University of Pretoria.

Bertha le Roux

bertha@precis.co.za

Caroline van Niekerk

caroline.vanniekerk@up.ac.za
caroline@mweb.co.za