



# Unraveling Burnout for Scientists

rebecca pope-ruark phd | agilefaculty.rpr@gmail.com

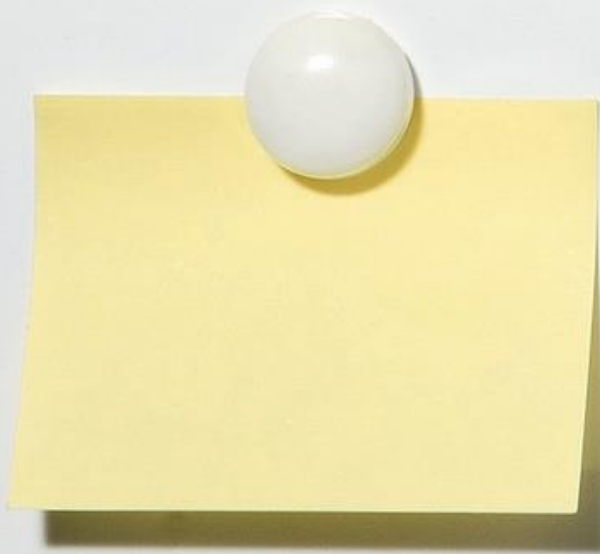
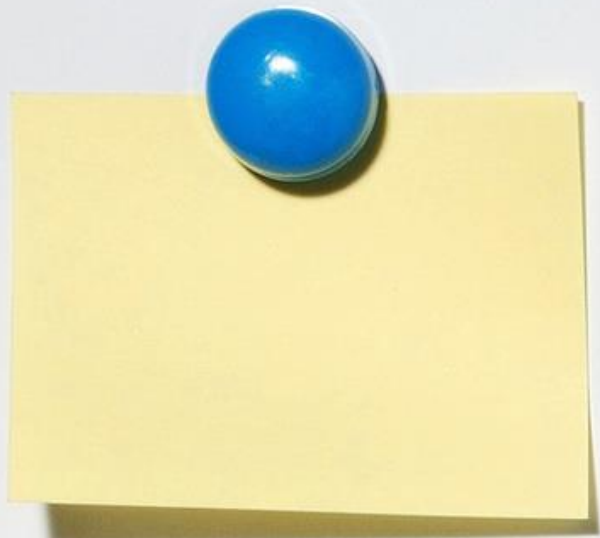
[www.higheredburnout.com](http://www.higheredburnout.com)





After years of productivity and engagement, Helen is eligible for the highest promotion in the lab you lead. But lately you see her leaving early, skipping meetings, and not engaging in meetings she attends. She seems unusually cynical with the students in the lab and is regularly sick. A colleague told you they found her having what looked like a panic attack in the bathroom recently. You are used to her being a solid scientist and collaborator, so this is troubling. What do you do, if anything?





# AGENDA



**Burnout by the numbers**



**Defining burnout and its signs**



**Mitigating burnout**



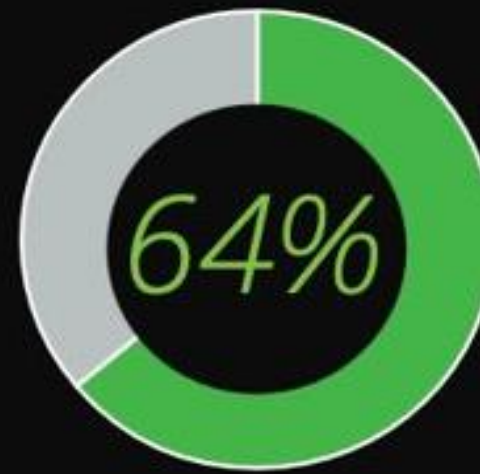
**A note about boundaries**



87%

of professionals say they have passion for their current job

YET...



of professionals say they frequently feel stressed or frustrated at their current job

18%  
everyday

32%  
few times  
a week

15%  
once a week



77%

of professionals have experienced burnout at their current job

51%  
more than once

84%  
among those not passionate  
about their job

## The biggest drivers of employee burnout



31%

lack of support or  
recognition from leadership



30%

unrealistic deadlines or  
results expectations



29%

consistently working  
long hours or on weekends



Employees who suffer from high levels of burnout report

- lower job satisfaction (55%)
- lower confidence that their employers care about them (47%)
- negative perceptions of work-life balance (55%)
- higher likelihood of seeking another job in the next year (56%).

The most burned-out populations — Gen Z (71%), those working multiple jobs (66%), Hispanics (65%), millennials (65%) and women (62%). (AFLAC 2022)

What

Who

## ***Nature Salary and Job Survey, [2021](#)***

- 58% of respondents said they were either somewhat or very satisfied with their positions, marks an all-time low
- 59% of respondents said they were satisfied with their work–life balance, down from 70% in 2018
- 45% said they frequently or always felt that they couldn't keep up with the demands of the job
- 39% said they frequently or always felt drained of emotional and physical energy.
- 45% felt that they weren't achieving as much as they should
- one in five said they sought help for depression or anxiety caused by their work, and 22% had not sought help but wished they had.





What

Who

Aspects of scientific culture that can lead to burnout:

- high-pressure funding environment
- current uncertainty around of federal funding
- scholarly competition for funding, publications, collaborators
- expectation escalation to stay relevant
- long hours in the lab or office with little time for rest/recovery/balance
- (unrealistic) expectations for productivity and results



# HOW ARE YOU? *REALLY?*


- Consider the statements on the Maslach Burnout Inventory.
- Share your most common score in the Google Form.





**Burnout** is a *syndrome* resulting from chronic *workplace* stress that has not been successfully managed.


[Source](#)



**Burnout** is a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:


- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion





**Burnout** is a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance, or negative feelings or cynicism related to one's job



**Burnout** is a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance, or negative feelings or cynicism related to one's job
- reduced professional efficacy.





## **IDENTIFYING BURNOUT**

- How prevalent do you think faculty burnout might be at your institution/lab?
- How is that burnout manifesting?
- How might that burnout be impacting the work of the institution/lab?

# **Levels of Burnout and Actions Needed**

**1. Level 1 - Period of Stress:** boundaries around time and place you work, time for hobbies and pastimes, breaks, unplugging



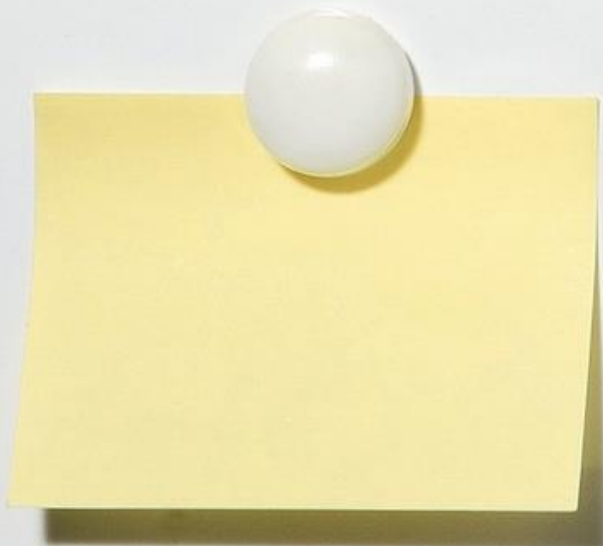
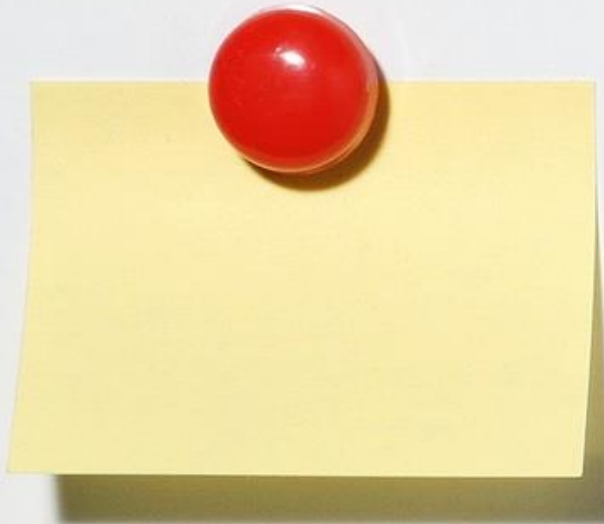
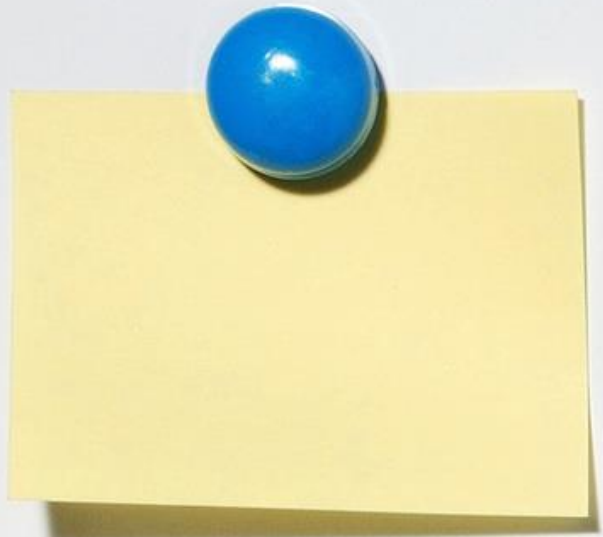
# Levels of Burnout and Actions Needed

- 1. Level 1 - Period of Stress:** boundaries around time and place you work, time for hobbies and pastimes, breaks, unplugging
- 2. Level 2 - Chronic Stress:** unfuse identity from work, stronger boundaries between life-work, saying no without guilt, honest conversation with supervisor about situation

# Levels of Burnout and Actions Needed

- 1. Level 1 - Period of Stress:** boundaries around time and place you work, time for hobbies and pastimes, breaks, unplugging
- 2. Level 2 - Chronic Stress:** unfuse identity from work, stronger boundaries between life-work, saying no without guilt, honest conversation with supervisor about situation
- 3. Level 3 - Deep Burnout:** stop work completely, find coach/therapist, deep reflection on cause of burnout, consider if in the right job/org, create new vision/plan, take first steps





Burnout is a workplace culture problem that impacts individuals, not the reverse – but we can start with coping strategies.

# 4 PILLARS OF BURNOUT RESILIENCE







# 4 PILLARS OF BURNOUT RESILIENCE

Purpose - know your why

# **purpose**

- What is the purpose that drives you as a scientist?
- What aspects of your work are most fulfilling, and why?
- What have you done in your work that you would love to do more?
- What legacy would be significant for you to build/leave behind?





# The Purpose That Guides

**Play with different mixes of goals, passions, and values as you define your purpose, your mission. Try this:**

My work's purpose is to use my talents for <something> and my passion for <something> to <address some need or gap or opportunity>. This aligns with my core values of <x,y,z> because...

Because of my purpose, I will prioritize <x, y, z.>

A collage of sticky notes and polka dots on the left side of the slide. There are yellow, pink, and red sticky notes with handwritten text. One yellow note says 'journey mapping'. Another pink note says 'sible' and 'ces'. The background has blue and orange polka dots.

# 4 PILLARS OF BURNOUT RESILIENCE

Purpose - know your why

Compassion - care for yourself and others



A collage of sticky notes and polka dots on the left side of the slide. There are yellow, pink, and red sticky notes with handwritten text. One yellow note says "journey mapping". Another yellow note says "sible". A pink note says "ces". There are also blue and orange polka dots scattered around the notes.

# 4 PILLARS OF BURNOUT RESILIENCE

Purpose - know your why

Compassion - care for yourself and others

Connection - act with others

## **connection**

- What workplace-related relationships do you value most?
- What do you value most about relationships with colleagues?  
students?
- What might you do to lean into those connections now?
- What connections might you be avoiding or ignoring right now? Why?





# CONNECTION - 4Ls

liked

learned

lacked

longed for

## **connection**

- Inside-outside observers
- Institutional insiders
- Institutional outsiders/higher ed insiders
- Higher ed outsiders





## CONNECTION - 4Ls

Brainstorm ways to engage  
in/create meaningful connection  
to mitigate burnout.

**liked**

**learned**

**lacked**

**longed for**

A decorative image on the left side of the slide featuring a light-colored background with blue and orange polka dots. Several sticky notes are attached: a yellow one with 'journey mapping' written in pink, a pink one with 'sible' and 'ces' written in blue, and a red one partially visible at the bottom left.

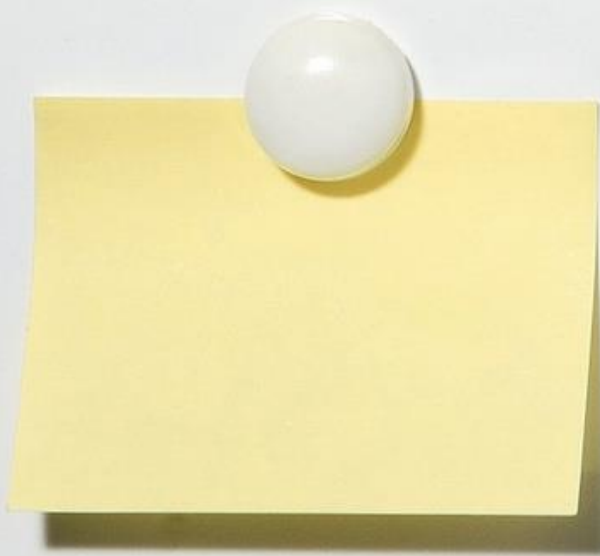
# 4 PILLARS OF BURNOUT RESILIENCE

Purpose - know your why

Compassion - care for yourself and others

Connection - act with others

Balance - weigh energy for life and work



The current funding uncertainty will cause significant challenges to the work you do, now and in the long term, and burnout will increase when you try to do more with less.



# balance

- What does balance mean to you?
- What's the difference between balance and satisfaction in life?
- What is "good enough," and when is it perfectly reasonable?
- What about your work gives you energy? Drains you? What about your life outside of work?
- What is challenging about self-care, and what could you do differently?

# balance

- **Prioritize activities** by having a clear personal mission and career trajectory, and being willing to say no.

**balance**

No.



**balance**

No.

No, but maybe...

No, but <someone else>.

Not so much.

Maybe, if the deal was sweeter.

Maybe, if the cost/benefit was clearer.

# balance

- **Prioritize activities** by having a clear personal mission and career trajectory, and being willing to say no.
- **Plan ahead** by block-scheduling protected time for work that is crucial and meaningful but not deadline-driven

# balance

- **Prioritize activities** by having a clear personal mission and career trajectory, and being willing to say no.
- **Plan ahead** by block-scheduling protected time for work that is crucial and meaningful but not deadline-driven.
- **Persist with passions**, determined through reflection and insight over time.



# balance

- **Prioritize activities** by having a clear personal mission and career trajectory, and being willing to say no.
- **Plan ahead** by block-scheduling protected time for work that is crucial and meaningful but not deadline-driven.
- **Persist with passions**, determined through reflection and insight over time.
- **Partner with others** to move projects forward and stay in touch with priorities and professional goals.

**boundaries**

# boundaries

- **Time Boundaries** - determine when you will and will not be available to others
- **Physical Boundaries** - protect your personal space and regulate physical contact with others
- **Mental Boundaries** - protect your thoughts, beliefs, and values
- **Emotional Boundaries** - involve recognizing, understanding, and protecting your emotions



# boundaries

Boundaries sound like:

- I respect your point of view, but...
- I've recently decided I not longer...
- I need...
- I'm uncomfortable with...
- I'm unavailable...
- That isn't my priority tight now.
- I'd like to be heard.
- I won't do that.

# boundaries

What's one boundary you want to set? With whom? How will you do it? What will you say?

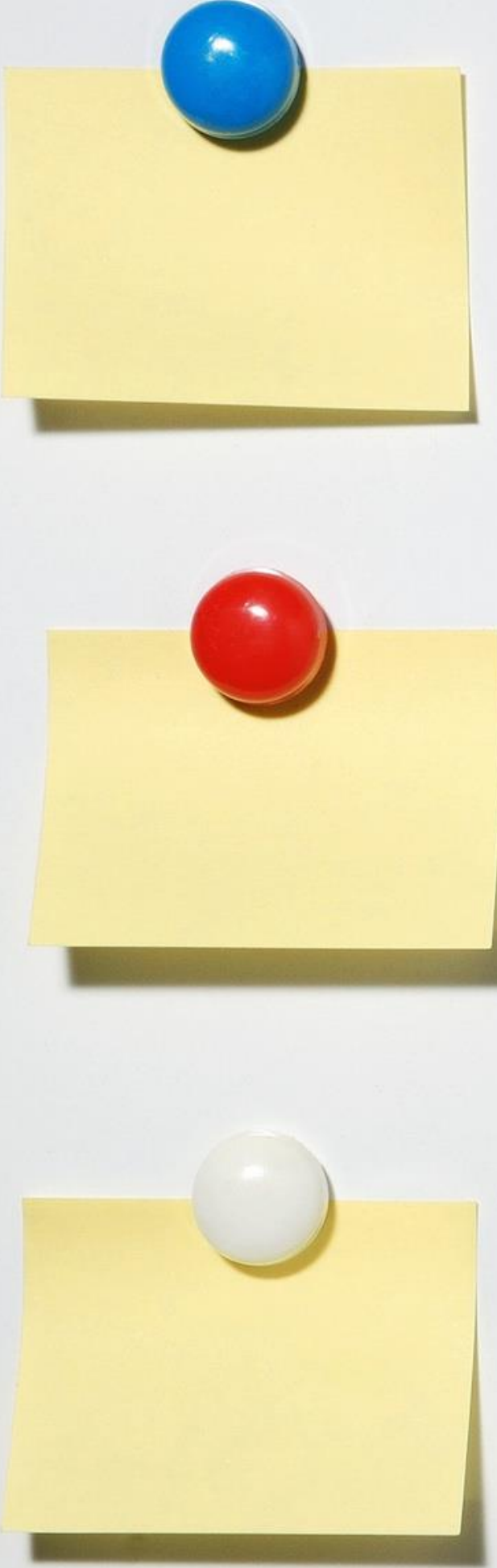
Boundaries sound like:

- I respect your point of view, but...
- I've recently decided I not longer...
- I need...
- I'm uncomfortable with...
- I'm unavailable...
- That isn't my priority tight now.
- I'd like to be heard.
- I won't do that.

# Thoughts on Balance and Boundaries

1. Make your health a priority.
2. Recognize that long hours do not equate to productive hours.
3. Set boundaries to establish your workplace and time.
4. Connect regularly with family, friends, hobbies, nature, higher power, meaningful experiences.





Burnout is a workplace culture problem that impacts individuals, not the reverse - how do we enact change on our campuses/in our labs for vital faculty and staff?



# QUESTIONS WE SHOULD BE ASKING

How can we better understand if burnout is a problem on campus/in the lab?



# QUESTIONS WE SHOULD BE ASKING

How can we better understand if burnout is a problem on campus/in the lab?

What features of our campus/lab culture cause the most stress, and what can we do about it? How might we be complicit in a culture of overwork?



# QUESTIONS WE SHOULD BE ASKING

How can we better understand if burnout is a problem on campus/in the lab?

What features of our campus/lab culture cause the most stress, and what can we do about it? How might we be complicit in a culture of overwork?

How can we empower faculty and lab leaders, especially grassroots leaders, to make change in the culture around issues of burnout?





# QUESTIONS WE SHOULD BE ASKING

How can we better understand if burnout is a problem on campus/in the lab?

What features of our campus/lab culture cause the most stress, and what can we do about it? How might we be complicit in a culture of overwork?

How can we empower faculty and lab leaders, especially grassroots leaders, to make change in the culture around issues of burnout?

How can we support faculty and staff experiencing burnout, without asking them to do more? How can we role model positive behaviors?



# QUESTIONS WE SHOULD BE ASKING

How can we better understand if burnout is a problem on campus/in the lab?

What features of our campus/lab culture cause the most stress, and what can we do about it? How might we be complicit in a culture of overwork?

How can we empower faculty and lab leaders, especially grassroots leaders, to make change in the culture around issues of burnout?

How can we support faculty and staff experiencing burnout, without asking them to do more? How can we role model positive behaviors?

What else should we be asking?

# Building a Practice of Balanced Well-Being



# Unraveling Faculty Burnout



*Pathways to  
Reckoning and Renewal*

REBECCA POPE-RUARK, PhD

## Unraveling Burnout for Scientists

rebecca pope-ruark phd  
agilefaculty.rpr@gmail.com  
[www.higheredburnout.com](http://www.higheredburnout.com)