

Burnout and how to avoid it

Being a teaching assistant is rewarding. No two days are ever the same! But it's also exhausting, mentally and physically.

Often those outside of school see weeks of holiday, shorter days, plus a few INSET days thrown into the mix, leaving some to ponder why we struggle at times.

Many do not see the burdens placed on teaching assistants especially during the last two years when classrooms and schools have at times been kept open because of the commitment of teaching assistants. Not only do we seem to be trying to teach the next generations the knowledge and skills needed for a successful life, we're also being asked to play a huge societal role in schools with a shortfall.

Uncertainty around pay and contracts add to the stress of the job. It's not a surprise therefore, that many classroom assistants are facing burnout and considering other work options.

So what is burnout and how can it be avoided?

“ *I think most people are aware of being burnt out but some can cut off more easily than others, and this in itself can be stressful. If you are the one doing the extra, you notice the ones who don't. Resulting in a vicious circle. Maybe an incentive/reward for those that go the extra mile!*

Teaching Assistant

What is Burnout?

Most of us get stressed at work at some point. Burnout occurs as a result of sustained stress that never subsides. This is due to prolonged periods of intensity and excessive demands on energy, strength and resources.

Herbert Freudenberger coined the term in the 1970's. He recognised that professions which involve a strong sense of morality or purpose, and commitment from workers who sacrifice themselves for the good of others, were most at risk.

It's no wonder that teaching assistants are at risk of burnout.



How can burnout be avoided?

Sadly, there is no definitive answer to this. As individuals, our stress tolerances vary. What can help is an understanding of the signs of burnout and the proactive measures that can be put in place to avoid it. We need to look after ourselves and those we work with, if we are to keep great teachers teaching.



Recognising the signs

Burnout is considered to have a wide range of symptoms however, three main signs of the condition are:

1 Exhaustion

For teaching assistants this may include both emotional and physical exhaustion. Evidence of this may be frustration and irritability, mood swings, impaired concentration, chronic fatigue and insomnia as well as physical symptoms such as increased illness, palpitations, gastrointestinal pain, headaches and dizziness.

feelings of hopelessness and apathy, low self-confidence, increased irritability with one's self and others, increased time spent completing tasks and apathy to want to do so.

“We need to look after ourselves and those we work with if we are to keep great teaching assistants in schools.”

Whilst it may not be possible to eliminate burnout within the profession, there are ways we can take action to avoid it in ourselves.

2 Detachment from the job

For teaching assistants this may develop as cynicism and pessimism towards the job, students, colleagues or the school itself. The person with burnout may prefer to avoid contact and involvement with others, and experience a loss of enjoyment from the things that once brought pleasure.



3 Reduced performance

For teaching assistants this may develop through negative feelings, lack of productivity and poor performance. Evidence of this may be

5 steps for avoiding burnout



Be aware of your own emotions and stress levels

Ensure you make time to 'check in' with yourself. Strategies such as mindfulness, meditation and journaling can be helpful as can talking to others (or even yourself). Having an awareness and understanding of stress, burnout and mental health is invaluable to understanding yourself. It's important you take the time to learn about you and take time to 'check in' before you need it.

Take charge of your wellbeing

Teaching assistants are only human. There is only so much we can do in the time we have. We need to balance both our work and our own lives, whilst also fitting in rest and relaxation. Every one of us will have a different version of what it means to have good wellbeing and a happy work-life balance.

Yet far too often, we put our students before ourselves, putting yourself before work is not wrong, as the old saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup. If you are to look after and provide the best education for your students, you have to spend time refuelling and looking after your health and wellbeing too.

Take time doing the things you enjoy; spend time with family and friends, get outside and enjoy the world. Plan your holidays and weekends in advance so you're not tempted to just work. Give yourself a break.



So remember the free and confidential helpline is here 24/7 throughout the UK on 08000 562 561 for all education staff.

Question before saying, "yes".

Generally speaking, teaching assistants want to do the best for their students, they also want to be good at what they do. That means we sometimes take on more than we should for no extra pay.

If you're asked to do something different or beyond the normal responsibilities of your role, think before saying yes. Question the request in relation to your working hours, and the time it will take to do. This may feel difficult or awkward at first but done gently and with kindness these types of conversation usually lead to better understanding between line managers and teaching assistants.

Accept that sometimes it's ok to say no.

It is ok to say you can't do something, whether it's due to limited time, an already huge to-do list or the limited impact it will have on student outcomes; sometimes you just have to say "sorry, I can't do that". When you want the best for those around you, it can be hard to say no to things, but consider the impact, the time and your wellbeing.

Or try talking to your line manager and asking something like, "Out of these responsibilities I have which should I prioritise now I have extra? Which should I give less time to?"

Get support when you need it.

Please make use of the support available to you. Sometimes it's hard to speak to people you are close to and even harder to speak to a stranger. But they can listen, support and can coach and guide to help you discover solutions that are best for you.