

12 Choices to Help You Step Back From Burnout

"Our very lives are fashioned by choice. First we make choices. Then our choices make us." - Anne Frank

A tired teacher is a powder keg waiting for a match. In my bouts with burnout, I've learned that stepping back from the brink is about choice. These 12 choices have helped me recover and be a better teacher for my students.

Choice #1: Choose to Be Happy

First, happiness is a choice. Choose to be the first one to smile at everybody you meet. Choose to greet your students by name.

Use happy triggers to boost your mood when you get upset. I have a Pinterest Board called Happy Thoughts and another called Things That Make Me Laugh. The "Atta Girl" folder in my desk holds nice notes. Host a OMDP (One Minute Dance Party) for yourself or a group and let the music bring you cheer.

Choice #2: Choose to Disconnect

We are making a dumb use of our smartphones. Instead of freeing us up to go anywhere anytime, they've tethered us to a hamster wheel. Usually, I check email twice a day. I deleted my school email off my smartphone after several evenings because of an angry email. (We all get them.) Unplug once a week. **Be a human being, not a human doing.**

Choice #3: Choose to Be Mindful

Mindfulness is being called society's next wonder drug. Mindfulness is the opposite of mindlessness. It means: "Paying attention; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." Some meditate or practice yoga -- I pray every morning at 5 AM for at least 20 minutes. I find a sense of peace that centers me upon what is important.

Choice #4: Choose to Make Time for Sleep

Sleep loss harms your thinking, your health, and your mood. Psychologist Norbert Schwarz says, "Making \$60,000 more in annual income has less of an effect on your daily happiness than getting one extra hour of sleep a night."

Realize that watching your favorite movie may not be restful when you're exhausted. Go to sleep early with your cell phone in the kitchen where it can't wake you.

Choice #5: Choose to Get Outside and Get Moving

Last year when I was in charge of prom on top of everything else, I was close to quitting. So my principal and I had an honest conversation about my struggle to stay grounded. I asked to take a 15-minute walk during morning break every day until I could get through it. Thankfully, he agreed. I packed my tennis shoes and kept them at school. It worked.

Boston University psychology professor Michael Otto says, "Usually within five minutes after moderate exercise, you get a mood-enhancement effect." Exercise is shown to be a powerful intervention for clinical depression, diabetes, and anxiety. Even five minutes of green exercise (outdoors) is also shown to boost your mood. So get outside and exercise.

Choice #6: Choose to Be Grateful

Research studies have shown that keeping a gratitude journal will "increase your long-term well-being more than winning a million dollars in the lottery." I keep a joy journal by my desk and write in it every day.

Choice #7: Choose What to Overlook

"The greatest remedy for anger is delay." - Seneca

Understand that you're working with others who are almost (if not more) burned out than you. Therefore, count on everyone being fussy, cranky, and tired. Let it go. Studies show that patients who've had heart attacks can improve their well-being by practicing forgiveness and working to be less angry.

Sometimes our biggest enemy is the perfect person we try to be. My kids will be happier eating a frozen lasagna from a happy Mom than a home-cooked meal served by a witch.

Choice #8: Choose the Battles Worth Fighting

Most situations that educators regret "caving in on" are those that happen in these exhausting end-of-school months. Parents are emotional. Kids are emotional, and we educators are tired of fighting the battle. Choose to fight only for what matters.

Choice #9: Choose What to Do Next Time and What to Stop Doing

Arthur Gordon says to learn to say "next time" instead of "if only." Make the mistakes of your past a signpost, not a hitching post. Remember your mistakes, but keep your eyes facing front toward your current surroundings.

There are times to say, "There will not be a next time. Enough." Some places should be left. Some relationships should be severed. Some organizations should become part of your past. Not all the time, but sometimes.

Choice #10: Choose to Enjoy the Relationships That Matter

Don't be so busy making a living that you forget to make time for living. You have relationships and hobbies. Keep them in your life.

Choice #11: Choose to Make a Schedule and Priority List

In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg shares how the things that you schedule on your calendar are

more likely to be the "done" items that you check off your list. Schedule important tasks.

Choice #12: Choose to Finish Well

No matter how you started the year, choose to finish well. This is also your decision.

In the long run, a burned out teacher is of no use to her students or herself. You can choose to step back. You can do this, teacher! Your calling is noble, but you must sometimes regroup and adjust to make it.

*Credit: Vicki Davis
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