

Healing Burnout with Mindful Self Care by Jennifer Jean

“To burn-out is to let one’s light languish until it disappears. As interdependent beings, we are responsible for making sure our flame is fueled.” - Jennifer Jean

I’ve taught poetry writing workshops for 13 years, so classes now are pretty much duck soup. They’re always fun, and I always learn from my students, whether I’m teaching middle-schoolers, graduate students, or seniors at my local library. However, when I received a call two years ago from the director of Amirah, asking me to teach a poetry course to sex-trafficking survivors at their safe-house, I knew I would need to draw on more than a plucky, can-do attitude. And, I’d definitely need more than mere teaching experience and knowledge of poetry writing.

This would be the first time I’d developed a specialized curriculum for and built trust with a vulnerable, often invisible, group of women who were struggling to heal terrible psychological and physical traumas. I knew this particular “first” would be an emotionally involving challenge for me! I’d long been aware that I throw myself headlong into volunteering. There have been times when I’ve gotten so caught up with volunteering that I’ve neglected my family, and I’ve completely burned-out. This time, I vowed to proceed more consciously. What I ended up embarking on (and tweaking along the way) was a strategy for self-care that enabled me to successfully serve the safe house residents while avoiding volunteer burnout.

STEP 1

I regularized my prayer-life. Both meditation and prayer have always kept me in touch with who is in charge (the Divine, not the “me”). And, during this teaching experience, these practices helped me maintain clarity about my purpose in the safe-house (to give, not to despair). I continued to pray nightly with my family, but I also included praying in my car before entering the safe house and after leaving each class. I prayed for the women to heal and thrive, and I prayed that I could serve them in whatever way they needed most.

STEP 2

I “checked my baggage” as some say. I dealt with my own emotional challenges and realities. While I am not a survivor of sex-trafficking, I have had my own bad experiences with abusers and objectifiers. I’ve worked for years with a therapist to face, parse, and move through these experiences. Still, I knew that teaching at the safe house was sure to stir up feelings from my past, and I knew that these feelings (usually anger) would settle into my body, making me tense, or sick, or cloudy, or hypervigilant, or tired. In order to release that settled, stuck energy, I committed to a regular practice of yoga and core-energetic exercises. My practice was never perfect, but even the various cobbling

together that I accomplished made it possible for me to let light into the flow of energy throughout my body. When I let light and breath and motion into my body I had something besides anger from which to draw when I taught this challenging course.

STEP 3

I set aside time to de-compress. Arts, like poetry, primarily engage thoughts and emotions. If I didn't enact a mindful plan after teaching poetry at the safe house, it was easy to float away and let my mind wander. If I wasn't careful, I wandered into despair. So, sometimes after class I'd sit in a nearby Starbucks, eat chocolate, and write reflections in my journal. I needed to acknowledge when my volunteer work affected me, and that journal was a great container for my emotions and a great tracker of my emotional progress. More often, I would go jogging in a park or on a treadmill at the YMCA. Energizing my body was an excellent way to stay in the present, which enabled me to more readily connect with hope. No matter what, I didn't go home directly and interact with my family—my goal was to process the experience away from them so that I didn't inadvertently dump any residual negativity onto them.

STEP 4

I nurtured a support system. Like everyone, I have several circles of support. For me these include (in no particular order): my family, especially my husband and my brother; fellow writers and poetry teachers; fellow Amirah volunteers; friends-in-faith; and, my amazing therapist. When I was teaching the survivors I made sure to regularly engage with these folks. I kept up dates with my husband. Every week I called my friend-in-faith, Lenka, who lives in California. I also made time to take my kids out to do activities in nature so we could laugh together and relax. These were conscious moments of connection. When we're connected to others and present to others, light find us and enters us. When we let light in, we have something powerful from which to draw when we serve others.

To be honest, I didn't perfectly employ these strategies, and I began some strategies half-way through teaching the course. I wish now that I'd started my current qigong practice back then as it would've been super helpful in unsticking the really calcified emotions that ended up causing the few bouts of despair that I did have. These things being said, as I ready myself to teach journaling and poetry at Amirah in the coming months, I feel more confident about being a healthy person who can help others heal. In other words, I'm confident that I can address my tendency to burn-out.

To burn-out is to let one's light languish until it disappears. As interdependent beings, we are responsible for making sure our flame is fueled. And we're meant to share that flame with others.