

The Implementation Science at Work Podcast

Transcript - Episode 6: Why We Can't Self-Care our Way out of Burnout

Guests: Sherra Lawrence, Kimberly Maloney, and Jessica Reed, Implementation Specialists at the Impact Center at Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, UNC-Chapel Hill
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Speaker 2 (00:11):

Hi everybody. I'm Sherra Lawrence. Um, I'm an implementation specialist at the Impact Center at Grandchild Development Institute.

Hi, I'm Kimberly Maloney and I'm also an implementation specialist at the Frank Program Child Development Institute at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Speaker 1 (00:41):

I'm Jessica Reed. I am also an implementation specialist at the Impact Center at UNC Chapel Hill. Um, and I previously worked on a federally funded project through hrssa, um, to address workforce burnout and culture change in a community mental health organization. So I'm really looking forward to talking to you guys about burnout. It's become one of, it's hard to say it's a favorite topic 'cause it impacts people. So, um, you know, so hugely and, um, and it's really important, but I do, I'm glad we're talking about it. How about that feels really important. So, um, so just to start us off, Shera, how would you define burnout?

Speaker 2 (01:24):

Yeah, I'd say first and foremost that it's become an interesting favorite topic of mine as well. And I think I would define burnout as when you kind of get to a point where like there's no amount of, uh, rest or vacationing or self-care or anything that you can do to kind of get you out of, uh, just feeling exhausted and tired, um, like spiritually on a spiritual level. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, just feeling tired, overwhelmed, exhausted, and just kind of existing day to day. So you're not really, um, thriving. You're just kind of surviving. So that's how I would define burnout.

Speaker 1 (02:13):

Yeah, I think that's a great definition. And when I started thinking or thinking about it leading up to this conversation, I started thinking almost, it's almost a feeling of having too much and too little all at the same time. And it's sort of a spectrum too. So it starts with that exhaustion that you talked about where it's almost to the spiritual level, you're exhausted. It's more than just feeling how you feel at the end of a particularly busy work

week. And it's so pervasive that a weekend or a vacation don't really do anything to touch that level of exhaustion you're feeling. And it really, you know, leads into from there a feeling of disconnection. So you kind of go from just being exhausted and not having enough to give to purposefully stepping back from tasks or teams or relationships to try to find some of that respite that you so desperately need. Um, and then from there, as it progresses, really leads into a place where you just no longer feel effective in your roles. And, and those could be, you know, largely at work. 'cause we know burnout is a workplace problem, but I think it can then start extending into home and other things that you typically want to be doing too.

Speaker 3 (03:44):

I love and appreciate those definitions because, um, I can, in short, yes. Part of it for me, during covid when I felt a lot of these feelings that you're describing was having so much time to do, so much, but maybe not wanting to. And then feeling this cycle of, um, of exhaustion, trying to, trying to make my work feel meaningful, trying to build connections, trying to stay connected with not only my community but then also my coworkers and everything was just a lot harder.

Speaker 3 (04:56):

And I think that, um, there was a little bit of taking for granted how the world worked in that way where we were seeing each other and you kind of got that connection, that community, that feeling of meaning that you didn't know you needed. And I'm projecting that I didn't know I needed. Uh, but then realized when I couldn't have it anymore that, wow, that is a huge reason I loved, loved what I was doing, love what I'm doing. And, um, I think myself included, but I think many people are still coming out of that. And I also think what made it with all of that, with Covid, perhaps one of the things that made it like insult to injury, salt in an open wound type of thing, where things are just changing all the time and change is already hard enough to, uh, really take with grace sometimes.

Speaker 3 (05:57):

And I think that between all of the changes globally and the changes personally and the changes still happening, um, it's hard to really feel like hit a stride where everything's just kind of clicking and it, you know, you feel like you're operating on all cylinders.

Speaker 2 (06:40):

Um, I think for me, the experience of burnout was actually before the pandemic. Um, where, you know, I was in a, a pretty high pressure job where I was traveling a lot and just the day-to-day grind of, you know, work and travel and trying to spend time with family and friends and, um, just the busyness of life really made it really difficult for me to like, find space and time for myself to really take care of myself.

Um, and you know, I always say like the first thing that goes for me is just those basic habits of like remembering to eat, getting enough sleep, like, you know, uh, you know, moving my body, things like that. So that's when I know I'm kind of on the downward spiral

to burnout is when I'm, you know, one o'clock in the afternoon wondering why I'm starving.

Speaker 2 (07:38):

And it's like, oh, you forgot to eat today. Um, because, you know, you're just like clicking into that grind and just like not taking care of yourself. Um, and I think what leads to that, for me at least is, um, uh, I think there's this perception I have sometimes of like other people and other things are more important than myself and that, and there's a sense of a responsibility and a sense of loneliness sometimes with that, where it's like you don't have people you can depend on, or at least the perception of, like, you can't depend on people, you can't depend on structures, you can't depend on organizations or, you know, I think one of the things I always hear is just like, you know, there's always someone coming up behind you at work. So like you have to prove your work in some ways. And so, um, you know, we almost like kill ourselves sometimes to like just be in this cog, uh, be a cog in the wheel that keeps things going and not realizing that like it's just unhealthy and it's not sustainable to be kind of in that grind all the time. Um, so yeah. I have the

Speaker 2 (08:54):

Same like response that you do of like, oh yeah, I, I refuse to consider myself old, but I'm now experienced enough to have had multiple chances to burn out in different parts of my career. Um, and I am just so thankful for both of you for sharing those experiences. 'cause I think as much as like we're hearing about burnout now, I don't think we always hear the personal feelings of what it's like and what's driving it from people. So I, I think that's such an important piece that, that we're bringing out today. Um, so I would say my first instance of burnout was pretty early in my career. I was working in Philadelphia in a community mental health organization. I had a pretty big caseload with a, with kids. I was working with children and adolescents, um, and their families. And so I had a lot of high need kids, um, and families.

Speaker 1 (09:51):

Um, and not a lot of support from my supervisor at the time. I was trained in a couple of evidence-based practices, but I was not supported to use them. Um, and I was, I mean, I was exhausted. I was sick. Like I would have some clients that were so tough that I would wake up, you know, two, three o'clock in the morning already just like sick to my stomach about seeing them that day. Um, I would have, you know, weekly supervision scheduled that my supervisor would not show up for and then would be surprised that I was there calling her and looking for her. Um, and it just was like you, I think you described it sherra like it was lonely. I felt like I was in this all on my own, like the success or failure of these kids and their families was on my shoulders.

Speaker 1 (10:42):

My success as a new therapist was on my own shoulders. Um, and it's really one of the things that drew me to implementation science and still draws me to implementation

science is just that idea that if we use implementation best practices in places where we serve people, our workforce would be so much more supported and have more feelings of control over all of these demands on them and just wouldn't feel like they're carrying the load all on their shoulders. Um, and then more recently while I was working on a grant about addressing burnout, my supervisor left the organization I was in, my closest work colleague left, you know, they left within months of each other. And so I was then working alone in the implementation science department and doing at least one and a half people's jobs for a stretch of time. And in that project we were using the demand control support framework to talk about drivers of burnout and protective factors.

Speaker 1 (11:49):

And I knew I was on my way to burning out, but it also finally felt like I had a shared language to be able to talk about my experiences with my other coworkers to say, Hey, all my supports just walked out of this organization. The demands on my time and my effort and what I have to bring here have increased, um, by quite a bit. And I'm feeling like I have less control over how I can spend my time and what I can put my focus towards day to day. And just having that shared language, it didn't solve it, but it really enabled us to talk about what was going on, talk about what was on my plate, and put a longer term plan into place to start to address some of those things.

Speaker 3 (12:40):

Gosh. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you both for sharing. And I think it is, um, it's so interesting to hear our three situations and mine in which I have too much time, too much like loneliness and I'm burned out because I don't have that workplace connection, that workplace meaning. But y'all are the opposite to an extent where you're, you're almost overstimulated with work, have too much, you are gone traveling. It's, it's like high pressure. And I feel like each of us touched on an aspect of loneliness in our situations at that time. And then this idea or perception of doing it alone, whether it, um, like the perception of, I think Sharon, and correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like I got a sense of I don't know if I can fully rely on or depend on others around me. So I, I have to do it, I have to continue to push through this, which um, typically isn't a sustainable way to have a career.

Speaker 3 (14:01):

And I mean, Jessica, you were talking about everybody kind of left and, and feeling lonely and having this perception and idea that you're having to carry the torch on behalf of all these other people who have left. And I know with my situation, I just, this lack of connection with others, I know I felt, um, an idea that I had to work harder 'cause I don't know what others are doing all the time, but also because I work better in groups anyways. And so working alone is a lot harder for me because I am much better in a group think type of like environment. So I just think it's interesting to see how all these different scenarios can play out but ultimately lead to the same feelings. And one of the things that I was hearing and wondering as well is that, you know, a lot of times when these things happen,

turnover change, they can either be seen as like an opportunity to get better to grow to do these things.

Speaker 3 (15:03):

And at what point is it where it is seen as a big huge barrier and you're like just feeling that weight on your shoulders. And I think that, you know, different points of, if you're not burned out, I wonder if some of these same situations would be looked at in a more positive light. But when you're just burned out and overloaded, these changes feel crippling and more reason to address workforce burnout. 'cause you always want your employees and your team to be ready to take on those new challenges.

Speaker 2 (16:09):

Yeah, I think it impacts teams tremendously. I think first and foremost, just the morale of the team. Like, you know, I think we've all been in situations where, you know, you either come into a team or been on a team for a while and it just feels like there's no stability. Um, and it's hard to get traction with anything because as soon as something gets up and running like, you know, someone leaves. Um, and I think it's really difficult for the people who stay because, you know, there there's not a lot of systems and structures in place to help to address those changes or address those gaps. And I think people end up taking on a lot of that on themselves. Um, and I know in, you know, some of my experiences that, you know, when there is a lot of turnover or there is a lot of, um, gaps in resources and talent, you know, the people who stay end up having to take on more and that just kind of exacerbates the problem. Um, so, you know, a lot of times, you know, you would hope that an organization would adjust, um, adjust to kind of what, what capacity they have. But in a lot of times people just kind of take on more and more and more without more resources, without more support, without more capacity. And I think it kind of gets people burned out even quicker, <laugh>. Um, so yeah, I think, you know, people who stay, you know, they just have less capacity and end up burning out quicker. Um, I think is typically what tends to happen.

Speaker 1 (17:58):

Yeah, so I, you know, and how you're kind of describing burnout and how, how it impacts it. So it almost feels like it becomes a little bit of a cycle, right? Because people burnout, they leave, other people have to take on more of that load and then they start burning out. Um, so in some ways it feels like it's just sort of reinforcing rather than like being addressed at any point. Um, and so I, so I think it's one of those reasons, one of the reasons I like that demand control support framework to think about burnout is 'cause it's almost like a scale. And if on one side your demands are have gotten heavier because someone's left, then on the other side, somebody, it needs to be somebody's job to be thinking about what does supports look like and how do we increase control for that person, um, while hopefully it this short term scenario is playing out, you know, and hopefully the goal is to reduce those demands over time too.

Speaker 1 (18:55):

Um, I think there are other constructs that we confuse with burnout or sometimes can be overlapping with burnout and the feelings might be similar. The kind of how what it looks like on the outside might be similar, but I think the drivers and then even the solutions or strategies might be different. So a couple of those things are, um, the first one's vicarious trauma or sometimes we talk about it as secondary trauma. So when people are working, you know, hearing people's stories, understanding, you know, harm that is taking place, you can have an experience of trauma yourself from hearing or knowing about trauma that the people you're providing care to or services to are having or experiencing. Um, so that's one piece I think that's sort of like walks alongside burnout. Another is moral injury where that really stems from unfair treatment at work. Um, and an example of that can be when people are expected to work and show up in ways that don't align with your personal values or even the stated values of your team or organization.

Speaker 1 (20:03):

So an example of moral injury is, I think they're actually looking at this a lot in first responders or like firefighters where it's your job to keep people safe, but it's also your job to go into unsafe situations, but there aren't always the supports in place that are going to keep you as safe as possible. And so, um, you know, emergency room physicians, doctors, there are people in roles like that where, um, you know, they're kind of showing up to keep other people safer to focus on the health of others. And that same kind of courtesy is not extended to them because of their role. Um, and then the, the last one I wanted to just highlight is compassion fatigue. So, you know, especially when we think about health and human services providers, um, where people just get to the point where they're just no longer able to show up and care for clients or people seeking help due to just repeated exposure over time to trauma and to needs of others that really our systems are not designed to support, um, the level of acuity that I think we're seeing right now since covid and, um, we, we really just don't have the funding and the systems to support the, uh, the mental health needs in, in all parts of our, our work that we're seeing.

Speaker 1 (21:29):

Um, so those are some things I just wanna draw attention to. 'cause I think sometimes we can start trying to address burnout without realizing that, you know, maybe there's something else that's going on that would have a different solution. Uh, so when we think about solutions, Shera, I know our culture right now is really focused on self-care as a big solution. And oftentimes when we, we hear burnout and self-care kind of spoken about in the same breath.

Speaker 2 (22:07):

Yeah. I've been on a, you know, a personal kind of anti self-care journey myself. Um, you know, I think that for years now, and I think kind of in the wake of many things, like you were saying, Kimberly, you know, in the wake of a pandemic, in the wake of big political issues going on around the world, you know, people try to find solutions to deal with like these big

scary problems. And you know, if you go on social many, uh, social media any day of the week, you know, you see so much, you know, content around, uh, self-care and, you know, going on vacations and all the luxurious, like 50 step facial care routines and things like that. Um, and you know, one of the things that I've been reading about and learning about is, you know, self-care is not enough when it comes to these types of things.

Speaker 2 (23:01):

Um, it really puts the onus on the individual to solve their own problem when these are systemic problems. These are organizational level problems. These are problems that need solutions that, you know, change policies and cultures, um, to move away from the way things are done and create supports and systems to support, you know, the workforce holistically. Um, and I think that it's really important that whatever solutions are created have that in mind. Like we think about, you know, uh, the great resignation and a lot of women who are out of work now because there's not childcare for them to, you know, afford and put their child in. So a lot of people have had to step back from the workforce in order to take care of their children, you know, and a lot of that probably has been, you know, after people have burnt out to the point where they're like, I just can't do this anymore.

Speaker 2 (23:59):

So a lot of people are having to make some really tough decisions around, you know, their, their lives and their livelihoods. Um, so yeah, I think whatever, whatever solutions we come up with need to really create spaces holistically and create, um, create po policies and practices that allow people to thrive in their jobs and life. Allow people to thrive and have a balance that work-life balance, that elusive work- life balance that we're all looking for. Um, so Kimberly, can you share an idea about how, um, supporting people about how people can be supported in the workplace?

Speaker 3 (24:40):

Yeah, absolutely. There are many resources, but one of the biggest is to involve your workforce, your employees, your staff in some of the decision making processes. Um, encourage their input and collaborate on solutions. And this just allows your employees and your staff to feel heard, to feel valued, and they're more likely to be engaged. Um, and this reduces burnout. And then also, without being said, you know, like follow through on those solutions, those strategies that you have collectively come up with. Um, and then just make sure that you track them so you can continue to look at, um, are they working or are they changing?

Speaker 3 (25:43):

Uh, and then another one is to invest in ongoing training. Invest in skill development opportunities for yourself, for your staff, for um, people in your people that you're not necessarily partnering with, but people that are, you're working with. And so invest in

those, those developmental opportunities and consider incorporating mental health and stress management programs to promote healthy wellbeing. Um, this enhances skills and knowledge and empowers your staff to handle responsibilities more effectively. And it gives them greater confidence and it can also all of that lead to reduced burnout. Um, and then two more. One is around media networking, communication, using various approaches to foster a sense of community and support among your employees. And this can include online forums or social groups where you can share your experiences, seek advice, offer support to one another. But I think this, that being said, goes beyond just professional talk, beyond just professional exchange, um, but really getting to know each other and how to support one another.

Speaker 3 (27:02):

Um, and then regular communication, I think that's something big among, uh, especially now that people are moving hybrid or virtual is feeling still connected. Regular communication through newsletters, webinars, social media, keep people informed, let them know that they're part of the group and that they're gonna be the first ones to get this information before it is shared further. Um, but then under like underlying all of it is, is data. Um, figure out how to regularly assess and monitor the wellbeing of your staff, their stress levels, their satisfaction, their workload, and measure it over time. And then use those numbers to then evaluate and see if there's a threshold where people start to teeter toward burnout or their thriving.

Speaker 1 (28:13):

I would say from an organizational change and especially culture change perspective, to start by asking people, are you burned out? There are, you know, inventories, there's a maslo burnout inventory you can use, there's a mini z there's a couple of different questionnaires out there that can be used. But you can also just ask people how do you define burnout? And would you say you're burned out and see what they say? You can ask them, you know, what's important to you, what matters to you, what, what keeps you here? Um, and then and finding out, you know, what supports do people need and what support looks like for them. I think in, for leaders in leadership positions that they can really make it a priority to focus on workforce wellness and consider that to be a main priority in their decision making that as much as you think about, you know, resources, the bottom line, whatever drives your decision making that your workforce needs to be considered there as well.

Speaker 1 (29:14):

And then lastly, I would say, you know, really identifying policies and practices in organizations that people are telling you are driving burnout. And believe them when they tell you, because they'll only tell you so many times before they leave. And I think we need to do a better job of really looking at those policies and practices and rather than creating reactive policies when things happen. Um, start thinking about how we can protect, um, protect people, protect our workforce, rather than always protect, protecting the

organization at the expense of the workforce. Um, and I would wrap all of that up by saying, we talked about how you can't self-care your way out of burnout. Um, so I would love to hear from you all, you know, without, without kind of bringing in that self-care piece, what are things that you do personally to prevent burnout? Uh, Sherra, I don't know if you wanna start 'cause you're on a personal crusade against self-care <laugh>.

Speaker 2 (30:15):

Sure. Um, yeah, I mean, I think that the first thing that I try to do is just inform myself about kind of the differences between like just, you know, I'm, I'm reading a book, they call it faux self-care, um, the faux self-care versus the real self-care and really thinking, um, you know, really thinking hard about what is it that I need to change about the way that I'm living my life from day to day, um, in order to create space for, you know, taking care of myself, um, not just self-care, but like care on a deeper, a deeper level. Um, you know, some of the things that I've read are, you know, uh, you know, thinking about like your nine to five and like, is that serving you? And like, are there some tough decisions that you need to make about, um, you know, the, the career you're in, the job that you're in, um, the organization that you're in.

Speaker 2 (31:15):

And do those, um, do those things really align with your values as a person and your values of like how you wanna live your life? And if not, like what are some, you know, real big decisions that you need to make? Um, I know for me personally, um, you know, I've kind of adopted the mindset of like, you know, I'm not doing heart surgery here. Like, no one's gonna die. So I try to be really realistic about like the work that I do and the time, the timelines and the work plans that I develop to do things because, you know, if no one's gonna die, then I don't need to kill myself trying to meet some goal. And, you know, taking those vacation days and PTO (paid time off) days and like making sure that like, it's not just, you know, I'm working, working, working to get to a PTO day or vacation days, but how do I incorporate that space in the everyday, in my everyday life so that, you know, I'm not, you know, just recharging every so often, but that it's, you know, built into and sustainable in my everyday life.

Speaker 1 (32:24):

Ooh, there is so much wisdom there. I hope everybody who's listening to this podcast just cuts out that portion and carries Sherra's voice around in their heads with them. I know. I'm gonna make note of those things for myself too. Uh, Kimberly, what's one thing you do personally to prevent burnout?

Speaker 3 (32:43):

Well, I wish it was full of, um, as much wisdom and, uh, all of that knowledge as Sherra, but mine is much more simple and therefore, perhaps, um, something people can do right now. Um, what I do I try to do daily is get outside, um, preferably by myself. I'm not

naturally a solitary person. I'm very gregarious, but I've found that going outside, especially somewhere calm, somewhere with nature, just kind of being, it is enough to be like a sustainable practice where I can feel grounded, feel like not taking myself too seriously, but also I am, I am important, but I'm not the most important. Um, it just really sober. It's, it's a very sobering experience in one where I feel like, um, I can get clarity, uh, when I'm just spending time outside doing whatever. Um, and that's something that I try to do, try to do daily, whether I used to run all the time, that used to be it, but now it can even be going out and like taking hikes and things like that without music, without maybe with music, but just with the intention of this isn't exercise, this isn't like a chore, this isn't a task.

Speaker 3 (34:04):

This is like time for myself to be with myself and be in nature and, um, listen to whatever comes to mind, um, and really like practice on myself. So that's something that I try to do and I've found it really rewarding and a sustainable practice that I can count on to help as well.

Speaker 1 (34:28):

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. Um, I think for me, I, my things that I do now are be really intentional about creating connections, um, in ways that I'm also mindful that are not adding demands or adding burden to others, um, but are really like creating those supportive relationships, supportive environments and around that really working hard to intentionally build trust and trusting relationships as well as working really intentionally to building psychological safety into teaming environments and relationships and spaces that I'm a part of and in my work. And when I cannot find trust and I cannot find psychological safety, and I heard this from you too, Shera and a little bit from you Kimberly, that like setting boundaries and making sure that I'm not working outside of the boundaries that help me be successful is one of the things that has become most important to preventing burnout for myself. So, um, I just wanna thank you ladies, thank you for bringing me into this conversation. Thank you for your honesty. Thank you for the lovely humans that you are and I'm so glad that we're making this conversation bigger and, so glad to hear your voices and, and what you consider and wanna bring to the table related to this really important topic.

Speaker 2 (35:54):

Thank you, Jessica. Thank you for your expertise and what you bring to, and just, you just have such a big heart <laugh>. That's one one of the things I always appreciate about you. Alright,

Speaker 1 (36:08):

Thanks everybody.