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“Pandemic Brain,” Burnout, and 2022

Posted on [December 15, 2021](#) by [Olivia Smith Schlinck](#)



[In my first post, I wrote about the big feelings](#) our students might be grappling with and how to approach the semester carefully, with kindness and grace. Lately I’ve been asking myself: how do we do the same for ourselves? Something about this moment – this month, this semester, this year, you pick – feels. . . off. People are stressed, depressed, or entirely burnt out. People are [quitting their jobs at higher-than-average rates](#) and having trouble focusing on their work, [feeling overwhelmed and distracted](#). It’s almost 2022 and people are still struggling with processing 2020.

Our collective burnout is not a surprise, really, when you think about it: 21 months of an ever-evolving pandemic; growing exhaustion and resentment towards public health restrictions; the whiplash of going “back to normal” at work while the pandemic rages on; a sky-high inflation rate; the impending resumption of student loan repayments; recent natural disasters in the West. Parents have just barely gotten some relief in the form of vaccines for many children, but still not the youngest. We can’t catch a break and everything is hard. And yet we’ve been soldiering on at work as if the world outside our windows is not still on fire.

There has been widespread speculation that the pandemic is at least partially to blame for the collective burnout we’re experiencing. Now, the Harvard Medical School has offered proof: a link between the pandemic and psychological distress. [In a newly published study](#), still under peer review, researchers found that “pandemic-associated stressors may have triggered a neuroimmune response in non-infected individuals.” Translation: the pandemic has literally changed our brains.

Recently, two of the researchers spoke about the “Pandemic Brain” phenomenon on the [Buzzfeed Daily podcast](#). To briefly summarize the science: inflammation is an immune response designed to protect you from getting sick in response to some pathological event, like the introduction of bacteria or a virus. This is a good thing. Things start to turn sour when the original reason for inflammation is resolved but still the inflammation remains. Prior

studies have found that chronic stress and social isolation can increase neuroinflammation, and neuroinflammation can cause fatigue, brain fog, pain, and depression.

The study found an increase in neuroinflammatory markers in healthy individuals after pandemic-related lockdowns. And while the small study does not fully show a causal relationship between psychological symptoms and neuroinflammation, it does suggest some link between the two. If stress and social isolation can increase neuroinflammation, then a pandemic is sure to contribute to an increase in these symptoms.

So, how do we fix it? That's the problem. [Speaking with BuzzFeed Daily](#), one of the researchers jokes that “ending the pandemic” would be the best fix. Easy, right? Without an answer on the exact cause of the increase neuroinflammation, identifying a treatment is difficult. For now, the researchers point to traditional anti-inflammatory measures like cutting back on alcohol, exercising, doing yoga, taking specific supplements, and meditating.

From anecdotal evidence (aka tweets from fellow librarians and academics), it seems that burnout is hitting academic law librarians particularly hard. Most have worked in-person since the Time Before the Vaccines. Those working at a university with mask mandates have added “Mask Police” to their job descriptions. Judging by [the sheer number of job vacancies](#) posted online in the past few months, many of us are working in understaffed libraries. But I think that most of the problem is that we've just continued to work, full steam ahead, no break in sight, no time to stop and breathe and try to make sense of the last two years.

While these inflammation-reducing tips are certainly useful, I was frustrated by a lack of discussion about larger, structural changes that employers can make to reduce our stress. Meditation might be a good band-aid but higher salaries, better benefits, and more time off would go a long way. In an ideal world, universities would offer some type of additional time off to support their employees in distress. But I suppose that in an ideal world there'd be no pandemic.

For those of us without institutional power, a band-aid might be all we can do for now. So, I offer a suggestion: take a break. Pause to practice self-care, to be gentle with yourself, to check in with your mental health. Take time to process the last 21 months. Take time to grieve – for loved ones lost, for time lost, for opportunities gone and memories uncreated and lives lived trapped inside your home.

Many of you likely have a break in the coming weeks for the new year. I hate that we have to use our holiday and family time to recharge and heal instead of actual institutional support. ([And evidence suggests that vacation does not solve burnout unless it is coupled with institutional change](#)). But for now, it's the best we've got. So if you're feeling burnt out, exhausted, depressed: take a break. Unplug. Don't check your email during your time off. Email will still be there in the new year (and it's a library – what kind of emergency could there be?). Take a break from your projects. And please, I am begging you, [“don't spend your holiday break writing.”](#)

The Harvard study recently gained popularity when [a TikToker posted a video explanation of the findings](#). The video closes with this: **“it's really encouraging to know that I'm not alone. . . If you're struggling right now, you're definitely not alone and it's not your fault.”** This is perhaps one other small way to combat Pandemic Brain – knowing you are not struggling alone. I too have experienced the increase in brain fog, the

fatigue, the depression associated with Pandemic Brain. Hearing those words helped me, and so I wanted to share them with you. If no one else you know feels the way you do, you have me to sit with in solidarity.

This entry was posted in [Work/Life Balance](#) and tagged [2022](#), [burnout](#), [mental health](#), [new year](#), [pandemic](#), [pandemic brain](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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