

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello, and welcome to You Got This! A podcast about teaching and learning and sustaining community for everyone at Thompson Rivers University. I'm your host, Brenna Clarke Gray, Coordinator of Educational Technologies, and this podcast is a project of your friends over at Learning Technology & Innovation. We're housed with an open learning, but we support the whole campus community. I record this podcast in Tk'emlups te Secwepemc within the unseated traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And today's episode is a minisode, no interview today. By the time you hear it, I will be in Ontario with my family, not checking my email. Friends, I want to talk a little bit today about burnout. Yeah, I know, I know, but let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

If you've tried to get any work out of me in the last month, you'll notice that I have been sick a lot, like a lot, a lot. The last two weeks of March I was off, I was off for two weeks at the beginning of January, and then this week I was off at the beginning of the week. This week has really been the one that kind of struck, though. It was a pretty straightforward daycare virus situation. I have a little bundle of germs who goes off to school and brings home germs, and there's norovirus going through the school system here in Kamloops, just fantastic. So, yeah, we got hit.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

But my husband and my kiddo were out for 18 to 24 hours really. Kiddo stayed home a couple more days to be safe, but he was fine. He was eating and playing and being himself and everything. I'm on like day five of not really being able to keep food down. Yeah, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, you don't need to hear that. The good news is I'm mostly subsisting on jello, which is delicious. I mean, highly recommend. But I think my body might be trying to tell me something. One of the things that I have started to slowly learn is that when I don't take rest, my body takes it for me and it's always been this way, right? When I was teaching faculty, I used to get to the end of the semester right around this time and I would just crash. Just like I'd just have a three day migraine, and it was like my body was being like, "You know what, your grades are in, go to bed. Go to bed and never get up again." That's a lot harder once you have kids incidentally. There's a lot less space for that kind of crash and burn mentality.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Anyway, all this to say since January, I've had a series of concrete illnesses like the norovirus, real things that have happened to me, my body, myself. But what has alarmed me, I guess, a little bit is how long recovery has taken each time. Each time I've seemed to really struggle to get back on my feet, and in the interim periods all through really since January, I've been struggling with brain fog and difficulty staying on task, problems with focus, and a real struggle to not procrastinate. I've always been a procrastinator in general. I like pulling big stretches of time of focus rather than poking away at a task, and it's not a particularly healthy habit as we tell students. But this is like not just procrastinating because I know I'm going to save a big chunk of time, this is like procrastinating because I just don't want to do it. Can't bring myself to address the task. Yeah, if you've been waiting on something for me, it's been a hell of a term.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I had planned this trip back to Ontario, which I am on now, as I speak to you from the past, for some time. It's a big celebration. My kiddo is double vaxxed, we can go see my family. Hopefully, safely, and hopefully, my dad, as I've said before, is immune compromised. So it's a big concern for me when we

travel that we keep him as safe as we can. This whole situation of being double vaxxed was like a big opportunity. Let's go to Ontario for a big chunk of time so the grandparents can really have some time with their kiddo.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

But I was always planning to work. There were conferences that I wanted to do and papers I wanted to write and responses that I had committed to, peer reviews. Like all kinds of stuff. I had committed to all kinds of stuff that I was just planning to work at during my four weeks. I was going to do a full week of TRU work in there answering tickets on the help desk and such. I've decided I'm not going to, which is hard for me. The only reason I can do this by the way is because my team is so, so supportive. So to Jamie and Brian and Brad, thank you for making it possible for me to take some time away and try to recuperate my poor brain.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Deciding not to do that, by the way, deciding not to work has been really hard. I've spent the last few days writing emails withdrawing from conferences, turning down opportunities, including gosh, some of my favourite things, opportunities to visit classrooms and talk to students, saying no to that. That's all been really difficult for me. I think part of that is self-concept and a desire to achieve. Part of it is just I really love my job. I love what I do and I really enjoy it, and so turning down opportunities is hard just and like a pleasure principle.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

The difference between just taking time out reasonably and recognizing you're on the verge of burnout, for me, it's when it crosses into the physical realm. Like when my physical health starts to suffer. It's something that I find really alarming, frankly, right? The brain and the body are connected, how dare you? Anyway, I'm going away for a few weeks, which means that the podcast is going away for a few weeks and I wanted to address it here. Not just because I wanted to tell you that the show wouldn't be on the air for a few weeks, but because I think we need to talk more about burnout and how burnout isn't just about workload. I've been thinking about that a lot, because it feels so weird to me that I feel so unwell now when our workload has ebbed. I mean, compared to where we were a year ago, two years ago, our workload is nothing in comparison. But there's all also been, well A, sustained work, sustained high volumes of work for a really long time. But, B, I think in many ways, the fully online semester was a lot easier for me to manage. The workload was huge, but it was really predictable and there was a very concrete set of tasks to accomplish. On a certain level, I think there was quite a lot of adrenaline. I felt a great deal of pride in the work that we were doing as a team, and I felt really celebratory of it. I think that had a big impact. I also think that just downright uncertainty that we've been living in all this time, but I think particularly since the world has started to open up again. For me, that's been something that has really fueled a lot of anxiety. The less data we have, the less comfortable we feel generally like in life. So this phase of the pandemic has been wearing on me emotionally.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It feels vulnerable to talk about burnout, because it isn't just about workload, right? I think many of us who are drawn to careers in universities tend to be pretty driven, tend to be pretty high capacity folks, or tend to at least conceive of ourselves as being high capacity. And we tend to struggle with the idea of not being able to achieve, or at least I do. The other reason why burnout feels really vulnerable is because it's not just about workload, there's a pretty significant mental health component. I feel unwell

in my body and in my emotional self, and that's hard to talk about particularly in a workplace context. If someone had shame, which I clearly have none of, it would be really hard.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I've tangled with burnout twice before in my life, once in grad school where the culture of overwork is so pronounced. I think I was prone to overwork in undergrad as well, but the work was easier, more straightforward. There was only so far I could burn myself out. Although I did insist on having, oh God I don't know, I had like three part-time jobs while going to school full-time. Not for fun, obviously, it was necessary. I think I was tired a lot of the time, I don't think I was burnt out. In grad school, the desire to achieve at an extremely high level over an extremely long period of time. That was much more of a burnout situation.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Then, again, in my first job out of grad school, in retrospect, I wasn't a great departmental fit and a desire to try to achieve good fit, definitely led to an experience of burnout three or four years into my career there. Having met burnout before, I think I'm better at noticing it and recognizing it earlier in the process, which is good. I think that I'm better at taking steps to remedy it. The fact that I am actually going to take time off and actually not work is pretty new. It's pretty new for me. It's not something that I take to like a fish to water. Even the last time I took a chunk of time off early in the pandemic, I was off nominally from TRU, but I was doing workshops for BC Campus, I was doing conference papers, I was doing this, I was doing that. I wasn't really like off. I didn't really turn off my brain. This is good. It's important, it's healthy, and also, honestly, it's really scary, frankly. Like as someone who very much defines herself by her capacity to achieve and her work, and most importantly, I think I define myself by my ability to feel like I am being of service. Taking time off from that is really hard and it involves a lot of rethinking of self-concept. I'm trying to be gentle with myself through the process, and I want to be open with it here in case these feelings are things that you are struggling with too. And maybe you're not able to identify them or maybe you have identified them, but you're not sure what to do about it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

For folks who are done teaching now until the fall, I hope that you will find some time to take off. Folks who are rolling right in to summer semester, my heart is with you because I know how complex that transition is and how wearing it can be. I hope you can build some time in for rest at the end of the summer. I find it very tempting to think of rest as something I need to do so that I can come back and do my job better. That's a very comfortable place for me to spend my narrative energy. What's more radical, complex and difficult for me to think about is that I need to rest because my health matters independent of my work, and the modeling that I'm doing for my own kiddo about what it looks like to excel, that's really important too. And I need think about that when I'm giving everything to work.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

These are all the things I'm thinking about, and I will have obviously lots more time to think about it over the next four weeks when I'm just looking after my kiddo and spending time with my family and being away from my desk and from my email and from demands. I might even delete Twitter. I'm probably not going to delete Twitter. Well, if Elon Musk buys it, I'm definitely deleting Twitter. But, barring that, no, you'll probably find me there. All of this to say, if any of this resonates with you, I hope you'll think about how to build some rest and recuperation in for yourself because it matters. If you don't do it, trust me, your body will make you, humbling though it is.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That is it for season two, episode 25 of You Got This! And that is it for me for a little while. The next new episode will drop on May 23rd, and we'll be back to our usual interview structure on May 30th. So don't forget about us, we're here and we're coming back. As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm not checking it right now, but you can do it. I am bgray@tru.ca. I'm also on Twitter [@brennacgray](https://twitter.com/brennacgray), and in both cases, that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca. Of course, you can always comment on individual episodes there.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I am not going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. Instead, I'm going to recommend that you prioritize rest. If you're not teaching anymore, I hope that the whirlwind of meetings that is May and often June will subside quickly, and that you will be able to find some space and time for yourself then. If you are teaching, I hope that you can look ahead to August and really find some time for yourself at that point. While we're thinking about rest, particularly, for those of us who are about to be embroiled in curriculum redevelopment or design or program design, I hope we're thinking about how to build rest and model it for our learners as well. They learn from watching us, and I know how many toxic and unhealthy work habits I picked up from watching the people I most admired. I think it's up to us to break that cycle too. So until May 23rd, I will be thinking about you and I will be resting, and I hope for the same for you. Take care of yourselves and each other, and we'll talk really soon. Take care. Bye-bye.