

VASTA

Voice and Speech Trainers Association, Inc.
Spring 2001 Volume 15, Number 2

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Stress and Strategies to Prevent Burnout

Mary Corrigan, Professor Emeritus
University of California at San Diego, Department of Theatre/Dance

Last August members of VASTA presented a panel at ATHE entitled "Burnout: Strategies to Prevent It." The panelists were selected because of their varied talents and for the demands of their profession. Each of the presenters engage in some or most of the following tasks (and sometimes simultaneously): skilled actor, director, coach, 'rescuer-bandaid-applier', able administrator, author, editor, researcher, consultant, while continuously striving to be superb teachers! Do you feel as though I just described your job?

These multiple juggling acts, coupled with the stress of obtaining academic promotion can frequently affect health, personal relationships, and the joy of daily living. Stress is part of every form of life. We need to have the tension of opposing muscles in order to stand, sit, or walk. Life without stress would be impossible. However, when we have too much stress, our bodies mobilize to fight or flight because we experience a threat to our survival. And each of us responds to stress differently. Even highly stimulating activities (acting, directing, teaching) can evoke a stress response. Today's voice teachers are required to fulfill multiple professional roles: coach, teacher, scholar, committee member, colleague, advisor, actor/director, husband/wife/lover, and friend. When there are multiple conflicting requirements coupled with too much stress, too little sleep and too little time, our basic balance can be seriously disturbed. Did you know that 75-90% of office visits to physicians are stress related?

The average news sound bite has shrunk from 42 seconds to a mere 8 seconds. The average network TV ad has shrunk from 53 seconds to 25, and three second television ads are on the way! Today within our multi-task profession stress-free relaxation time has become all too scarce, while academic and professional pressures have become ever greater. In the following articles, Bonnie Raphael, Jan Gist, and Nancy Houfek present their experiences with stress and the strategies they have developed to reduce it and to prevent burnout. [Panelists included Kate Burke and Louis Colaiani whose excellent papers are not included due to space constraints.]

How to Avoid Burnout

Bonnie Raphael, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

On April Fool's Day, 1999, I was up in the attic of my home seeing whether the roof had managed to withstand a torrential rainfall the night before. It was early morning, I was in a hurry, and I didn't play close enough attention to what I was doing—I stepped where I thought there was a floor, but there wasn't. I went through the attic floor, through the second-floor ceiling, and landed on my feet, on the floor of the bathroom, and broke my leg badly enough to require hospitalization and surgery.

What does this have to do with burnout? A lot, I think. Kate DeVore, a good friend and a wise woman, sent me an e-mail that perfectly summed up what had happened. It read, "First God whispers in your ear. Then He taps you on your shoulder. Then He breaks ~~(continued on page 7)~~

VASTA Bibliographers Solicit Member's Help

The 2000–2001 VASTA bibliographers, Beth McGee and Jeff Morrison, are now soliciting new titles and authors from 1997/8 to 2000 to add to the next edition of the VASTA bibliography. If you've never seen or used the bibliography, it can be an excellent resource to get you out of tight spots or to further your research: it contains a wealth of titles and authors, and each entry is also accompanied by a short abstract describing the contents of the title.

The bibliography, first published in 1993, with addendums in 1995 and 1997, is full of fantastic information, but a lot has happened in even the last three years. The bibliography currently contains titles under the following headings: Voice Production and Speech Training, Singing, Text, Dialects, Body Awareness Training and Self-Use, and Speech Science. We are looking for new book titles, new journal articles, videos, audiotapes, or any obscure but fantastic titles you have encountered that you think might not yet be in the bibliography—and if you published a book, in a journal, or self-published anything this year, we may not be able to find it yet on the Web or at the library, so please send us that relevant information! If you submit an entry, please include at minimum the title and author; if you can send us the complete bibliographic note, better; if you have written or read the item in question, please send us an abstract.

With all the discussion on the VOX this year about movement and voice/movement integration, we thought we would strongly encourage people to submit titles in that area, and to include movement texts under the Body Awareness . . . category.

Finally, we are looking for people to volunteer to read titles and submit short abstracts after doing so. If you are curious about new ideas in our field, this can be a great excuse to read something about them, and you will be thanked in the acknowledgments. Reading a single short article helps our efforts as much as reading a full-length text. Send entries, abstracts, or contact information (if willing to read titles) to BOTH Beth McGee and Jeff Morrison at the following email addresses: sbm2@po.cwru.EDU and jeff.morrison@uni.edu, or snail mail to Jeff Morrison at 309 Clay St., Cedar Falls, IA 50613.

Thanks for your help!

VASTAVOX

VASTAVOX is a listserv owned by Dudley Knight at UC-Irvine where members of the list can discuss, via e-mail, concerns about Voice and Speech. This open list allows anyone to join. VASTA members are encouraged to subscribe.

How to Subscribe: Send an e-mail message <listserv@uci.edu> in which you will leave the "subject" field blank and write in the body of the message: SUBSCRIBE VASTAVOX. First name, last name, as in the example: SUBSCRIBE VASTAVOX Dudley Knight. In short order you should receive a welcome message from VASTAVOX.

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It took a twelve-foot fall, followed by five days in the hospital and twelve weeks in a wheelchair for me to finally, finally get the message.

You know what they say about hindsight being 20/20? Well, my twelve weeks at home, either in bed or in a wheelchair gave me a great deal of time to think things over, to visit myself. I realized that my fall was an incredibly powerful metaphor—that the universe would simply not support me, given the path I was on. I realized the extent to which the chief symptom of my burnout was my inability to be fully present. I had so much on my mind all the time, so many lists, so much that just had to get done, that I was unable to devote myself entirely to any one given task, including telephone conversations, faculty meetings, meals, coaching sessions, movies, even sleep.

I was naïve enough to have believed that when I gave up the wonderful but very, very demanding job I had at the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard, I had in fact simplified my life. It was true, but only to a limited extent—it was not until I acknowledged how much of my workaholic mindset and practices I had brought to North Carolina with me that I finally started, little by little, to begin to turn things around. I suspect that, for me at least, this will be my life's work.

I still slip more often than I usually care to admit, especially when I am at meetings like this one, catching up with so many people who knew me before my fall. But for the most part, I feel a lot more present than I have been in the past. I sincerely hope it doesn't take anyone reading this anything like what it took to get me to change my life!

Why are theatre practitioners in general and voice coaches in particular so susceptible to burnout? There are many reasons. Some of the most important:

1) Many of us love our work so much that we quickly get trapped into doing far too much of it to remain healthy and to have some balance in our lives. Our work can certainly be lots of fun and very interesting, but it is never done—no matter how much we do, no matter how many hours we work. Unless we set boundaries for ourselves and stick to them, they simply disappear. One of the reasons that the Actors' Equity Association Handbook stipulates an eight-hour work day is for the same reason; actors and voice coaches alike need to be protect from ourselves.

2) Our jobs are generally labor-intensive and relatively low paying, so we have neither the luxury of free time nor the funds to pay others to do some of the tasks for us (whether it's housework, correspondence, tape duplicating, e-mail correspondence). Unless we are vigilant around expectations and boundaries, there's a constant feeling of being behind.

Is there anything we can do? I think so, but the solutions are neither simple nor straightforward. For me:

1) I have finally come to realize that too many perfectly reasonable requests—from students, actors, colleagues, even family—can provide the basis for an unreasonable schedule and far too much stress to stay healthy. So one of the many things I am learning to do is to say "No" to requests that seem really reasonable on their own but not in the context of a bigger picture.

2) I also think it is essential that we insist on being paid for what we

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and coaching duties. We also should always receive theater credits on productions we have worked. Individuals may have to journal these hours in order to let chairs or artistic directors or clients know just how much time it can take to get a given job done correctly. Instead of feeling indulgent about this, see if you can reframe the concept, so that you are setting an example, not only for your overworked and overscheduled and sleep-deprived students but perhaps for your colleagues or even your boss as well.

3) I must keep reminding myself over and over that there is no such thing as perfect, and that I need to decide, sometimes unilaterally, what is "good enough" and when my work on a particular project or with a particular actor is done. Only once in my entire career have I had an employer ask me, "Bonnie, where were you last night?" We missed you." All the other times, I myself was the taskmaster who remained impossible to satisfy.

4) I think it's useful to acknowledge our own need for recognition, appreciation, perhaps even martyrdom and to begin moving in the direction of efficiency, competency, even anonymity instead. Dare we give up our addiction to drama (be it on stage or off)? Dare we risk (God forbid!) being boring, having few or no exciting stories to share with people we haven't seen in a while? What a concept.

5) I think it's quite useful to put ourselves on our lists. If we were to lavish even part of the attention and care of ourselves that so many of us give to others, the quality of our lives would improve immediately as well as over the long run. For example, I find that one way I can regain my enthusiasm and zest for my work is by not doing it in the summers. Thankfully, I have reached a point in my career where I can manage without the extra income, because I have discovered in no uncertain terms that the free time is far more valuable to me than the added income.

6) I also help avoid burnout by attending VASTA meetings each year and by taking advantage of VASTAVOX. Colleagues whom I respect hear me out, offer me sympathy, support and validation, exchange war stories, provide needed counsel. I am reminded of what a splendid group of individuals constitute the membership of VASTA and am reenergized.

I really do not want to preach to you. I certainly don't want to give you the impression that I have figured it all out forever and am becoming Yoda! These adjustments are difficult and ongoing—often needing to be reexamined on a daily if not an hourly basis—and I have certainly been guilty of some major lapses. But I continue to seek a stillness within, a simplicity, an ability to be present, moment-to-moment; I continue to learn from the two

Stress and Burnout

Jan Gist, Alabama Shakespeare Festival

Burnout: Occurs from work; inability to say no and/or to limit hours and projects; pressures to achieve and produce; unresolved conflicts between colleagues, actors, students, directors; lack of adequate rest; lack of institutional support; plus the ongoing, unrelenting nature of the work.

What does Burnout feel like? Exhaustion and depletion:

levels of difficulty to focus, difficult to begin new projects, concentration is affected, difficult to think effectively and efficiently, to make decisions, to have clear judgement. So you work harder and take longer at each part of the job.

Some Affects of Burnout: **Grief:** Loss of joy, energy, passion, focus, idealism, pride, effectiveness, sense of purpose in your life.

Rage: Pent up and explosive anger at feeling abused and not respected. Blaming others, short temper, lack of patience, hard on yourself, which results in depression.

Depression: There is a tendency to turn grief and rage inward on yourself because you can't afford to turn it on employers, co-workers, and students. This can produce a sense of generalized helplessness and/or a sense of paralysis and dread.

Creates an inability to make changes or choices.

Defensiveness: You are already giving more of your self than feels good, so you feel burdened by requests, but you still have trouble saying "NO," which can result in acting out defensive behaviors, allergies, body postures, and illness. There is a tendency to cling to old familiar ways rather than experimenting with new and different approaches or developing more satisfactory coping mechanisms. There is also a loss of perspective.

Conflict: Different points of view start to look like battles rather than interesting possibilities, new ideas, or potential avenues of discussion. So many aspects in theater and teaching need attention at the same time, it is difficult to allocate priorities when overly fatigued.

Strategies to Combat Burnout: **Scheduling.** **Put yourself into the picture.** You can't be in more than one place at a time. Make a point of being relaxed and fully 'present' while you are there.

Plan meals and take time away from work to eat. (Eat some protein, even if during meetings).

Get enough sleep. (melatonin, kava)

Tally up your hours and limit them per week. How many 12-hour days do you accept a week? Take breaks throughout the day to "clear" yourself.

Take at least one day off every week with NO WORK OF ANY KIND. Carefully select who to spend that time with. Honor your own thoughts and feelings. Honor your one day off. Say NO to meetings or school work on that day. *Work at home is work, don't pretend it isn't.* (When you do work at home, find ways to make it more relaxed and focused.)

Engage in other interests beside theater and teaching. Get acquainted with your inner self. Make quiet time for your thoughts and feelings.

When on the job: Avoid power struggles. When coaching professionals, if they want to do all the talking to prove they are right, let them talk for a while. Listen and get to know them. Look for openings: find ways for genuine agreement, praise, sympathy, and then ask, "How can I help? What do you want to achieve?" Be clear about what you do and don't offer: "I'm not the director. Let's explore together," or "The director asked me to work with you on these specifics." Focus on what can realistically be done in each vocal session. Don't try to achieve too many things.

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Be sure that the director is supportive of your work with the actors. Differentiate what you can and can not change in that finite time span.

Your time counts: Limit how often you sit in rehearsals and run through. Don't go to opening nights unless you really want to, and be clear about what you are going for. Don't take notes on opening night. Let the actors own it.

Find allies at work. Who is it safe to vent to? Who can you confide in and who can keep your secrets? How much can they tolerate hearing? Enjoy their company. Choose when to ask for support and assistance.

Find allies away from work. Find friends whom you trust and enjoy. Find friends to have a history with, to grow with, people who are nurturers as well as takers. Consider having a pet.

Honor your insights and your own way of thinking.

Honor your own sense of timing. Allow time for creative projects to percolate, release the goal of total perfection, and ask: "Where does this come from, this self-inflicted demand that I be a perfect servant? How can I change this message? What is it I really care about? How do I give myself permission to grow towards that, while accepting my frailties today?"

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT "BURNOUT"

Nancy Houfek, Head of Voice & Speech

American Repertory Theatre/Institute for Advanced Theatre Training
Harvard University

[Nancy's paper has been edited due to space constraints; contact Craig Ferre (see page 12) for an unedited version.]

Writing this paper has been both profound and useful. I have been a workaholic as far back as I can remember. Burnout happens to me when I feel more going out than coming in. Our profession is particularly susceptible, I believe, because our roles are so undefined and variable, our work is best when unnoticed, and the voice process is by nature both slow and deep. I know when I am approaching burnout: I sense combinations of exhaustion, boredom, and frustration. My focus becomes narrower and narrower. After listing a number of situations which cause me stress, I realized I could simplify them to two types:

1. Times when I feel that I can't accomplish what I think I should, and

2. Times when I feel unacknowledged for what I have accomplished.

I also became aware that some of the things that create stress for me might actually have the opposite effect on someone else.

I have distilled my personal strategies to alleviate stress to seven points. They fall into four overlapping categories: physical, personal, professional, and philosophical. Articulating them has been very revealing to me; I can now see how and when I have not attended to myself. I hope they are helpful to you.

1. STAY PHYSICALLY FIT

I know this seems obvious. I often laugh at myself for not listening to the admonitions I give my students about their health. When I do forget to prioritize my physical well being, my alignment changes and breathing capacity diminishes.

Here are some of my day-to-day solutions:

*I walk to work every day. It takes about twenty minutes, the same time and less stress than driving. During my walk, I listen to my body. I breathe. I plan my day and organize my thoughts for teaching. I also can experience what the day is actually like—hot, cold, wet, sunny—and take note of the seasonally changing sky, river and foliage. If I am feeling muddled or anxious during the day, I'll take a walk outside to clear my head rather than drink a cup of coffee or eat something sweet.

*I participate fully with my students in class. I kill two birds with one stone: I feel what they are feeling in their bodies, I stay loose and open myself.

*I also try to sleep on regular schedule. The theatre world is not conducive to those with an early morning circadian rhythm. I have a mat in my office so I can take a nap when I simply need to stop.

As a result, my energy can stay high during the day. I sleep better. My mood is better. I can look forward to what the day may bring.

2. KNOW WHAT YOU CAN DO IN A DAY.

If I have scheduled too much to do in one day, I end up constantly watching the clock. I am not able to fully give to each moment because I am worried about getting to next moment. I sometimes think I should be in two or three places at one time. Often I don't acknowledge that I am tired; I let adrenaline keep me going. I start to get cranky and feel attacked by the things I have to do. I get frustrated that I cannot do what I think I should. I rush to get the small tasks done and often have to do them over.

I have become vigilant about counteracting these situations by the following:

*Every morning, I make a list of what I'd like to get done that day. I also have a list of what I'd like to accomplish during the week, and an ongoing "master list" of my projects/goals for the year.

*I am learning not to overbook a day. It is important to know my physical limits and acknowledge that a two-hour one-on-one coaching session, for example, can be exhausting. I schedule breaks into the day which include preparation times, travel times, exercise times, eating times and simply "do nothing" times.

*I have increased the number of interns (an excellent program started by Bonnie Raphael at the A.R.T.) I use during a year. The more I trust my interns to perform at a high level in teaching, coaching, or generating material, the more imaginative and dedicated they are. The higher my expectation, the higher their productivity.

*I try to keep my personal time UNscheduled. My goal is to focus clearly and cleanly on the moment at hand without anticipating or fearing the moment to come (we understand this as actors, why not as educators?) I think I am getting closer.

3. GUARD YOUR PERSONAL TIME

The best advice Bonnie Raphael gave me when she left this job four years ago was, "Establish your boundaries right away; otherwise, they will take everything they can from you." When I let those boundaries blur, I lose my center. I lose contact with my husband and our communication changes. What we as voice professionals do is fundamentally social;

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I find I get “talked out” and need to be quiet in order to restore myself. Here are my day-to-day solutions:

*I make sure to schedule in personal quiet time during the day: lunch, swim, walk.

*When my day is done, I leave the theatre promptly.

*I try to leave work at work and focus on home at home. I rarely bring work home anymore.

*I don't plan anything for my day off. I resist the temptation to work.

*At home, I have learned when and how to ask for time totally for myself.

Guilt is my biggest enemy. But I know I am a better teacher and coach, more focused, relaxed, and imaginative, and better life partner, if I keep the boundaries in tact.

4. HAVE ALLIES

Despite the collaborative nature of theatre and education (or perhaps because of it), one can feel alone, unacknowledged, or even attacked. Some days I actively need to seek out acknowledgement, and even praise, in order to keep going.

Here are some ways that I do this:

*Every day when I come home, I “debrief” with my husband. This has become a ritual. We both share the incidents of our day. I am able to put the good parts and the bad parts into perspective because he is a non-judgmental sounding board.

*I have developed wonderful relationships with educators at Harvard who have nothing to do with the theatre. This has been of tremendous importance to me. For example, a sticky political situation within the institution polarized the faculty and resulted in a student being let go. My ally outside the department could help me see the situation without the personalities. She was able to give me unbiased guidance as well as practical advice.

*I get support from within the organization. Theatres can often feel like a Petrie dish of gossip and conjecture. It's a necessity to find colleagues to trust; we can offer mutual acknowledgement and advice.

5. STAY CREATIVE

Due to the nature of my job at the A.R.T., I no longer have the time or focus to perform or direct, two important life-long creative outlets. Without the deep satisfaction engendered by the pure creative act, I can become resentful of the other work I am doing. I have found the solution to this in several ways:

*I challenge myself to risk new techniques, approaches or exercises when I teach. I wish to dynamically counteract the possible dullness of teaching the same work day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year.

*I take class, currently watercolor painting. What kind of class doesn't matter; the input and stimulation do.

*I paint. I can feel the danger and satisfaction of making something from nothing, the same deep reward I had in performance.

6. TAKE SMALL VICTORIES

There is always more to do than circumstance allows. I'm sure we all have the gnawing sensation that if only we had more time, if only the students weren't over-loaded, if only this actor were willing to change, if only that director were interested in the text, we could REALLY have an impact. We feel cursed with knowing how much is possible to teach, learn, perform, express, understand. I struggle to bring my expectations

in line with reality. My solutions are both practical and philosophical:

*When I check something off my daily list, it is a victory (even if I'm checking off “make list.”)

*When one student has one small breakthrough, it is a success.

*When a project doesn't succeed as a whole, if I can see where one person improved, I take the victory.

*I make a point to acknowledge and praise the small victories I see around me. How can I expect the same if I don't?

*I try to trust that the cumulative effect of the small victories will accomplish the whole in ways I cannot anticipate.

7. SEE THE LARGER PICTURE

The six points above seem to help me with the exhaustion, boredom, and frustration parts of burnout stress. I must wax philosophical to address a deeper part. The other crucial piece of advice Bonnie gave me was, “The only baggage you have is the baggage you bring with you.” Wind-surfers put it this way: attitude is everything.

*I find the role of voice coach/voice educator must be ego-free. Whenever my self-importance rears up, it gets in the way of the work. For example, if I feel unacknowledged by a director, disregarded by a movie star, or blown off by a student, I simply must see the whole scenario. The world is not about me.

*I am more centered when I realize I don't have to be liked to have an impact. It's nice, of course, but sometimes the student who doesn't like me learns the most from me.

*I need to remind myself often why I teach. We know what competitive pressures are on our students to succeed professionally. We understand the demands of a production needing voice results quickly. We also know there is a healthy level of competition within faculties and even between voice professionals. I must articulate for myself how simple and essential the work is above and beyond temporal success: breath, honesty, spontaneity, self-awareness, and expressivity are my true standards. The pleasure of teaching these things goes far deeper than the outward measure of a career.

*This brings me to my most philosophical point. I have had my share of disappointments and losses. I have come to believe that if I believe I live in a state of grace, I will live in a state of grace. Disappointment will lead to new opportunity if I see it. Loss will lead to gain if I let it. Stress will lead to

Arthur Lessac Winter Newsletter Article Follow-up

Arthur Lessac is planning an adventure-filled odyssey to South Africa this spring and summer. His further research, work with Lessac teachers in the area, workshops, lectures, and extended travel will require his attention abroad. Consequently, he will be unable to guest teach at the Lessac Summer Workshop Intensive in Durham, New Hampshire this July, as originally reported. The workshop is under the direction of longtime Workshop Program Director and Master Teacher Sue Ann Park and is being coordinated by Certified Lessac Teacher Deby Kinghorn, now at the University of New Hampshire, Durham. Sue Ann and Deby will be joined by Certified Lessac Teacher Nancy Krebs. For more information about the month long program, please contact Deby Kinghorn at: Deb.Kinghorn@unh.edu or Sue Ann Park at SayPark111@aol.com. Join this challenging Voice & Body Workshop Intensive!