Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Mental Health in Academia: Some Hard Truths

By:

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For better or worse, the editors of this special collection have asked me to write on mental health in academia. It is an important subject and one we need to destigmatise. My own qualifications to write on the subject are, however, limited to personal experience, observation and reflection. In that spirit, to misquote George Box's aphorism, all advice is imperfect, but some may be useful. The other substantial qualifiers I must obviously attach to anything I write on this subject are: first, situational (I am a bearded, white, middle-aged male); and, second, a statement of the bleeding obvious. We are all living through a pandemic, and few if any of us are operating at 100% cognitive capacity or emotional resiliency.

To begin: some years ago, at a different institution, I reached a point where professional, workplace, and personal pressures intersected for a period and I was simply unable to function as normal. Depression is certainly a possible label, so is burnout. I sometimes think of it as an implosion. I was fortunate enough to get help, recover, move on, and I have not since relapsed. However, what one finds on the other side of such events is not a return to things as they were before. Indeed, returning to what went on before is quite likely to repeat the patterns which caused one to burn out in the first place. Hopefully, one finds instead a new, better normal.

Let me tackle this in the following back-to-front way. Let me first offer some advice, then second let's ask 'how do I know if I have a problem?' and consider what happens on the day we wake up and realise we really are in a bad place.

So, first, let me try to provide a few key and provocative pieces of advice. Yes, many of the drivers of poor mental health in academia are structural. The profession is increasingly precarious, the ravages of managerialism across the university sector are well documented, we continue to struggle with sexism, ableism and racism in the academy. Mental health struggles set in early in academic careers. Additionally, there seems to be in most institutions a relentless accumulation of well-intentioned centrally-generated initiatives which result in more and more administrative work to be completed by frontline teaching and research staff (so-called "audit culture"). This all leads to a strong tendency for us to think: "the problems I face aren't personal, they're structural. Slogging on and getting through the day is simply what has to be done. There is no alternative".

Here is the first big hard truth. You're wrong.

Yes, many of the drivers of poor mental health are structural. However, the only thing we have much immediate control over is our own behaviour (he said, channeling the Stoics). This is particularly true in a profession like academia where we are substantially left to manage our own workload and agenda. (Note "manage" not "set"). This is not to say that willpower or moral fibre or a blood transfusion from a Nietzschean ubermensch will allow us to overcome structural conditions. It won't. All I am saying is that until the revolution comes or the neoliberal university model collapses, we each have to make our own choices

about how we survive in academia or whether we leave it.

Here are my next three critical hard truths. The first is that **if your problem is overworking, the only solution is to reduce your workload**. Read that again. Part of my recovery was going part-time for a period. I was fortunate that colleagues in key institutional roles supported me in that choice, and that it was an option ultimately available to me through the University as a workplace. It felt like an impossible decision (because there is always so much to do) and at least one friend gave me the well-intentioned advice that: “In academia going part-time is a cut only in pay”. But I policed my boundaries and used the time to get better. It was, in the end, the right option for me at the time because I could afford the temporary pay cut.

Such advice is easy to dismiss. (“He’s a senior, financially stable, male academic! So glad he could take time out!”) But there are other less and more drastic ways of achieving workload reductions. At one end, I have seen far too many colleagues devise incredibly labor-intensive assessment regimes when literally no one has required that of them (more on this below). At the other end, it may be necessary to change institutions or leave academia altogether. (I’ve done the former and contemplated the latter.)

The second difficult truth is that **resiliency is not an innate characteristic**. The world is not divided into people who are resilient and people who aren’t. Resilience is about recharging. Resilience is the long-term energy you have to fall back on in order to sprint – often in an adrenaline- and caffeine-fuelled frenzy – through the current “crunch period”. And academia is often just a succession “crunch periods”. But once those long-term reserves become deeply depleted, that’s when you derail, implode, burn out – choose your metaphor.

My third truth. **The only way to recover your resiliency is rest**. And, to borrow two ideas from racial justice activists and the disability community: **rest is resistance; and only rest is rest**. That is, if the structural problems you face lead to overwork – then getting enough rest is fighting back. It is fighting back against a system which wants you to internalise the message that the only purpose of rest is to further your own productivity. (See the excellent podcast from Rebecca Roach, the Academic Imperfectionist, on point here.) Also, if you need to recharge your long-term batteries, do not mistake working

in a less pressured way for rest. Only rest is rest. Answering emails, but “only” doing so in bed is not a holiday. Not doing any really important research work but “just” catching up on your marking is still work.

Because we are all gifted analytical thinkers, we are talented at constructing self-defeating internal arguments that help us avoid recognising these basic truths. For example, we might find ourselves saying: “but there is so much work to do, and only I can do it.” Certainly, the present academic system creates a lot of work for academics and much of it is unnecessary. But academics are also fabulous at creating rods for their own back. I have met far more colleagues willing to complain about their marking rather than sitting down to redesign their curriculum to try and meet the same educational objectives but without generating hundreds of essays or exams for them to mark every term. For example, there seems to be a purist belief that if one strays from certain forms of assessment – and great volumes of it – one is somehow cheating. There isn’t space in this piece to go through all the techniques I’ve used to keep my own workload at a roughly manageable level. They will be different for everyone – but the first step is realising that doing everything to a counsel of perfection **when no one has asked you to do so** is a sure-fire way to work yourself into the ground.

With this uncomfortable groundwork in place, I’ll now turn to offer some advice about identifying when you may have a mental health problem that needs attention.

Do I have a problem?

Academics tend to presume that if they can still work, there isn’t a problem. “I’m meeting my marking deadlines and publishing! I’m fine!” This is a bit like saying that running full tilt at a wall isn’t a problem until you hit it. Better to avoid collapse than reconstruct yourself after one. So, in terms of signs that you may have the beginnings of a problem, here are some things I’ve come to realise are the red lights on my personal dashboard.

The first and most important for me isn’t obviously work-related. It’s anhedonia: **the inability to take pleasure in ordinarily pleasurable things**. This is particularly bad, because if hobbies and life outside work lose their allure – why not work more? **Feeling that there is no alternative** is another big one

(because you are essentially saying that you feel trapped).

Others may include: (1) feeling that unless you do something to an absolutely 100% standard you are letting down yourself, your institution, and/or your students. But sometimes good enough is good enough. No one can do all of the job 100% all of the time. In different seasons you will have to choose where to put the bulk of your energy and where you may have to park things in neutral or only incrementally improve over your previous practice. (2) Diminishing your own achievements (the academic imperfectionist podcast calls this "moving your own goalposts"). (3) Dreading opening your email. The list goes on (and on) and you will have your own. But these are some of my personal signs that flag when it is time to step back, detach, and recharge. Because if you don't listen to these warning signs you can burn out without knowing it.

I've hit the wall, maybe. What now?

My personal metaphor for this is that it felt like suddenly realising I had both: (1) gotten stuck at the bottom of a deep well; but (2) couldn't really imagine why it was necessary to climb out. Every journey out of the well is going to be different.

Let's come back to my key pieces of advice from earlier in the post. If you accept that the only solution to overwork is to work less, and that only rest is rest – then this means that you cannot be entirely the same person on the other side of recovery that you were before. Because if you go back to your old patterns of working and thinking, eventually you're going to find yourself at the bottom of the well again. You won't discover a magical form of resiliency that prevents this: you are only resilient if you can keep your long-term emergency stores of energy topped up.

You have to find what your sustainable level of effort and engagement is and operate within those margins. We all have to exceed our ordinary limits in particular crunch periods – marking season is always one of mine – but remember this is drawing down your long-term resiliency. This will need to be recharged again at a later point, and only rest is rest.

As a result of my own experience, I've had to realign the expectations of my scholarship, teaching, leadership, and self-management. And I now think –

genuinely – that I do all of these **better** than I did before in my permanently adrenalized and caffeine-fuelled state. My research is more thoughtful (focussed on quality not quantity), my teaching has been more engaging, and I am more present and attentive in my ability to help and work with colleagues. (Or at least I hope so.) Yes, academia-as-factory is still there but I have recaptured more of academia-as-garden.

It's not perfect, but for me, it's a more sustainable way to work. And if I had not found one, then I might well have had to consider leaving the profession. (As many have done, and if that is your way out of the bottom of the well, then strength to you). Having made a number of necessary changes that were right for me, I am the happiest I have ever been as an academic. I also put family first in returning to a particular city (Canberra) and along the way found an institution which fits exactly the type of research and teaching I want to be doing now. Yes, these were changes in my structural conditions – but they were also choices. Choices which involved compromise and redefining success to align better with my own values and priorities.

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