



Faculty Stress: What Can Junior Faculty Members Do to Promote Good Mental Health?

A lot of research has focused on student stress, but few studies have examined faculty stress. This is especially true for tenure-track junior faculty members who are adapting to new organizations, new workloads, and greater expectations related to job performance. Junior faculty members do indicate greater stress levels compared to senior faculty members (Sorcinelli, 1992). This increased stress is seen in all disciplines and is present in the majority of newly hired faculty.

Higher levels of occupational stress predict lower job satisfaction, a greater number of days absent, poorer work performance, and lower levels of productivity, which can lead to greater turnover (Sudatta and Payal, 2016). When faculty members are stressed, our performance in the classroom suffers, which means that our students' academic success suffers. Listed below are several ways faculty can reduce their own stressors in an attempt to increase students' academic success.

Suggestions for Reducing Stress

Mentorship

Having a professional mentor can increase research productivity, collaborative scholarship efforts, and improve research abilities (Rush and Wheeler, 2011), which may alleviate potential concerns about workplace performance and decrease stress. This benefit of mentorship appears to be true whether a specific mentor is assigned to the mentee or whether there is a choice given to the mentee (Schrodt, Cawyer, and Sanders, 2003). Additionally, a mentor can act as a role model for the junior faculty member by providing guidelines for behaviors to emulate in obtaining occupational success (Lockwood, 2006). For example, a mentor can assist the junior faculty member navigate a new organizational culture, thus reducing the stress of adapting to a new environment. Several institutions offer "teaching pairs" workshops during which junior faculty are introduced and paired to informally discuss pedagogical strategies and to offer general advice related to navigating a new work environment.

Departmental Support

Administrative changes, like when a junior faculty member's supervisor leaves a department, can be stressful.

This is especially true if an administrative change occurs before annual performance reviews. The new supervisor may not be aware of the junior faculty member's contributions and professional successes. To alleviate some of the stress of an administrative change, a junior faculty member should strongly consider requesting that the departing supervisor submit a letter of support outlining the junior faculty member's performance, thereby alleviating some of the anxiety associated with the review process. In fact, a junior faculty member could submit an updated curriculum vitae each year to any senior faculty member who may be involved in the reappointment tenure decision process to keep others abreast of his or her accomplishments related to teaching, service, and scholarship.

Meditation, Mindfulness, and Counseling

Research has indicated that interventions focusing on mindfulness (i.e., guided meditation; self-care, including increasing exercise; sleep; and seeking emotional support) decrease anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout, and conversely increase sleep quality and coping skills (Esi van der Zwan, de Vente, Hultink, Bögels, and de Bruin, 2015). Faculty can partake in self-care intervention programs to promote increased psychological health, learn relaxation techniques to reduce stress, and obtain social support from others who may be going through similar processes.

Mindfulness programs increase awareness of regular, day-to-day experiences in an effort to raise alertness, increase engagement with daily tasks, and improve cognitive processes to make the individual more engaged with his or her behaviors and responsibilities. A meta-analysis examined 20 empirical studies that used mindfulness-based programs to treat clinical (chronic pain, mood disorders, anxiety disorders) and non-clinical issues, (emotional distress in dealing with daily stressors) and concluded that mindfulness was effective in promoting mental and physical health in clinical and non-clinical populations (Grossmana, Niemann, Schmidt, and Walach, 2004). Thus, faculty can research mindfulness techniques and engage in these practices to cope with stressors and promote self-care related to mental health.

The benefits of therapy with a mental health professional have long been documented in treating major depression, relapse of depression, and adjustment issues related to emotional distress. Many institutions have excellent healthcare programs that include free and confidential counseling sessions with a trained professional. Junior faculty members who are having difficulty in their new tenure-track roles should be encouraged to seek counseling

in order to talk about their difficulties and obtain additional advice on self-care to reduce stress.

Increase Autonomy and Perceptions of Fairness

Studies have shown that a greater sense of control induces greater perceptions of fairness in the workplace (Lawrence, Celis, and Ott, 2014). Perceptions of fairness increase organizational citizenship behaviors, work productivity, and occupational satisfaction (Cameron and Hyer, 2010). Therefore, by increasing faculty members' sense of control and perceptions, their stresses should decrease. One way this can be done is by ensuring that everyone has a voice during faculty meetings, thereby showing that feedback is valued. Thus, faculty members should feel free to express any concerns they may have at department meetings. Faculty members should even consider joining a faculty labor union to advocate for fair and equal treatment in the workforce at their respective institutions.

Feedback

A vague professional promotion process can be very stressful. Having explicit policies and procedures for tenure and promotion as well as for the annual performance evaluation process will help, and ensuring that faculty are aware of these guidelines (or know where to find them) will reduce stress. Therefore, faculty members should be proactive in seeking information pertaining to tenure requirements, and obtaining advice and guidance from senior faculty members who have already successfully been through the tenure process. Also, faculty should speak with administration about tenure expectations so that guidelines are clear rather than ambiguous.

Conclusion

For colleges to increase student success, faculty members need to decrease stressors in their careers that prevent them from bringing enthusiasm into their classrooms. When faculty members are able to manage their stressors, they are able to engage more effectively with course content and their students.

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