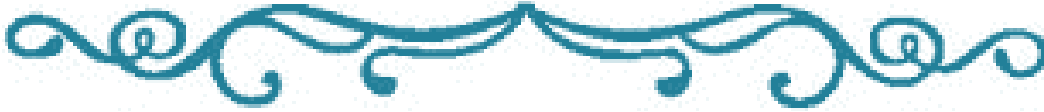


Editor's Column: Avoiding Toxicity

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It's been almost three years since I left my last institution – it'll be a complete three years in November. A lot has happened in that brief period; some highlights, in no particular order – two long-time employees passed away; I got my doctorate; my new institution has seen a new president come and go and a new one start; I (finally) got COVID (and it sucked); my husband left one career (restaurant industry) for another (higher education); he broke his wrist (that career change is unrelated); my dad had to have emergency surgery; I worked on an AI literacy microcredential; and now I'm facilitating a Title III grant. And that's just SOME of the stuff that's happened – that's not even half of it.

I know I talk about this a lot, but it's because it's something that I think about a lot: unsurprisingly, all of that (and more) has left me burned out. I've been trying to avoid burnout to the best of my ability, but given my neurodivergence, it's difficult. While exploring ways to prevent burnout, I encountered a new concept – though it really shouldn't have been new to me: *toxic productivity*. Toxic productivity is “a drive to be productive at all times – not just at work, but in all areas of life” (MacNeil, 2024). I used to think I was just a workaholic, but when I encountered this phrase, it hit home that I'm not just a workaholic. I engage in that behavior *everywhere*, whether I've actually and intentionally embraced hustled culture or not (which...well, I did at one time, but now I don't). But I also do it at home, which society tells me is *good*, because I'm a woman, and

the domestic space is my responsibility. Which, by the way, is not how my husband and I regard or divide domestic labor (my brain is a jerk).

There is nothing good about toxic productivity. It really can take “the joy out of everyday activities and causes you to push yourself too hard for too long,” inevitably leading to “burnout, depression, and other physical and mental health consequences” (MacNeil, 2024), none of which is a newsflash to anyone. However, *knowing* that information is not sufficient to prevent those things, anymore than knowing that penicillin exists can prevent you from getting an infection. You actually have to use the information to accomplish the goal – use the information to protect your physical and mental health.

Rather than dwell on the reasons *why* I struggle with toxic productivity and workaholism, neither of which are justifiable or healthy, I’d rather focus on how to break the cycle. MacNeil (2024) offers six (6) ways to break the toxic productivity cycle (with my sincere but slightly glib commentary):

1. Define work boundaries (aka quit checking your email after work)
2. Set realistic goals (Rome was not built in a day)
3. Build breaks into your schedule (no, but for real – take a walk around your library)
4. Do nothing (yes, actually do nothing)
5. Deal with your underlying feelings (mine arise from gifted kid syndrome)
6. Take a break from your smartphone (no, really – use “do not disturb” mode)

These are broadstroke recommendations – how you implement them is up to you. The main recommendation I would make about implementation is to remember that small change is sustainable change. It takes time to build habits, and it can take more time to

change habits. And that's okay! Some writers equate workaholism with addiction (Rossingol, 2023), and sometimes it can feel like that to me. And because of that, it can be hard to change those behaviors, thought patterns, and habits.

As I write this, the fall semester at my university looms. I know the local K-12 schools, public and private, have started. My Facebook and Instagram feeds are full of "1st Day of School!" pictures, including some "first day of middle school!" and "first day of high school!" moments. There are a lot of parents sending their children off to the first day of the next leg of their educational careers, including to college. There are a lot of people starting work on degrees that they hope will change their lives. There are a lot of people starting new jobs that they hope will change their lives, much like my husband.

The presidential election also looms. There's a lot of fear and anxiety everywhere, both in the state and in the country. Heck, around the world! Libraries are under attack; education is under attack. It's scary times. It is easy to feel overwhelmed – it is easy to want to throw one's self into work and into the hustle to avoid the anxieties and stressors around us, to exert some control in one's world so that one doesn't feel completely out of control.

But there's also a lot of excited energy out there, and a lot of *hope*. And I think we need to focus on that enthusiasm, on that excitement and energy! I think we need to focus on **hope**. But I also think we need to focus on ourselves as well – focus on self-care, on attending to our feelings and needs, so that we can better help one another – putting on our own oxygen masks before we help others with theirs. Take care of yourselves; if you're feeling burned out or in need of help, reach out. Someone will take your hand, I promise.

References

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