

# Newsrooms fertile ground for burnout among layoff survivors

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High levels of stress "coupled with journalists' often priest-like commitment and passion for the work" makes journalism "a fertile field for burnout development," reports Scott Reinardy, assistant professor in the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas. In this piece, Reinardy touches on the case of former journalist Reni Winter, and reports on several studies he has conducted over the past six years examining the rate and causes of burnout among journalists.

By Scott Reinardy

*The final installment in a series of four AEJMC white papers published in 2009-10 on research and issues relevant to editors*

Reni Winter was a journalism lifer.

At age 8 she latched onto the idea of being a journalist. Winter took the appropriate steps – earned a degree from the University of Maryland, worked for several daily newspapers, and won a plethora of awards along the way.

"I absolutely loved being a journalist," Winter said.

But after nearly 25 professional years, the journalism love affair began to wane. By late 2006, Winter was demonstrating signs of burnout. Personal tragedy, a new boss and the changing journalism landscape elevated her stress level. She was frequently tired, indifferent and unenthusiastic about work, and no longer enjoyed it. As the stress mounted, she experienced physical ailments, including an inflamed thyroid, which was affecting her heart.

"I went to a little counseling but there wasn't any way to avoid going off the deep end professionally, so to speak," Winter said.

A deputy local editor at the Lafayette (Ind.) Journal and Courier, Winter turned to the company's human resources office for assistance. She quickly realized that was a mistake.

"When I saw her reaction, I thought, 'My goose is cooked,'" she said. "All she said was, 'That's not good.' I felt I was totally and completely isolated. And I started to feel afraid ... I was on the radar. When talks started the following year of layoffs corporate-wide, I started getting ready."

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As part of Gannett Corporation's nationwide reductions in December 2008, 10 Journal & Courier employees were offered buyouts or laid off. Winter was one of two in the newsroom to lose her job.

## **Burnout Background**

When Christina Maslach is introduced at conferences as "a pioneer" of burnout research, she laughs. Maslach, a University of California, Berkeley, psychology professor, is the name behind the primary research instrument that measures employee burnout: the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Maslach and her colleague Susan Jackson were hardly seen as pioneers when they developed the MBI in the late 1970s. Instead, they were repudiated for conducting what was considered "pop psychology" research. Three decades later, however, thousands of studies have used the MBI to measure burnout and develop strategies to combat it.

The MBI was designed to assess health care workers and includes three primary scales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. In 1996, Maslach helped develop a measurement for non-health care workers. The MBI-General Survey includes exhaustion (fatigue on the job), cynicism (indifference toward work) and professional efficacy (feelings of expectations and accomplishments) (Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 1996). High degrees of exhaustion and cynicism lead to low levels of efficacy, creating burnout.

Burnout is an accumulative process dependent upon work conditions, organizational structure, personal relationships at work and home lives. Stress and stressors are the instigators, but how an individual contends with stress is just as critical. Journalists accept a certain degree of stress. Some thrive under it, others wilt, but all expect it because it's the nature of the business. Coupled with journalists' often priest-like commitment and passion for the work, journalism is a fertile field for burnout development.

"I so passionately loved my work I never would have thought that I would burn out," Winter said. "I was always the person, 'Give me another story; give me more work.'"

Maslach said there isn't enough data to indicate if one profession is more susceptible to burnout than another. However, some research has shown that the best, brightest and most committed among health care workers suffer higher rates of burnout than others.

"It still raises that question that having that passion for your work or compassion for other people is a good thing in terms of going into the work," she said. "Does it conceivably provide more of a risk?"

## **Burnout Among Journalists**

For newspaper. "layoff survivors," there's little time for worrying about risks. ASNE's annual newsroom census reports that more than 13,500 full-time journalism jobs have been lost since 2007. In the past three years, newspapers have diminished their editorial staffs by about 25 percent. (Annual newsroom census, 2010).

Traditionally, staff reductions increase stressors for layoff survivors. Naturally, workloads increase. For journalists, there is not only more work but also different kinds of work. Continuous online deadlines and multimedia efforts create a new type of newspaper journalism.

During the past six years, I've conducted several studies examining the rate of burnout among journalists. In addition to measuring burnout, the research examined external issues (work overload, work-family conflict, organizational support and job satisfaction) and internal issues (organizational trust, morale, organizational commitment, coping strategies and perceptions of job quality).

A study was conducted in 2007 (n = 715) and again in 2009 (n = 2,159). The rate of journalists' burnout did not significantly change between the two studies. Interestingly, the rate of cynicism was in the "high" range, but exhaustion and professional efficacy were in the "moderate" range in both studies. Traditionally, exhaustion leads to cynicism, which leads to a reduction in efficacy. That has not been the case with journalists so far.

"For some, cynicism really shoots up, and for others it doesn't," Maslach said. "Is that a function of the kind of work you're doing, the kind of training or preparation you've had to handle the work?"

A counterbalance to burnout is professional efficacy. Enjoyment and confidence in work help minimize exhaustion and cynicism. Although there were no significant differences in efficacy between the two studies, the efficacy levels trend downward. That trend indicates journalists are experiencing less enjoyment in their work, which can erode the barrier protecting news workers from burnout. Additional burnout results from the studies include:

- Job demands, and conflict between work and family, are significant predictors of burnout. Job satisfaction, social support from friends and family, and perceptions that the organization is supportive of its workers alleviate signs of burnout. Internal issues, such as diminished trust in the organization and morale, also contribute to burnout. Commitment to the newspaper and perceptions of job quality minimize feelings of exhaustion and cynicism, and enhance efficacy.
- Women are more burned out than men. Women in the 2007 study showed higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism, and lower levels of efficacy. They said they received less organizational support than men; job demands plus role overload contributed to their burnout. In the 2009 study, exhaustion and cynicism remained more prominent among women, and they experienced substantially less trust in the organization and lower levels of morale than men. However, women demonstrated a stronger sense of identification with the organization. Women and men did not differ in job satisfaction or perceptions of job quality.
- The studies have consistently shown that younger journalists experience higher rates of burnout compared with more experienced journalists. Journalists 30 and younger have higher rates of exhaustion and cynicism, and lower levels of efficacy. Causes include work-family conflict and job demands, while job satisfaction and social support minimized signs of burnout. Morale and perceptions of job quality also were contributors to burnout among young journalists. It can be argued that less-experienced

journalists are not as equipped as veterans to contend with newsroom pressures. In addition, young journalists traditionally do not work in managerial roles or desired positions, which can contribute to exhaustion and cynicism.

- Looking at job responsibilities, results indicate that copy editors and page designers experience higher degrees of cynicism than other newsroom workers. Interestingly, reporters demonstrated lower levels of efficacy than news editors and executive/managing editors. Several studies have shown that autonomy in the job boosts satisfaction. Desk personnel and to some degree reporters probably experience less independence in the job than other newsroom workers, particularly managers. Having the ability to determine workflow and job responsibilities gives workers a sense of control. Less control can create more stress and diminish ownership of the work. This also could be the case for younger journalists, who generally receive the least appealing assignments as they “pay their dues” in the newsroom.

## Addressing Burnout

Job burnout creates a deluge of problems. Among them, work quality and quantity diminish, absenteeism occurs, and workers seek to leave the organization. Staff reductions can exacerbate the situation. After a period of drastic change, an organization eventually will begin to re-establish pre-change comfort levels. If the cycle of departures -- via layoffs or choice -- continues, an organization will remain in a state of flux, compounding worker uncertainty and possibly perpetuating burnout.

There are signs burnout might already be taking its toll. From 2007 to 2009, intentions to leave journalism increased for women and younger journalists. There was a 17 percent increase among women who said they intended to leave journalism within five years, and a 29 percent increase among journalists 30 and younger. The percentage of those saying they did not intend to leave journalism did not change between the two studies. The shift came from the “don’t know” category, where uncertainty became certainty within two years. One final note: those intending to leave journalism are experiencing higher levels of burnout, work-family conflict and work overload, and lower levels of trust, morale, organizational support, job satisfaction and perceptions of job quality.

Maslach said the MBI is not a diagnostic clinical tool that determines the effectiveness of a worker’s ability to do the job. It’s merely an instrument to identify areas of concern. Burnout is about the individual’s relationship with work. Although individuals and organizations vary, Maslach and colleague Michael Leiter (2005) have identified six primary relationship areas between workers and their work. In their book, *Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving Your Relationship with Work*, Leiter and Maslach’s areas of concern include:

**Workload:** Work overload is the impetus for exhaustion. Identifying the causes of work overload and developing a strategy for counteracting it will assist in improving the worker’s relationship with work.

**Control:** A sense of control over the work being conducted can be an issue that undermines the worker’s relationship with work. Micromanagement, ineffective leaders or ineffective teams can be issues.

**Reward:** Lack of appreciation and gratitude can be detrimental to the relationship between workers and work. Rewards can include compensation, job assignments, recognition and enjoyment for work being conducted.

**Community:** For workers, organizational community is nearly as important as social communities. The relationship with work is a give and take, and workers generally want some reassurance that they are not alone in the relationship.

**Fairness:** Justice in the workplace includes everything from developing work schedules to presenting appreciation awards. Lack of fairness can come in terms of disrespect, discrimination or favoritism, among others.

**Values:** Matching personal values and organizational values can be crucial to the relationship. It's the premise that the organization believes in the worker as much as the worker believes in it.

Several of Leiter and Maslach's six areas correspond with the job burnout predictors established in my 2007 and 2009 studies. Just as workload, control and reward can equate to organizational support and job satisfaction, so can community, fairness and values be contributors to trust and morale.

Holistically examining the work environment through the six areas allows organizations to build stronger bonds with their employees. It's not a "problem identification" strategy but a strategy that emphasizes relationship building. Focusing on achievable goals is better than outlining problems, Maslach said.

"Let's just figure out where we want to be rather than where we are right now and let's figure out how to get there," she said. "It just changes the game a lot if you can get people engaged in that way. . . . It's the flower pot analogy. I've got this gorgeous plant and I'm going to put it in this crummy pot without dirt and not water it. Well, is it going to grow and do good stuff? I don't think so."

Unfortunately for Reni Winter, her flower pot had been emptied of dirt and water. Two years after leaving the Journal & Courier, she works four part-time jobs to make ends meet. At 56, she still struggles with the idea she's no longer a full-time journalist but is working with a writing coach to rediscover her journalistic passion. Working with the elderly and the developmentally disabled, as well as instructing aquatic workout classes for those with arthritis, are now her passions. Nonetheless, Winter is still surprised burnout happened to her.

"Journalism traditionally you're supposed to be tough, self-deprecating, work late, don't have a life, so it begs for burnout," she said. "It would be nice if journalism would be more tolerant of the humanity of the individual. They are tolerant philosophically of humanity as a whole, and humanity of individuals outside of the industry, but it's notoriously hard on its own people. And it's going to get you."

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He was a reporter and editor for 18 years at five different daily newspapers, and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Reinardy is also the co-author of *The Essentials of Sports Reporting and Writing* (Routledge, 2009).

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