E29: Addressing burnout in higher education with burnout coach and Professor Rebecca Pope-Ruark

**Rebecca:** My name is Rebecca Pope-Ruark. And I am currently a Faculty Teaching and Learning Specialist at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. And I'm also a coach and a consultant as well.

**Jacqueline:** Great. Thank you. So describe briefly your journey to where you are now in your career, please.

**Rebecca:** Sure. I started really as a very involved student. Very deeply embedded in the higher education context, even as a student. So I ultimately ended up doing my PhD in professional writing and rhetoric at Iowa State university, where, for five years I taught my own classes. I taught two writing courses a semester for my entire five years. So I was really a teacher at heart. When I graduated, I moved to Elon university in North Carolina, where I was on the faculty for 12 years. I was tenured for the half of that. And there, I really grew into my own as a teacher and it was really part of my identity and who I was and how I saw myself.

I had amazing students and I had really wonderful colleagues. And, so it became a little difficult. So over time, I just found myself doing too much, pushing myself too hard. And ultimately that led into a pretty severe bout of burnout. And I ended up needing to take some medical leave to get a handle on my mental health and ultimately decided that returning to my institution probably wasn't the healthiest thing for me. So I took the leap and moved into Faculty Development at Georgia Tech, which is a completely different institution than my previous institution. But it's been a good change. It's been a change that I've been working toward for a while. So I really enjoy working with faculty who work with students. So that's my linear trajectory. I'm also in wrapping up my training as a coach. So I work with academic women and I just finished a book on burnout. That'll be out next year.

**Jacqueline:** Great. Thank you so much for that. And so I was wondering are you able to do the coaching and the faculty development together because they're aligned, it's part of your role, or how's that going? Even just the sort of two roles there?

**Rebecca:** Sure. It's a little bit of a mix. I work with faculty specifically in related to teaching and learning challenges and opportunities. Some of that does involve one-on-one coaching and our consultations. And then I basically have a side gig where I do my own coaching and have my own clients on the side of my day job. And I do some consulting. I do a lot of workshops related to burnout as well. Have some group coaching programs connected to that. So it's a little bit in my day job coaching can be coaching tools, at least can be very useful to me. And then coaching itself, more as a side gig, during the weekends more often than not.

**Jacqueline:** And do you mind sharing a little bit more about what you think led to your burnout, what you experienced during that time and how you did decide to go forward and how long it took you to say, recover and heal.

**Rebecca:** Sure. That's a long story, but I'll keep it short. So it was a combination of things that led me to the burnout. It was a combination of my own ambition and kind of constantly striving to do one thing better to keep moving up a ladder that was imaginary after a while. Just to continue to keep pushing myself to do better and better. It became, once you write a book, everything has to be a book. Once you give a workshop, everything has to be a giant workshop for big institutions. So there was a lot of my own kind of ladder climbing there that was beginning to be unhealthy. And then there was also, there was some things going on with the program I was co-developing that, quite frankly, was traumatic professionally for me. So that really kept it off in terms of leading to a bit of a breakdown and needing to take a break from my role as a faculty member at my institution. So it's been about three years, three and a half years now that I've been dealing with this.

I've been in Atlanta for two years now. It took probably a good year and a half of therapy before I can really make a decision and say, I don't think that while my previous institution is a wonderful place with great students and wonderful colleagues and who deeply care about students, it wasn't a healthy place for me anymore. And I needed to make a change for my health and my family's health. I wasn't really on the job market when I was on a medical leave, but I applied for a job or two just to see if I was marketable in faculty development. And one thing led to another and I ended up getting the job at Georgia Tech and we decided that was a good shift for us to make, a clean start. To try something different, to be somewhere different and to just restart our life a little bit with a little bit more healthy approach to our lives, into our own mental health.

So that's where it came from. I still do regular therapy and I'm not ashamed of that and in the slightest, but I do also feel like I've done so much work on myself in the last three years that burnout isn't really something that's going to happen to me again, I'm a different person now. I have a much better sense of balance in my life and what I'm willing to do and what I'm not willing to do in terms of my job specifically. It was an opportunity to make a really positive change and try something different and try something in a new place. It's been really healthy for me to try something that I've wanted to do for quite a long time, in terms of faculty development and to focus my attention on that. And my appreciation for faculty development also led me to write the book on burnout. It's very much a faculty development book based on my experience and the experiences of other women that I talk to and who contributed their stories about burnout as well.

**Jacqueline:** And we're going to get to the book. I'm very excited about that. So I thank you very much for sharing that you have been in therapy. And that was part of my journey as well for the first couple of years after burning out. And then I transitioned a little bit more into coaching and I found I did a little bit of coaching and therapy at the same time. And then I was able to sort of transition into not needing the therapist help, but having coaching. So tell me a little bit how you discovered coaching yourself to want to become a coach.

**Rebecca:** That's a different kind of story, I think, than a lot of folks who might find coaching. I am a Certified Project Manager in a Methodology called Scrum that comes out of Software Development. I was studying that as my first book, as on Scrum Project Management for academics. I'd been studying that I'd been getting certified and they actually have a certification for coaches. So I took just a couple of days training on agile coaching and really enjoyed the kind of the way that, that, practice frames interactions between a coach and a clients and the kinds of conversations that you have. So I've been interested in getting certified as an agile coach, but because I'm in academia and not in software development the opportunity for practice hours just wasn't there. So it had been on my radar for a while, and then a coach that I had worked with a few times and whose work that I really appreciated her books and things, she started a coaching program.

So I had been in a program, create your own side gig program with her for a year, while she was developing the coaching program. And when I graduated from her slow hustle program, the coaching program seemed like the next best step for me. It's one of the few, if not one of the only training programs that focuses on working with academics and understanding higher education. So everyone in those trainings, is really steeped in higher ed and we understand the unique challenges of the industry and the rhythms of the industry. And that's really what I wanted to do. I love higher ed, as much as I'll critique it, I do love it. And I'm connected to faculty and I really want to make sure that they're having kind of vital careers and experiencing the flourishing that they want to be experiencing and supporting them when they're not flourishing and going through some things, when they're thinking about maybe leaving their role or leaving their institution or even leaving academia. When they're excited about opportunities and need support prioritizing, and that kind of work. It's really a joy to work with faculty as they're developing their careers and how they want to move forward in their lives. So it's a really fulfilling relationship between a coach and a coachee.

**Jacqueline:** That's a great story. Cause I was looking back at your other work in Scrum Development and I quite often work with healthcare systems who are developing healthcare solutions with software. And so I often have to write about things like this, scrum methods in the grants. And I was like, where's the connection? So you've made it perfectly for me now. I totally understand. I think that's so cool. And that is a slightly different route to coaching. And I so love that term that your leader or mentor had the slow hustle. Cause I was chatting with another coaching entrepreneur, and often people are having to start with a side hustle and we don't want that to then become another burnout badge. So I love that was called the slow hustle. Great. And I'm also really fascinated. This is why obviously, I'm partly talking to you today is on your focus with higher education. Having burned out from academia myself, and really I don't think I realized it was burnout at the time, but I certainly didn't know also what to look for in terms of looking for the types of resources that you're presenting now. So how do we, how do we help faculty realize that this is where they're at. I'll just start with that one. I have so many questions cause I really admire that you stayed in the academic environment and you're trying to help people within that environment. Because for me that seems a space that I would struggle to go back into, even if it were trying to help people in that environment. So we'll get into that in a little bit, hopefully, but yeah. Just in, in terms of how do you feel like faculty can recognize burnout and know to come to someone like yourself who has this higher education expertise in burnout?

**Rebecca:** I think that, and this is a big focus of my work, a purpose of the work that I do in burnout is that people don't have a language to talk about mental health related to faculty, specifically related to burnout because the idea of burning out is really a shameful thing. Higher ed, our brains are a currency where reputation is our gold. So the idea that you might not be quote unquote, "doing your best work" or there's shame attached to that. So my goal has really been to provide the clinical definition and really make sure people understand the clinical definition and some of the symptoms of burnout so that they can know they can see it in themselves or perhaps in their colleagues, because when I was going through it, I initially I had no idea what was wrong with me. I just thought I was depressed or anxiety, was having a bad patch with my anxiety. But those were more symptoms of a larger problem, which ultimately was burnout and that workplace stress piece.

So the World Health Organization a couple of years ago, revised their definition of burnout. And so in the World Health Organization's most recent diagnostic manual it's referred to as a workplace syndrome caused by chronic stress that has not been managed successfully. So essentially it is a couple of things to point out there is that it's workplace connected. Which means it's a cultural issue because workplaces cause this. So it isn't necessarily someone's fault that they burn out. They're products of a culture that has led them in that direction. That higher ed can certainly do that. It's specifically stress. It's being unable to complete those stress cycles and manage that stress in different ways.

And the last piece is that it has not been successfully managed, but I think framing that way makes it sound a little victim blaming. So I think that if we focus on it as a workplace syndrome, driven by stress, that you don't have an opportunity or any way to manage because it's continuous, it's always coming at you. It's very overwhelming. I do want to note too, that in the World Health Organization definition, it's not classified as a mental illness. It's classified as a syndrome. You may have underlying mental health issues that might be exacerbated. For me, depression and anxiety were definitely activated as I was going through my burnout. But it's not caused by those things. It ultimately can cause exacerbations of things that you already have. So part of my goal really is to just get that definition out to people so that you can be looking for that particular kind of grouping of experiences. So part of that definition also is there are three characteristics to look for when you're, I don't want to say diagnosing because diagnosing should only be done by a mental health professional, but that you can recognize and possibly start having some conversations around.

So the first one is exhaustion. You want to be on the lookout for, extended emotional, physical, intellectual exhaustion over time. So that might manifest itself and not being able to focus, not being able to care, not being able to have conversations about maybe intellectual topics that maybe you have, enjoyed or done your whole professional life. So it's really this just bone deep weariness of exhaustion that you just can't bring yourself to do or care in your workplace anymore. The second is, and this one has a couple of different terminologies we'll go with cynicism and depersonalization. We're on the lookout for when someone starts to really pull back from the things that they really have appreciated or enjoyed in the past about their workplace and their jobs.

For me, I was a teacher's teacher. My students were my everything. When I started to have panic attacks going into class, because I had to deal with students or when I started hiding in my office and not having office hours. Cause I couldn't stand to talk to them very long. That was very clearly me depersonalizing and moving away from the students and thinking it doesn't matter. They're just coming at me. They won't leave me alone. So that was a very different mind shift for me to be. And that can also manifest as is pulling away from your research or, whatever it is that you're passionate about. You start to get cynical about it and pull away from it. And then, so that's exhaustion, cynicism, and depersonalization. And then the last one is a lack of self-efficacy or a belief in your own self-efficacy. So that sense of what am I doing? Why does it matter? Does anybody care? What's the point that real disconnection between what had fed you before and that you are making a difference is really that third characteristic that we're looking for when we're defining burnout and we're identifying it in ourselves and in others.

**Jacqueline:** And I think that really fits in terms of the role you can imagine an academic plays and a researcher plays because we so often go into these careers because we are passionate about something and we want to make the world a better place. And I remember, receiving emails, asking for details of something we were working on and I would always be very responsive to things like that. And I remember looking at this email and going, who cares? I don't care what that particular device is. Who cares about this detail? This is such a waste of everybody's time, and I was like, oh, that's bizarre. And then I went to this global meeting on physical activity where we were reflecting on the past 20 years of physical activity research and the progress we've made.

And I literally felt like I was hanging my head going, this is pointless. We've done nothing. This is a waste of time. And it was devastating to feel like that. And so I think that's partly why, in some ways I stepped away from academia too, because I just thought if I can't do what I want to do in this space, then why am I even here? Because there's so many other downsides to being in this type of environment. Yes. There's lots of upsides in terms of your flexibility to work and the salary and benefits and retirement. There's all those positive sides, but I think that cynicism was the thing that made me go, oh, I just can't do this anymore. And and it's pointless, to do it anymore.

**Rebecca:** It's really a matter of, kind of, taking you away from the identity that you have of yourself, that idea that you have of yourself and for some of us that can be soul crushing. If your entire identity is wrapped up in higher education and what do you have left if you can't trust your brain.

**Jacqueline:** And interesting that you put it in that way, because you have that loss of identity of being the professor. I remember because I continued to be an adjunct professor at one of the universities. So I kept that title for myself for at least a year. And then I was like, I don't need this. This is silly, but it really did just try and bolster me so that I could still think of myself in that way. So another book that I read at the same time was Still Alice. And then she had been a academic researcher and she had got early onset Alzheimer's and I felt like her, I felt she lost her identity in that. And it was so affirming to me cause she described her life how busy it was before this happened. And I was like, yes, it's not my imagination. We really are busy as academics. Cause I remember hearing this, report about some of the least stressful jobs, one of them is a tenure faculty and I'm like, in what world is that?

I do think there is this, potentially impression outside of academia, that tenured faculty, you're just sitting around doing what you want to do. But as even as a full professor, I was working so hard and traveling and just, you have so many roles as a teacher, researcher, a mentor or a leader, a colleague in all these different environments, the community service you do. There's so many pieces to it. So when I read Still Alice and read about her losing her identity as her brain started to malfunction with early onset Alzheimer's I just related to it entirely. And what was so positive about that book was the talk she gave on being an Alzheimer's patient, she felt was the most impactful she had ever given . So that kind of gave me some hope because one of the things I convinced myself in leaving was I can have a bigger impact outside of academia. Not that's an easy task, I've set myself, it's just trying to share some of, where people can feel that they're at in terms of trying to cope with that change in identity. Cause it really is a struggle.

**Rebecca:** Absolutely. And it's a difficult thing to change institutions or to leave higher ed completely because we are so indoctrinated in the sense that this is the ivory tower. This is only the elites and the few get into this. If you leave, does that mean failure as opposed to moving to something else? So it's very easy when that identity is wrapped up in a lot of the socialization of higher ed as an industry to feel that pain. I know that when I was deciding if I wanted to go back into higher ed one of my great fears was if I go to industry, will I ever be able to get back into higher ed? Because that's the only place that I really know, what if I don't succeed in industry and I want to come back to higher ed, would that be possible?

**Jacqueline:** And I will share that one of the things I have experienced being outside of academia is a lot more respect for the fact that I do have a PhD, whereas in academia, everyone is that great. And that was always that feeling. Even when I brought in like a $10 million grant, someone else brought in a hundred million dollar one. So whatever you did just didn't feel good enough for anybody, so I think that is something about that environment that is a little bit soul crushing. Yeah. So maybe we can then share with the audience a little more about if we think about faculty burnout, maybe people thinking that's not relevant to my work. Education is an ivory tower, but why is it important given the role of education in society at large and in particular, the role models we want other female students to have?

**Rebecca:** My answer is that we model for our students. They see us doing whatever it is. And if it's overworking, if it's giving way too much of yourself, if it's burning out, our students see that and they begin to think that's normal, not necessarily students who are going into higher education, but absolutely our PhD students in our master's students can see that in our undergraduates can see it as well. So if we're not setting boundaries for ourselves and taking care of ourselves, they might see that as the way things are done. And then we do them a disservice as they set up their lives as young professionals.

**Jacqueline:** And what concerns me too is if there are not women teachers, if there are not moms who are teachers, women teachers, if there is not moms or women who are medical researchers is one that there is not that role model for, female students to see that this is this is a possible route for them, but also particularly for the medical research side of things. If there's not female faculty doing medical research, women's medical problems are not being researched and that's a huge problem. So I definitely, it took me a while to see the impact, in a larger picture of why faculty burnout is so important for society at large. What is the focus of your up and coming burnout book? Tell us a little more about that.

**Rebecca:** Sure. So it is specifically a book written to women in higher education. It's interesting. Really, when I started writing the book, I sent out a call for papers for folks to send in their stories, or if they work with faculty to send in, some of their programming or tips or things that they use as faculty developers or coaches. And when the full drafts really came through about a year later, 99% of them were written by women. So very few men responded to that call and we can think of stereotypical psychological reasons for that. And, I don't have proof for that, but the vast majority of people who contributed to the book and wanted to be interviewed for the book were women.

And I think that makes sense for a variety of reasons, stereotypical and not stereotypical. So the book focuses on women specifically in higher education and their experiences with burnout. They offer their stories. I offer my story throughout the book. It's a mix of autobiography and vignettes of other women's stories, interviews, secondary research, more primary research. So it's pretty much a big mix of those things to help people. Really, my goal is for folks to feel validated that their experience is, not that it's not unique, but they're not alone in those experiences.

That other people, other women go through them, that there are ways to cope that there are coping strategies, but also that if we want to eliminate burnout, we have to change the culture of higher education. And that's going to take all of us, making some big steps and pushing our administrations and our professional organizations and our unions to make some big changes so that we can have more balance in our lives and fulfill our purpose and connect with the students and people we need to connect with as academic professionals.

**Jacqueline:** And I'd love to get into some of the solutions that you're proposing in a minute, but just a question about, do you think burnout in academia is increasing and in this environment, do you think it's more challenging? What are the unique challenges of burnout and academia? Because the way I tried to think about it was in some ways it's a very established male dominated environment. And so if we solve some of the issues in academia that's a great case study for environments that are similar. But tell me a little bit more about whether you think it's increasing even particularly for women and what are some of the unique challenges that make it more difficult to change that culture? And then we'll get on to how you're doing that.

**Rebecca:** I mean in our pandemic moment. Yes. Burnout is through the roof. I don't know very many academics who haven't experienced some level of trauma and burnout from the past 18 months. That moment aside, I think it was increasing because I think institutional expectations were continuing to creep up, the level of free labor that we were being expected to do was creeping up. The proliferation of the adjunct nation basically, and taking advantage of our continuing faculty was causing that stress and workplace burnout. So I think there are a lot of factors in the industry that were leading burnout to be epidemic in American higher education. Anyway, and then the pandemic just exacerbated that so dramatically.

**Jacqueline:** What are some of the unique challenges in academia. For example, once I left, I started reading about gender bias and academia, and that there's this bias in relation to teaching evaluations, this bias in relation to whether your work is being cited. What are some of the specific issues in the academic environment that make this such a tough nut to crack?

**Rebecca:** Yeah, and I think you've identified a lot of them. I think that the industry was created for men in, in the last thousand years. Been created for men in that kind of environment. It's very competitive. We are trained to be very competitive with each other to be stingy with our work so that we don't get scooped . collaboration is a very strained process. Even if you're working in the same lab, how are those different groups in the lab, how are they recognized? How are they not recognized in publications? We do know that there are definitely inherent biases when students are doing course evaluations for women and people of color and sometimes adjuncts as well. So we do have the research about those biases in higher education. And a lot of that stuff is in other industries, just manifesting itself in different ways. We're not necessarily unique in that way, but what we are unique in is the fact that, at the risk of sounding cheesy, we are preparing the next generations of citizens and whatever culture we're showing them. And if we're showing them basically academic capitalism, that's, what's going to get manifested. So it's a matter of what we're showing our students and how we're leading our lives as models for the next generation of citizens.

**Jacqueline:** I think that's so important. And I think how I viewed it was that we always seem to be operating from scarcity. Some of the conversations I had as I was leaving cause I was profitable for the university. I covered my whole salary and I brought in millions of dollars every year. And so they said what can we do for you? But by that stage, I was so over it. And I was, I don't want it to be for me. I want your whole system to change. And even if you fund me so that I don't have to worry about my funding, everybody else who I work with is worried about funding, is overworked, is stressed, is tired. So I'm still in this work environment that is, unpleasant. I just didn't think that helping me was going to solve anything. So that's definitely where I came from. So let's talk about that. What are the things that you think need to change in the culture and how are you approaching that? As a public health scientist, obviously I'm really about systems and society and culture because that's what we want. We want to see change at scale in public health. So tell me how you're approaching it. I'm so fascinated.

**Rebecca:** I honestly wish I had more to say because a lot of what we can do right now, and unfortunately, a lot of what's being done is individual intervention. Small group interventions coping strategies in a lot of ways. Culture is so monolithic and difficult to change. But my view of it is that if we can train more people in the definitions and what to look for in terms of burnout, we see it more regularly. We can come together more likely to start pushing our administration to change those things. Our professional organizations can get more involved with the recommended policies and things like that for us to use and recommend to our institutions. It's we have to be willing to recognize it and people have to be willing to speak out about their episodes of burnout, because like I said earlier, it can be a very shameful thing to admit that you can't work to the standard that you had worked previously, whether it was massively unhealthy for you or not is not necessarily in that equation. You're still feeling like you're failing in some way, and that someone can take your place very easily in higher education.

If you're not constantly trying to improve or do better or striving, we're always working from scarcity. We're always working from a deficit. So how do we deal with that? We have to recognize it first. We have to be able to say, there's the sense that of academic capitalism time is money. All of those kinds of things, our brains are our currency. How do we stop thinking that way? And how do we start thinking in a way that is, dare I say nurturing to us and to our students, to our graduate students as they're coming up as well. How do we change culture? And we have to do it from the ground up, but also from top down, I think there needs to be a groundswell on the bottom, but I think higher administrations need to be really listening to their faculty, listening to what's happening and be willing to put their money where their mouth is on a lot of those things, because it's very easy to speak to, we're going to change culture, but you're not going to change culture without offering people time and money to do that, to really make a difference. So the initiatives have to come from both ways I think.

**Jacqueline:** And that, that is definitely a valid point that often for change, you have to start within. So that is, is definitely one of the first steps that we have to make. And like you say, the more people that you can help cope with burnout to stay in academia so that the pipeline isn't so leaky. And then the more women that then are in those senior positions the better. I think that is definitely one of the approaches that we can take and there needs to be taken. So how are you helping?

**Rebecca:** I also just want to say that, you mentioned the leaky pipeline and I think that's a misnomer too. It's women aren't necessarily just leaking out. They're being pushed out by cultural factors, usually driven by men. So how do, we need to address that because those women are also burning out. They're not just, they're not leaving because they can't cut it. They're leaving because the cultural conditions do not make it possible for them to live a healthy work life.

**Jacqueline:** And especially, I think it's as mothers that, that becomes just so untenable. So how are you helping women cope? So they're not being pushed out.

**Rebecca:** What the book does is offers a lot of validation, a lot of connection, and then also some coping strategies, more than anything. I think that's what we can offer now.

**Jacqueline:** So how do you help people through your coaching?

**Rebecca:** Usually I work with folks over several sessions and we really start at a values level. So what are your actual values? Higher ed gives us a lot of values in terms of achievement and success and respect and those kinds of values. But what are the things that you really care about that might be separate from that? And then looking at how those values are aligning to the work that you're doing. And are there ways that you can shift your work or focus on different things or move beyond higher ed or whatever, your current situation in higher education, by connecting to those values. And then we also talk about things like living your purpose, like really understanding what's driving you right now. And what motivates you and what fills you up and being able to connect your work to that. We also look at how to have compassion for yourself as well as having compassion for others. Our self-talk is also, is often toxic where, we would never say the things to someone else that we say to ourselves in terms of the shaming language. So thinking about how we can be compassionate for ourselves is really important. I think that connecting to others and connecting to the things that fill you up as important. So it might be relationships, or it might be a connection with nature or animals or what, surfing, whatever it is that fills you up. And then also thinking about balance. What does balance look like? And that's never going to be a 50, 50 split, but there, there are opportunities for thinking about how do you navigate having some balance in your life so that your entire identity is not wrapped up in your work.

**Jacqueline:** Yeah, I think that's so important. Okay, so just for us to wrap up Rebecca, what is one behavior change you would recommend for women, faculty and or universities to start today? I love to leave listeners with something actionable that they can really start to address right away.

**Rebecca:** And that's an interesting question. When we think about coping skills and burnout and really, I think, again, it goes back to my desire to make sure people understand what burnout is and know that definition. There is a, the most validated research instruments for identifying burnout, it's called the Maslach burnout inventory. There's a free version or a very inexpensive version online for teachers specifically that people can take and see if they fall on the spectrum of burnout so they can check for those behaviors. And then knowing, where you fall on the content help you think about what measures you might want to take to improve the quality of your life connected to burnout?

I think it's in some ways it really is having compassion towards yourself, especially as a woman in higher ed, as a mother in higher education, having compassion. You're doing the best that you can and often your average is a lot of other people's best work. So thinking about really, what is what's reasonable that allows you to continue to be resilient, I think is really important. And I think that higher education broadly needs to start being aware of burnout as an epidemic in our culture, and really start looking at more systemic ways of addressing the toxicity of the culture and that's just going to take a lot of work.