



THE
**BURNOUT
CURE**

Learning to Love
Teaching Again

CHASE MIELKE

Assignment #1: Take On the No-Complaining Challenge

I recommend everyone try the no-complaining challenge. This challenge is like a life audit: you'll step back and see how your mind works. There are a couple of routes you can take:

- **Option A:** Don't tell anyone you're doing the challenge. Simply give it your all and notice if people seem to shift in their interactions with you, especially people who know you well, like your partner, friends, or family.
- **Option B:** Enlist others. Get a partner or a handful of colleagues (or students) together who want to take on the challenge. Having others join you in the challenge enables you to keep each other accountable and provides a debriefing group for talking about the experience.

Remember that the idea isn't to find perfection; it's to make progress in identifying and reducing negativity bias.

Assignment #2: Add a "Peak-End Ritual" to Your Day

One of the greatest lessons I've learned about parenthood is that rituals matter. Parenting books and gurus talk about having bedtime rituals to help kids go to sleep. But the gurus are missing a huge question about such rituals: What's in it for me? I might sound pretty selfish, as providing a good night's sleep for my child should be the end goal. But every parent knows how much work it takes to build and maintain that ritual.

Fortunately, I've learned that the ritual is worth it not only for my son's sleep, but also for my well-being. As mentioned earlier, due to the "peak-end rule," recency and resolution matter for our memory and satisfaction. So, if I have a "bedtime-means-war" experience putting my toddler down to sleep at night, I'm likely to say I had a rough day. But if he goes the "snuggle-and-be-sweet"

route, I'll feel like my day was amazing. And my thoughts at the end of the night matter because soon I'll be sleeping (or ruminating) and consolidating my version of reality into my memories.

My wife and I have habituated positive rituals into our child's bedtime routine. For example, even if my son has had a day of mega-tantrums, I make sure that I sing to him and kiss him good-night—even when I'm grouchy. These rituals are positive ends to an otherwise challenging day. They give me a piece of goodness to collect to show me that the whole day wasn't bad.

Consider building a peak-end ritual into your school day. Before leaving your class, you could do one of the following:

- Ask yourself, what was your “win of the day”?
- Play a mood-lifting song as you do a final organization of your room or desk.
- Have a “victory session” rather than a “vent session” with colleagues.
- Write down a specific goal for tomorrow. Reflect on the progress you made today with the goal you set yesterday.
- Send a quick e-mail message to a parent, sharing something positive about one of your students.
- Write a positive affirmation on your board that students will see when they walk in the next day.

Also try some peak-end rituals at home in the evening. Check out some of the other practices described in this book, such as mindfulness meditations (see Chapter 2) or gratitude journaling (see Chapter 3).

Assignment #3: Start a Jar of Goodness

Get a large jar. Each day, recall one positive memory, write it on a slip of paper, and place it in the jar. At the end of the year (or sooner, if needed), pull out the slips of paper and reflect on the many positive memories you have.

Assignment #4: Reminisce About Your Reason for Becoming a Teacher

My students often ask me why I became a teacher. Based on their reactions to my response, they seem to expect me to say, “Because I was inspired by so-and-so” or, “I had this class that changed me.” Neither of these was my reason, though. Truthfully, I was a defiant, antagonistic little punk. As an upperclassman, I skipped school often; I pulled pranks; I got kicked out of Spanish class permanently.

Despite my discontent with school, I remember the exact moment I decided to become a teacher. I was about to skip school again, most likely aggravated by some teacher and thinking, “I can’t wait to get away from this place and never come back.” Then, like getting smashed between the eyes with clarity, I had another thought: “That’s one of the most selfish ideas ever—running from a problem rather than fixing it.” That moment I decided that I wanted to be the teacher I didn’t have in high school.

My aversion to school was a product of not having positive relationships with my teachers. In hindsight, of course, I can see that I had some great teachers. My issues with teachers were my version of reality as a teenager (I hadn’t yet realized the importance of goodness curation). Nevertheless, my inspiration to teach was the desire to deliver what I had lacked. I wanted to build positive relationships with challenging students to help them find a better path—and for them not to simply infer that someone cared about their well-being, but to know it every day.

When we’re frustrated as teachers, we often ask ourselves, “Why do I continue to do this?” But a more powerful question is “What inspired me to do this in the first place?” I’ve questioned my decision to stay in education many times. Every time I do, though, I bring myself to that moment in high school—having an epiphany that I could do something good for others.

Take some time and reminisce about your reason for teaching. Even though it has probably shifted since you started and the memory has been reconsolidated many times, recall the spark that led you to do this work. Write it down, talk about it, mull it over on your drive to school, post about it online—do whatever it takes to recall the empowering reasons you got into this career. That memory shouldn't be stuffed in the back of the museum; it should be the centerpiece.

Assignment #5: Celebrate with Others

Just as art curators don't have to be the ones who make the art, goodness curators don't have to be the source of positive things to take note of. Instead, we can celebrate the good with others. One way of doing this is "active constructive responding."

Say a student shares some good news about playing well in her soccer game over the weekend. Imagine how you might respond. Here are some possibilities:

- Point out the negatives of the event (active destructive):
"Hmm. You should be careful; I just read about the long-term effect of concussions from soccer."
- Ignore or brush off the good news (passive destructive):
Nod head, continue to organize desk.
- Give a vague and clichéd response (passive constructive):
"That's pretty neat."
- Share authentic support and curiosity (active constructive):
"That's awesome to hear! Tell me more about it."

A group of studies found that when people seek out others and discuss good things, it boosts their positive emotion and well-being to a point beyond the benefits of the good event itself. Additionally, if their partner gives an active-constructive response, it boosts the positive effect even more (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Celebrating others improves our relationship, allows us to share some goodness, and helps ignite the sharer's positive emotion.

This outcome doesn't mean we need to stop what we're doing and dive in every time a kid shares some good news. We all know how time consuming that would be, especially with elementary students who love to share that cool thing their cousin's friend's mother did 17 months ago. But consider offering some active-constructive responses in situations like these:

- With your partner or other key relationships in your life
- With a student you'd like to have a more positive relationship with
- When you're having a rough day and could use a boost of something good
- Tomorrow