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Preventing Post-Tenure Malaise



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To outsiders, faculty life can look fairly cushy. Follow the rules and engage in shrewd academic politics during a six-year probationary period and you secure tenure and lifetime employment.

Quite a shiny brass ring, to be sure. However, the tenure pursuit — for those lucky enough

to get a tenure-track job and then earn tenure — is not for the faint of heart.

Quite a few tenure candidates experience early career burnout. By burnout, psychologists mean mental and physical exhaustion tied to a sustained effort — in this case, the challenges of creating an admirable employment profile along with the vigilance required to stay on track along the way.

As a young scholar, you stress about the true value of your work amid fears that, if a committee votes the wrong way, you will be ousted from a profession you spent a decade or so training for. Tenure expectations — sometimes murky, sometimes fluid — provide a wobbly foundation for evaluating whether your efforts will be successful during this mad marathon. Symptoms of burnout are many, but often include: anxiety, insomnia, forgetfulness, procrastination, loss of appetite, physical illnesses, and depression.

Even if full-blown burnout doesn't occur, the protracted audition of a six-year probationary period is fatiguing and stressful.

Oddly, the predictable emotions of joy and relief generated by a successful tenure decision can also be tainted with ambivalence. With a stroke of the president's pen, the drama is over. The brass ring is yours yet the dissolution of the incentive leaves the newly tenured with sometimes profound existential questions: "I worked so hard for years — for this?" or "What's next for me?"

Most academic careers last 30 or 40 years. That's a long time to be plagued with post-tenure blues.

Some claim that the stresses of the tenure track produce a form of narcissistic depression in some faculty members. The

Life in higher education can be a delight but only if you have a plan to keep the professional blues at

investment of time, energy, and effort feels so large that you may have no personal reserves left to initiate a less supervised and more self-generated period of your career. At best, a blues-stricken tenured professor gets off to a sluggish start in building a record that will lead to a full professorship.

bay as well as a vision for your imagined future as a scholar, a teacher, and a service-minded colleague.

At worst, the blues may lay the groundwork for getting stuck — turning you into one of those "deadwood" profs you used to ridicule as a student.

All tenure-granting institutions have professors who do not advance beyond the rank of associate professor. "Terminal" associate professors tend to have distinctive characteristics in common:

- Their scholarship tends to be lackluster, either in scope or substance.
- They allow themselves to be drawn into an excessive amount of service that diverts time and attention from building a research agenda or improving their teaching.
- They forgo leadership opportunities or choose ones that lead nowhere. Consequently, they end up building a local rather than a national reputation.
- They are often unduly critical of colleagues who advance beyond them.
- They tend to be dismissive of the institution that granted them tenure for not recognizing the value of their continuing contributions, or for maintaining standards that are too difficult or too fuzzy for them to attain.

So what can you, as a new associate professor, do to prevent the post-tenure blues? Some academics may need to seek mental-health care. As longtime professors and administrators, we also suggest the following strategies.

Remember, your dissertation is not your life's work. Your dissertation established that you have the capacity for scholarly work, but your "life's work" — in terms of scholarship — lies ahead of you.

There is no requirement that you pursue some dull or overwrought variation of a theme you mentioned in passing in Chapter 3 of your doctoral thesis. Move on to ideas that inspire and excite you. That's not only acceptable, it's desirable.

If a sabbatical leave is available after tenure, by all means, take it. You need both distance from — and perspective on — the tenure race. That doesn't mean spending your semester off doing Sudoku. It does mean asking yourself what sorts of things you envision for the next stage of your career.

Actively plan what topics will make your research work feel less like work. Evaluate the kinds of service that will be most satisfying, and strategize how to avoid the ones that will drain your spirit or distract you from meaningful work. Use your sabbatical to read books you longed to read during the tenure marathon but could not spare the time.

Identify new ways to invigorate your teaching. As an assistant professor, you will have developed a few standard courses that your chair will look to you to cover as your regular department responsibility. Teaching those courses over and over may start to resemble a routine.

If your courses have started to feel stale, start over. Adopt new texts. Explore new delivery strategies, such as problem-based learning or flipped classrooms. Develop a seminar in a subfield that is new for you. The goal here is to get your teaching back to a level that is satisfying for you and your students. In short, reinvent yourself in the classroom.

Give leading a try. Whether you take a tour of duty as a department chair or pursue management posts in a scholarly society, demonstrating leadership is often an unspoken criterion for promotion to full professor. Running search committees, coordinating assessment efforts, even chairing the university's parking-appeals committee can hone your management skills. These opportunities offer a change of pace that can help chase away the blues (unless of course the department or the organization is a viper's nest).

Just be sure that your choice is valued by your department colleagues, as well as by the dean, provost, and committee colleagues who will decide your eventual fate.

Travel. A Fulbright experience, for example, provides a special kind of renewal as you immerse yourself and your skills in a new culture. If a Fulbright isn't possible, work with the folks who manage international travel on your campus to investigate the relationships your institution has already established that might support a faculty exchange or foreign faculty assignment.

If a formal arrangement is not feasible, travel abroad on your own. There is no better way to broaden your horizons.

Find a co-author. Left unattended, some midcareer academics find it difficult to settle down and generate new scholarship that will advance their careers. Identifying someone with compatible interests and complementary work habits can help you stay focused.

Exploit your relationships in professional organizations to find someone who would benefit from an alliance. Two colleagues can often cover much more professional ground than one — and you can trade off the honor of being first author as work appears in your mutual scholarly pipeline.

Maintain or enrich your mentoring relationships. Just because you're now tenured doesn't mean you won't ever need good advice again. The mentors who helped you weather the tenure track are likely to have plenty of post-tenure wisdom to share. Make a point to thank them for their support and then maintain the relationship with regular coffee dates. They can help you identify subtle risks that might compromise your path to full professor.

In addition, volunteer as a mentor to early-career scholars. Helping others achieve tenure can be very effective in reducing post-tenure malaise.

Life in higher education can be a delight — there are always new worlds to learn about and conquer (metaphorically, anyway) — but only if you have a plan to keep the professional blues at bay as well as a vision for your imagined future as a scholar, a teacher, and a service-minded colleague.

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