

Why I Collapsed on the Job



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By Katerina Bodovski February 15, 2018

I'm a tenured professor at a large public research-oriented university. This was my first job straight out of doctoral studies. It was, and still is, the job of my dreams. As opposed to the many tenure-track horror stories we hear (particularly from women), I felt valued and appreciated from Day 1 in my department. I respect my colleagues and feel respected by them.

So what's the problem? Last fall I physically collapsed.

I had been a fairly healthy person. But suddenly my body refused to heal from a simple infection, leading to inflammation that left me bedridden and unable to perform most of my duties for five long weeks. Even when the physical symptoms started to improve, I was unable to focus on my work. Never before had I felt what it was like to burn out completely.

How did I wind up like that? I can't say this came crashing out of the blue, because it didn't. I was doing too much. My workload had become inhumane.

In the fall semester, I taught two graduate courses. My department has three programs, and I was running one of them, with its 10 faculty members and about 50 master's and doctoral students. I served on two committees, one in the department and another at the college level. I completed six manuscript reviews for leading journals, serving as a deputy editor on one of them. I had four doctoral and two master's advisees and served on 15 graduate committees — providing feedback and writing letters of recommendation. Last fall I wrote close to 40 such letters. Add to that the steady stream of emails I must read and respond to every day.

My job description stipulates that I should spend 60 percent of my time on research, 30 percent on teaching, and 10 percent on service. The duties I describe above should have taken only 40 percent of my time but in reality took nearly *all* of my time. Yet the research component of my job is the main ingredient that affects promotions in academe. So on top of my overload of teaching and service duties, I was supposed to work on multiple research papers, present at national and international conferences, and pursue external funding in grants.

Many recent Ph.D.s are unable to find tenure-track jobs because colleges and universities in the United States have shifted, slowly but surely, to a model in which a large segment of the teaching force is made up of nontenure-track instructors, adjuncts, and visiting professors. To them my complaints may seem unreasonable. After all, I have been lucky to get a tenure-line job (and later, tenure).

I perfectly understand how lucky I am. I was born and grew up in Moscow. The idea of receiving a Ph.D. from a leading American university — let alone becoming a professor there — resided in a different universe for me. The prospect still was in a faraway galaxy when, at age 20, I moved to Israel, alone. After receiving my bachelor's and master's degrees from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, my mentor persuaded me to apply to doctoral programs in America. I moved from continent to continent twice, received formal education in three languages, and started from scratch in countries I had never visited before.

My personal history is actually a reason that some in my circle were surprised by my health crisis. They asked a simple question: "Why now?" Surely I had been challenged before? Yet with all of the stress my family and I endured (some of which I described [in a 2015 book](#)), I am acutely aware that mine is an easy story in comparison with those of other immigrants. I would never understand the struggles of a person of color, for example, since I am a white woman. I'm twice an immigrant but have never been homeless or hungry, nor have I feared for my family's or my own safety, in contrast to so many immigrants in this country.

For me, the answer to the "Why now?" question is work. Over the years, the expectations for faculty work have grown exponentially. A tenured professorship has always been my dream job, because it provides freedom and flexibility. You teach what you care about; you decide what to research. But the benefits of such freedom and flexibility in academe come at the cost of disappearing boundaries between work and life. We are so free to work whenever we want that many of us end up working all the time, not having full weekends and rarely taking off more than just a few days, despite popular perceptions to the contrary. We bring our work home or anywhere we go — on flights or long drives, to vacations or family reunions. We are constantly checking email, responding to colleagues and students. What Richard Swenson wrote about in [his 2004 book, *Margin*](#), has become reality: We live our lives without a margin. Like many faculty members, I somehow became a silent workaholic. I do not believe that was a conscious choice. Some people may be predisposed to it, but many of us are

socialized into this trait of academic culture. This is how things are done, goes the unwritten agreement. We prepare our doctoral students for that culture and advise junior faculty members on the job accordingly: This is how the institution works, and you'd better get ready for it.

Nobody questions that culture. If you are too weak for the challenge, go elsewhere, find a different occupation. I used the word "silent" because being an academic is a pretty lonely job. Nobody else knows how much is on your plate. We live a day-to-day illusion that we don't have a boss. We have only "self-imposed" deadlines. Everything we do is our choice.

Countless articles and books have been written about why women are reluctant to say no on the job. I never thought I had that problem. But requests in academe rarely come in the shape of cold demands; they come tightly wrapped in appreciation. Students enjoyed taking my courses, therefore they want me to serve on their graduate committees. Journal editors value my professional opinion, hence the requests to review manuscripts. I say no to a lot of things, but clearly not enough. The grip of academic work is indeed that proverbial "iron hand in a velvet glove."

Another gendered reality is that women work a double shift, carrying a larger burden of the household chores and child care. I live in one of the most egalitarian marriages I know of. My husband carries a larger share of the home-front responsibilities than I do, and our son is in college. I cannot begin to imagine what this is like for women in more traditional marriages or for parents of multiple young children.

A couple of months before I collapsed, a profound feeling of exhaustion took over. As a side interest, I had been studying emotions through a variety of traditional and nontraditional ways for close to two decades. I've been pretty effective as a mentor because I have acquired certain tools and used them to help my students and young colleagues.

Somewhere along the way, though, I lost the ability to help myself. I'm writing about it now in the hope of bringing attention to the troubles in the ivory tower and to give others the legitimacy to question the things we have come to take for granted about faculty work and life. Our creativity, our scholarship, and our mentorship should not be treated as objects on a production line — but it often feels that they are.

By and large, I have recovered physically, and I'm back to teaching, mentoring, and running my program. Thanks to the flexibility of my job and some understanding colleagues, I was not "on leave" at any point. I was "lucky" to be sick over the Thanksgiving and winter breaks. But I surely face a challenge of reflecting, regrouping, re-evaluating, and redesigning what and how I do from this point on.

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