

By **Nikole D. Patson**

A cure for burnout

“I am going to be on sabbatical at the same time!” I exclaimed to my former Ph.D. adviser. My certainty surprised me. I had recently earned tenure and become eligible for a sabbatical, but I had hesitated to take one. A break from teaching to focus on my research sounded nice in theory, but the truth was that I felt burned out on my science. I had no idea what I would do on a sabbatical, and the thought of losing the structure that teaching provides terrified me. Yet when I saw my former adviser at a conference and she mentioned that she would be spending the next year on sabbatical in a lab whose work I admired, something clicked. Maybe that was what I needed to get my spark back after the grueling, isolating process of getting tenure.

When I started in my tenure-track position 6 years earlier, I had all the enthusiasm in the world. I couldn't wait to set up and run my own lab. To earn tenure, I needed to prove my independence by publishing as a solo principal investigator. That's pretty standard for professors who run labs staffed by graduate students. But I work at a state university regional campus that serves only undergraduates. The students are wonderful, but they need a lot of training and only have limited time for research.

So, I thought the best approach was to publish as a single author and do the bulk of research myself. I was so concerned about proving that I could work independently that I didn't talk with colleagues or mentors about my work. The only people who read my manuscripts prior to publication were peer reviewers and editors.

It worked: I got tenure. But when I received the email notification from my dean, I realized the toll those years had taken on me. Instead of being ecstatic, as I had always imagined I would be, I sat blankly in front of my computer wondering, “What now?” I couldn't remember why I had ever been interested in the questions I had pursued, and I was convinced that I had already had all of the ideas I would ever have. I went to my living room and started to binge-watch *Gilmore Girls*.

That sense of emptiness continued for about 9 months, until my Ph.D. adviser and I got to talking at that conference. When she brought up her sabbatical and invited me to visit, I was intrigued. I didn't have an idea for a project, but maybe I could be a laboratory tourist and benefit from seeing new perspectives. I had recently been awarded a small grant—enough for an international flight and 6 weeks of housing.



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My students were advanced enough that they could manage without me for a while. I turned in my sabbatical application the day it was due, and 6 months later I was in Germany.

The first day, I set up my laptop and wondered what to do with myself. A few hours later, one of the lab's graduate students announced that it was time for lunch—a daily group activity. After I was introduced to everyone, one of the students mentioned that she was uncertain about how to implement a new experiment. As we discussed her project, I remembered how much I enjoyed this kind of collaborative exchange of ideas.

From then on, I made it a point to strike up conversations as we walked to lunch each day. The weeks flew by, and I felt my enthusiasm

for research coming back. A colloquium I gave to the department at the end of my visit capped the experience. The audience was engaged and asked challenging questions. I felt energized and enthusiastic about my work for the first time in years.

I wish I hadn't allowed my tenure process to become so isolating. My ideas had been stuck in my own head for so long that they felt stale. In hindsight, I could have talked with my colleagues and mentors about my work. That wouldn't have jeopardized my independence and would have helped both my work and my mental state. But I've learned my lesson: Community and connection are a great antidote to burnout. ■

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Science

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Science **364** (6438), 406.

DOI: 10.1126/science.364.6438.406

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