

Burned out? Don't drop out

By Marsha Larsen

You know what it feels like. Your fuses are sputtering out, or sizzling to the point of explosion. You say you're "about to blow," "wicked out," or "burned out." School becomes a pressure you just can't take any more.

Are you burned out?

Counselor Ed Beck of the Capitol Campus Counseling Center says 'no,' the term is a misnomer. "Burn-out implies a different set of circumstances—a career in which someone is giving more than receiving, like a social worker or nurse who work in chronically stressful situations with too little compensation."

Burn-out takes time, much longer than the school experience. Becks says burn-out is a gradual wearing down of idealism. Eventually, even the "strokes" don't compensate for this when it is coupled with the stress inherent in the occupation.

Professors burn out. Students stress-react.

Dr. Marian Krieger, coordinator of Counseling Services, says stress reaction is an adjustment first-termers at Capitol Campus often feel. They notice a dip in their grade point average and wonder, "What's going on? I did so well before I transferred here." Accustomed to a semester system, they find terms short and intense. More is expected of them in an upper division school. "They must," Krieger says, "jump in and do their work, relying principally on themselves for motivation."

Stress reaction does not limit its target to new students, however. Beck and Krieger say that married students, returning women and men may fall prey as well. "A person must juggle more according to the number of roles he or she must fulfill, and the more roles, the more stress."

Dr. William Mahar, Assistant Professor of Humanities and Music, adds two more categories of stress. One is peculiar to Capitol Campus; the other, more universal—"senior-itis."

Senior-itis may occur in a student's last term. "Seniors," Mahar says, "are so concerned about their futures, they can't concentrate on the present. It's a transition period, a time of having to cope with uncertainty."

The stress distinctive of Capitol Campus is one, Mahar says, of basic identification. "Penn State Capitol Campus is not a readily identifiable con-

versation opener, for one thing. Capitol is not that well known in the area, even though it has existed since 1966. Capitol represents an unknown quantity, yet school image is very important to students."

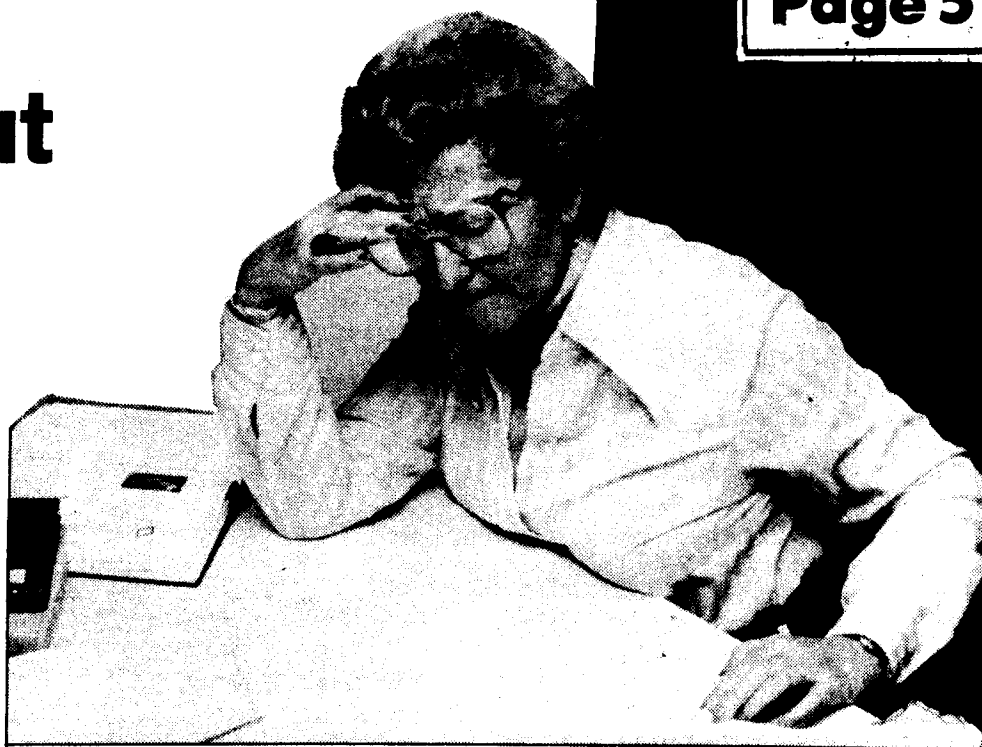
Dr. Mahar contends that professors can see tension in students. "If you've learned to read students' faces, you've learned to recognize stress." He adds, "Whether a teacher can recognize stress depends upon whether he or she cares about the job. Teaching is more than getting information across."

Mahar cares, and he notices things about his students, like changes in their appearance. Sometimes a student who is normally well-kempt and -dressed will look disheveled. Snatches of conversation just before and after class tip him off, too. He can hear students voice their concerns.

Mahar tries to read responses to quizzes perceptively. He can identify students who have overprepared. They overwhelm with information. "This kind of compulsiveness can be indicative of stress," he says.

Dr. Sandra Prince-Embury, Assistant Professor of Psychology, agrees that testing tells a tale. She notices that on occasion around quiz time, students will approach her and offer information about themselves. "Not so much to make excuses," she says, "but perhaps to place in context their anticipated performance on the exam." Some of her students reveal personal information when they meet with her to discuss their term projects as well.

Dr. Prince-Embury observes individual students absences as a sign of stress. She notes this does not necessarily indicate students are avoiding work or uninterested in it. "They don't burn out on school work so much as things crop up in their lives to overwhelm them—things like health problems, family losses, children's illness, financial worries."



"Actually," she adds, "I see more stress in new students. But once they get settled and integrate their education process with their lifestyle, they seem to be fine."

Before new students—or even seasoned students coping with change—negotiate that settling-in period, how can they determine whether they're simply having a bad day, or developing a legitimate stress problem?

Counselors Krieger and Beck point out that stress, after all, is not entirely bad. "There is a level at which stress is a motivator," they say, "but also a level at which it debilitates."

The debilitating level manifests itself symptomatically. If a student experiences lack of energy, ongoing depression, high irritability, or feelings of isolation, chances are it's a stress reaction. Physical symptoms may indicate severe stress as well: heart palpitations, dizziness, tingling in the extremities. All these, Beck says, can be "anxiety reactions—those things we called in the past 'a case of nerves'."

Beck and Krieger have noticed an increase of stress reaction among students at Capitol with "fewer outlets they perceive they have."

Students can find outlets in recreation and athletics. Studies conducted by the Counseling Center indeed indicate an increased use of gym facilities and intramural

activities by our students.

Social affairs and formal group programs (like Study Effectiveness Training) can help dispel feelings of isolation. Beck says he encourages these interactions because "there's real value in students seeing that others feel the same way."

"It's important to have a balance in your life between work, study, and having a good time," advises Dr. Krieger. She notes a common complaint they hear at the Counseling Center: "All I do is study; I have no time."

Dr. Mahar suggests that students "organize their time, allow time for recreation, and structure their lives to accomplish something."

Dr. Prince-Embury recommends, "Just do what you can." As part of this approach, "set more realistic goals for yourself. Don't expect to maintain a 4.0 cum if your life situation has encompassed many more roles than just student."

Both Dr. Mahar and Dr. Prince-Embury say that if students express or show signs of stress that can't be dealt with, they recommend the Counseling Center.

Counselors Marian Krieger and Ed Beck treat stress reaction after they rule out the possibility that symptoms might be a physical sickness. They are well connected within the surrounding communities and can recommend more intensive counseling, if the severity of the case warrants it. All of their student clients can depend upon strict confidentiality.

So it is not burn-out that frazzled students cope with, but stress—tension—anxiety. The bad news is that stress reaction is increasingly a problem in the highly charged university atmosphere at Capitol, and that it may recur during any transition period. The good news is that it's a temporary, adjustment phenomenon and that during it, there's help in them there halls.