02 Needfinding and Empathy Work

Team EduCAUtion
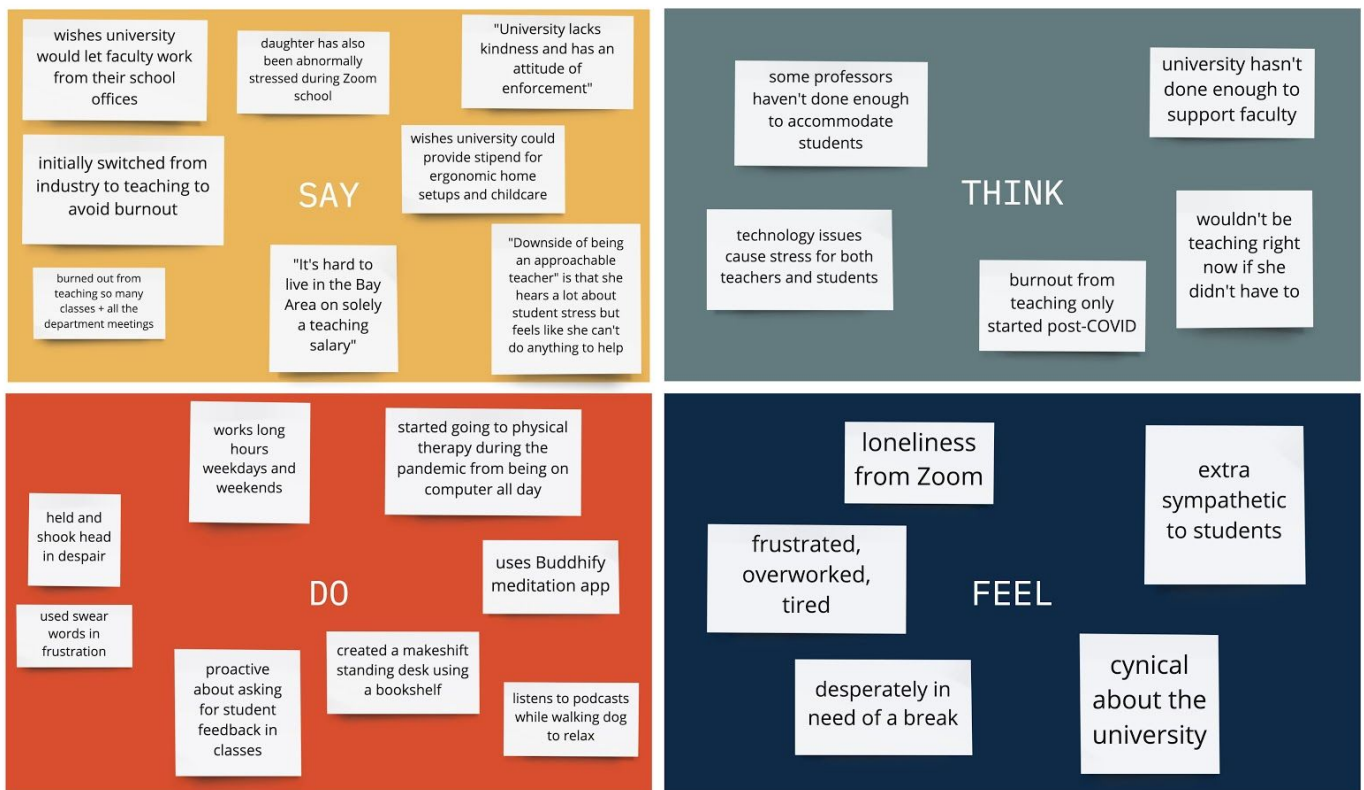Neha Chetry, Victoria Ding, Ingrid Fan, Isha Kumar

Summary of Interviews

We interviewed 8 people in total; 2 undergraduate students, 3 graduate students, and 3 working professionals. Note that the below names have been changed for privacy purposes.

Expert Interview: Jamie [Empathy Map] [Interview Notes]

Lecturer in Engineering

- Initially switched from working in industry to academia because she was feeling burned out in industry. Really loved her teaching job and **didn't feel burned out until the pandemic**.
- Feels that the university she works at has not been doing enough to support faculty members during COVID.

- ○ Struggles with working at home with unreliable wifi and uncomfortable office set-up, taking care of her daughter, and experiencing physical pain from being on Zoom all day
  - ○ **Wishes the university could provide faculty with more support**, such as stipends for childcare and ergonomic home setups.
  - ○ **University lacks empathy**
- Wanted to take the fall off from teaching, but couldn't afford to do so
- Works long hours, even on weekends.
- Recognizes that students are also experiencing severe stress as a result of the pandemic
  - ○ Considers herself a relatively approachable person, so many students tell her stories from their personal lives
  - ○ Feels helpless because she wishes she could fix her students' problems too

Alice [Empathy Map] [Interview Notes]

Pre-Professional Graduate Student at the University of Michigan

- Also did undergrad at UMich. Says **graduate department provides significantly more wellness support:**
  - ○ small-group mentorship, elective classes on wellness, walks with faculty, and assigned wellness groups with upperclassmen, town hall meetings

- **Was hesitant to initially categorize her stress as burnout** in high school and undergraduate until after a quick self-evaluation,
    - stated she had periods of depression from **overworking, overcommitting herself, and not having adequate resources in place to ask for help.**
- **Despite still reporting high levels of stress, Alice did bring up a few beneficial factors of zoom**
    - **including a safer environment to speak up more in class** (including using the chat feature), more personal time in the morning to focus on herself
    - more control over her own levels of attention (with immediate access to energy boosters like coffee).

Julia [Empathy Map] [Interview Notes]

Harvard new grad, starting a consulting job in the winter of 2020.

- Rarely felt conscious of burnout throughout the school year, but rather felt permission to feel exhaustion and recover once obligations or semesters ended.
    - Primary strategy for recovering from burnout revolved around long, uninterrupted periods of free time (a summer break length being the ideal time)
- Described herself as an **extreme perfectionist with stress prone tendencies**, a combination which she described as toxic in that it encouraged procrastination and extreme work.

- **Struggled heavily with zoom fatigue this year, though she felt that online school alleviated the traditional stressors which led to "normal burnout"**
    - E.G. She felt more connected to faculty, less burdened by her workload, and socialized virtually with friends more.
- Found it difficult to recover from her zoom burnout, and feels unenergized to transition to the next chapter of her life.

Sharon [Interview Notes]

Undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, currently taking a Leave of Absence from school

- Didn't feel burnout until virtual learning began.
    - Self-described as someone who never revolved her life around school. She was able to finish all of her homework and studying within school hours and found pleasure through her extracurricular activities
- Describes her relationship with stress as willfully ignorant, stating that **she doesn't realize how stressed she is until she gets a break.**
- Began to experience burnout when classes all moved online.
    - **hated attending online classes because she felt as though she was "being there to be there"** and no longer could attend lectures for the community or organic interaction.
- Currently living in the caribbean with a group of her friends
    - No school right now but instead working a remote internship in a field that she's passionate about.
    - Says she doesn't feel burnt out by work if it aligns with her interests and passions but nowadays has no patience to put any effort into work that diverges from such.

Molly [Interview Notes]

New grad from Stanford, former leader of the campus Wellness Initiative

- Suffered from burnout due to (1) overexertion in supporting friends with mental health battles and (2) acting as an on-campus resource for communities struggling with mental health (the Bridge, wellness initiative).
- **Combats stress by quantifying it**, without writing tasks down and managing a timeline finds it difficult to respond to obligations without shutting down.
    - Uses only a physical planner, and structures her timeline of worry to weeklong periods.
    - Doesn't separate categories at all (planning a friends birthday, doing homework)-- treats everything with equal importance.

- **Believes main issues contributing to student burnout on campus are: lack of understanding about mental illness and the way they manifest themselves, difficulty for faculty and peers in understanding how to support individual students, and lack of long-term care** (CAPS doesn't transfer to long-term).

Taylor [Interview Notes]

2nd year PhD student in Communication

- Relatively stress-free before this year
  - so stressed and busy that she hasn't been eating meals throughout the day, just snacks.
- Source of stress: her research lab.
  - thinks her other lab members can sometimes be competitive but in a passive way → feels like she has to question what people's intentions are.
  - drama relating to authorship order on a publication.Made her internalize need to be seen by others and be valued in lab
- Feels the **pressure to be as prolific as possible, even though this isn't what she personally wants or values**.
  - doesn't actually want to be an academic after her PhD, doesn't need to publish much, but she feels this pressure from other members of her lab.
- Other source of burnout: this is her first time teaching an undergraduate level course.

Sam [Interview Notes]

Pre-med new grad, currently applying to med school while on a gap year

- Main source of stress: medical school application process.
  - **Worried about doing med school interviews virtually** because she thinks that the effects of **internal biases and stereotypes may be exacerbated over Zoom**.
  - Interviews are now condensed into short virtual sessions, rather than what normally would be a day-long affair
  - She is concerned that interviewers may be quick to jump to conclusions based on initial impressions and that she may not have enough time to present her best self.
- Says she generally has a healthy relationship with school and work, but she noted that **being pre-med in general is just a never-ending source of stress**, whether that's from doing well on exams to asking professors for recommendation letters to waiting on interview invitations.
- We sensed that she was tired and distracted during the interview. She seemed to be holding back on sharing certain information.

Lenny [[Interview Notes]]

Stanford student working as a field organizer for MI candidate, full time student, and part of the Undergraduate Senate

- Currently works 30 hours (for just his field organizing job), and prioritizes his job before anything else. Before COVID/election year he worked 10 hrs/week and prioritized school.
  - Highly motivated, and efficient at scheduling tasks, breaks. Prepares himself mentally for expected "seasons" of stress.
  - Exuded confidence and passion for all of his pursuits/ chosen interests. Extensively spoke about his **motivations for dealing with stress** (background as Black male pursuing politics, wants to help community), enforcing breaks such as taking walks (measured by activity/ miles NOT by time), going out to dinner with friends
  - **Has not noticed drastic change with online consumption. About the same as before Zoom learning** (only difference being, physically constrained now due to lockdowns)-- hinted at experiencing burnout now though, but did not explicitly mention the word- -substituted with "very stressful"

Key Insights

On the subject of burnout, all of our interviewees -- students, professors, and other working professionals -- chose to elaborate on their struggles with experiencing Zoom fatigue and stress. They all reported **on struggling with their relationship to stress and work because of Zoom**, which indicated to us that **the landscape of burnout is changing due to Zoom fatigue.** Because some resources are no longer successful in the transition to online-only, many of the professionals and students we interviewed are struggling with searching for equally effective resources consistently utilized during in-person work and school. With the absence of physical resources such as on-campus spaces or in person counseling, interviewees spoke on relying only upon their immediate network of family and friends or "sticking it out" in the hopes that a transition to in person will occur.

Despite experiencing overall Zoom fatigue, several students voiced appreciation for the fact that Zoom has allowed them to build better, consistent, relationships with faculty and friends. The ease of online communication has helped some students overcome their fear of speaking up in class, and **the unusual and difficult circumstances brought on by COVID-19 have created general norms for accommodation and accessibility** at all levels of professional and institutional development. Many individuals have expressed that **asking for help has ultimately become easier now.**

After conducting our interviews, **we were surprised to discover** a key insight: **many people don't associate high engagement with stress as burnout.** Though nearly every person voiced

concerns with stress and debilitating tiredness, some people refrained from wording these experiences as "burnout".

Another key insight that we discovered is that **Zoom perpetuates a dual tension: while remedying certain "traditional stressors" thought to cause burnout, personal wellbeing has in fact become worse.** On the one hand, institutions are now more forgiving and likely to give out accommodation, as mentioned earlier. The burden and pace of classes has slowed, and students are able to complete their work with greater ease. Faculty and mentorship is more accessible, and free time enables more socializing than possible in person. However, the lack of deliberate breaks and intentionality in schedules creates an uncanny valley: "I'm socializing yet I'm alone"; "I'm done with work but I'm not enjoying my free time". **Zoom fatigue appears to result from fundamental oversaturation, in which the space for boundary and intention has broken down.** People are oversaturated, working and relaxing in the same room, socializing and stressed within the bounds of singular square boxes. This denies the ability to gain true relief , or as our literature review has coined, occupying us in a "continuous present". **One question we are left with is "what is a safe and accessible way of taking an intentional break?"**

With this direction from our needfinding, we hope to better augment our findings by interviewing certain groups; namely freshmen and students living in houses full-time with friends and also students with dependents. We predict that these spheres are of high interest to us as the former group likely has little to no grasp on the traditional stressors of in-person university learning while the latter group is likely facing more extreme benefits and/or challenges from switching to virtual learning. We hope to further investigate the idea of a continuous present and the tensions we have identified in Zoom fatigue.

==*Based on feedback from Monday, we have included a cohesive empathy map, organized by theme, of our remaining interviewees, which can be found [here](#).==