

## Audio Transcript for Episode 602: “Burnout + Boundaries”

*Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.*

**JEN SUTTON:** I started getting panic attacks again. I actually had ringing in my ears that I've never had before. So burnout started to be super real for me this year, to the point where I didn't know if I *could* continue in my day-to-day.

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**CHAD MOSES:** You're listening to the “To Write Love on Her Arms” podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. I'm your host Chad Moses, and in each episode, we'll be talking about the things that can often feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We'll be sharing stories and exploring big themes like hope, healing, and recovery. If any of the topics we discuss, or the stories we share, feel too heavy for you, know that it's OK to pause, to restart, or to stop altogether. As we discover new stories, we hope to remind you that your story is important.

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**CHAD:** Burnout. You've probably heard that term over the course of the last few years in regard to work, the pandemic, and the general state of the world. According to Psychology Today, burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion, brought on by prolonged or repeated stress. Though it's most often caused by things at work, it can also appear in other areas of life, such as parenting, caretaking, or romantic relationships. At the core of burnout, is stress. Stress can manifest itself in many different ways, and it does a number on the body, mind, and soul when it's not acknowledged and addressed.

So, in today's episode, we're going to be talking about how to recognize burnout, and how to treat it with the help of two people who are rather familiar with it, Sheena Grosshans who is a parent and the spouse of an educator, and Jen Sutton, who is a long-time teacher.

Sheena works as TWLOHA's Director of Key Relationships and is a Brooklyn, NY native who found both her love and home in the South. She is a life-long creative, professionally compassionate, but spends most of her days being bossed around by her two-year-old daughter. She also shares an eight-year-old son with her husband, who is a third-generation educator, and currently teaches at a middle school in Florida.

Our second guest is Jen, who is in her 13th year as a high school science teacher. This year, in particular, she has even added a few middle school classes to her agenda. And one of her coworkers is her husband, who teaches at the same school. But Jen is much more than just a teacher—she is passionate about mental health and advocating for both educators and students alike, she has a corgi named Millie and a cat named Bev, and she's a really big fan of a show called Ted Lasso (her favorite character is Mae).

And I'm your host, Chad Moses. Thanks so much for being here. Let's get started.

[music playing]

CONVO FILE

### **CHAD**

So today, we're covering a nuanced and rather specific topic, but it has touching points in the lives of so many people. Today, we're going to be talking about teacher, student, and caregiver burnout. So I think you know burnout is certainly a term that has become a bit more invoked. I can't remember really talking much about burnout up until, you know, maybe like six or seven years ago, I just don't even know if that word was a piece of *my* vocabulary. I guess just to put us all on the same page, defining what burnout is per Psychology Today, 'Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress.' While it typically kind of revolves around ideas of work, it can happen across a number of areas, stuff like: school, parenting, caretaking, and even just day to day relationships. And so on. So, raise your hand if you've ever felt burnt out. Yay! So we're all qualified to talk about this. And I'm assuming people listening also raised their hands. I guess let's start there. Like I've mentioned that, for me personally, burnout is a newer term in my vocabulary. For y'all— starting with Sheena— when did burnout first kind of enter *your* lexicon? Hopefully, it happened before your experience of it. But maybe that wasn't the case.

### **SHEENA GROSSHANS**

I agree, I think it is a *newer* term. And I think for me, I didn't realize I was burnt out, as much as I didn't have a capacity to do *more*. You know, and I think there was this idea of performance for me, this idea of output. And the fact that no matter what I did, I couldn't add more to that, because I myself was maxed out, and that it was actually decreasing the amount that I could be productive, in my day, that was really striking to me.

### **CHAD**

What first was, you know, the first barometric sign of the burnout, was just your level of productivity? Or were there, you know, some other manifestations of what burnout would be? How would it manifest?

### **SHEENA**

Yeah, yeah, I think parenting probably brought that on for me. Literal lack of sleep affects your life in so many different ways. And that was really hard for me to grasp, that this one area that's very connected to my health, and to other pieces of my life, you know, would actually affect my ability to be able to perform in work and in life, and in friendships, you know, just because I was tired. And so that learning that I had a capacity versus just being able to muscle through, right, and being able to push through and say, 'oh, I can do more, it's fine.' You know, that was really illuminating to me.

## **CHAD**

Jen, 13 years working in the school system. When did burnout kind of enter your radar screen? Was this something that you were warned about? Or was it something that you had to learn about firsthand?

## **JEN**

I hate bringing up the pandemic. But of course, that's kind of when I started noticing some things. As a teacher, we had to figure out new things, new ways to teach and personally—I don't think I ever got a break from all of that. And then this year, for me, as you said, I'm teaching a couple of middle school classes. So unfortunately, things are being added to our plates or my plate, personally. And yeah, for *me*, I actually had some physical signs that were starting to show up for my burnout. I was starting to get my panic attacks. I am a stressful person, I deal with this. I've dealt with this my whole life. But I started getting into panic attacks again. I actually had ringing in my ears that I've never had before, and I was talking to my therapist, and she was saying that that can be a sign of stress. So burnout started to be *super* real for me this year to the point where I didn't know if I could continue in my day-to-day. So it was kind of a scary situation. But yeah, that's where I'm at.

## **CHAD**

It occurs to me that so much of burnout is tied to, in some ways, the ways that we identify ourselves, whether it's as a parent, as a teacher, what our profession is, what our responsibilities are, and then that added pressure of, 'well shit, if I'm not performing up to these standards, if I you know, maybe the standards are unrealistic, or maybe they just haven't been calibrated. Like Jen was saying, you know, the pandemic, if you're not well over 100 years old, this is your first truly global health crisis. Felt on this level where life would be altered. Where day-to-day experience would change. I guess to that extent, let's kind of dig in. Not just burnout on a philosophical level, but what did burnout look like? On a personal level? How was it felt? How did burnout change your own sense of self-perception?

## **SHEENA**

I keep going back to my capacity, but there was this idea of the kind of person that I wanted to be, the kind of employee, wife, Mom, you know, and then what I was actually capable of. I found myself really not being able to parent the way that I wanted to, I found myself not really being able to be a friend the way that I wanted to. And I think you're going to get what Jen was talking about, you know, the pandemic, it made you flex in so many ways. And there was a point where I was like, I just can't flex anymore. Like I cannot adapt to anything anymore. And it wasn't that the little changes, you know, they add up over time. And so for me, I think that there was this idea of what I understood as acceptable. And what I understood as my, the way that I wanted to look, the way that I wanted to perform. And burnout really had to adjust that. For me, those expectations had to adjust, and allow myself to be kinder to myself and say, 'Okay, I'm dealing with a lot right now, things are gonna have to look different, because everything is different.'

## **CHAD**

And Jen, how about your experience? Especially as we talk about the profession of teaching, where it's not just believing that you're a good teacher, but there are metrics, there are test scores, there are things that the district is looking at, to determine how effective you are, what did it look like? What did it feel like to balance a sense of professional identity? In the midst of something impossible to measure?

### **JEN**

I go back and forth. Is this what I want to be doing? Am I really helping these students? If I'm not up to my level, where I can actually help them. Because if I'm not at my best, what am I bringing to the table for them? So I was questioning a lot. Is this right? Can this be changed? Because right now, I'm not helping anyone. They're struggling. We're all struggling. Yeah, I really felt like something needed to change or happen.

### **CHAD**

And that's so *brutal* in this case, because we're both talking about you know—, Sheena, you work with us, at To Write Love On Her Arms. You're a compassionate person. Jen, you've not only taught but you've given a ton of your time and energy and creativity to this organization, as well. You are heart forward people. There's people that experience burnout without that kind of benefit, of having a grounding heart forward profession. You can burn out doing absolutely anything. Do you feel like maybe there's something more painful to this idea of if you are burnt out, Jen you were mentioning, 'Am I even good at doing this? Am I good at being a teacher? Am I good at showing up for these students?' Could you spend a little bit more time just talking about the specific pain— that comes not just from doing your job well— but knowing that your job means that other people are looking up to you, counting on you, are seeking some sense of direction, and maybe even *nurturing* from you?

### **JEN**

I mean, at times it can feel like a lot of pressure; because you have to be *on*, in a sense. You can't just come in, really, with how you feel. When some days I wake up and I'm like, 'Oh, I don't want to do this. It's just hard to get out of bed, but you have people waiting for you. You have your students who are trusting that you're gonna show up that you can be their safe space for that day. So you have that sense where you don't want to let them down. Even though you feel like you just need some time to relax, and try to figure out your own things. So you can help them better.

### **CHAD**

Even today, it's not just your *personal* burnout. But I'm sure, dealing with *students* that are burnt out of how they're needing to learn. And then also dealing with *parents* who are probably more burnt out from parenting than ever before. You're not just balancing your own exhaustion, but also the people that you're trying to teach. And also the frustrated phone calls, and emails, and check-ins, from parents who feel just as overwhelmed.

### **JEN**

Yeah, it's a lot. And I was able to write a blog for TWLOHA, and I kind of went over how much we as teachers *do*. It's not just about getting them to learn the content. Honestly, if I don't teach the content, fine. I want them just to be humans. I want them to be good people. So that's kind of been my goal this year. Obviously, content, yes. Because we have to do the tests and all the things, but teachers just do so *much*. And there's a lot on our plate to just make sure that these kids are *safe* and feel safe.

### **SHEENA**

It's interesting, Jen, kind of what you were talking about. The collateral damage of not being able to operate at capacity is relationships. And *that* is something that I think is so scary and overwhelming. And I think that's why a profession like teaching, a profession like caregiving, a lot of times can lend ourselves to burnout. Because the collateral damage is *being there*, for our students. It's being there for our families. When something's gotta give, that means that *you* can't be there for them. And that's really hard—to prioritize yourself. So that you can be able to pour out to other people. It's interesting. I think that seeing my husband go through the pandemic, as a teacher, again, with all the flexibility and all the things, but then also just trying to be there for kids. He had—you know, with all the different crazy rules and everything—some students who would show up for two days, and then have to quarantine for two weeks. And just dealing with the social impact, the burnout of 'I have to quarantine,' like, all this stuff. It was a lot, but then you also want them to be able to do their work. And you also want to be able to have them feel encouraged. I know that for him, he literally would take kids on Zoom or whatever on his laptop and carry them around the class. We were able to teach in class for that, but he'd come home with a crick in his neck. But it was just so that student could feel encouraged, that student could feel like they were actually still a part of their class, even while they were quarantined. You know, as parents, like, the things you wouldn't do, you go to the ends of the earth, like for your children, you know, and you want to be able to insulate them from any harm, or any worry, or any of the things that you go through. And so you take it on, as yourself. But again, once you burn out, then you can't be there for your kids. You can't be there for the people that you care about.

### **CHAD**

Jen, you mentioned your specific emphasis this year on just making sure that these students develop into being good people. Quality humans. And, you know, this is still a lot of pressure for them. What did it look like to not only be in *tune* with your own sense of burnout, but interacting with students that are probably experiencing burnout for the first time, and in *their* lives?

### **SHEENA**

The most stressed out generation. I think the CDC just released— or someone just released—this is the most *stressed out* generation of teenagers. Ever.

### **JEN**

I definitely see that for sure in the classroom. And it varies from each personality. It's either a lack of motivation or it's students who just when they reach a point, they just literally put their head down, they shut down. Or it's those students who, you know, act out, and try to avoid

certain situations. Yeah, I know they're struggling, I can see it. And sometimes in my classroom, we have conversations. If things are getting too heavy, as far as their schedules. I know my district is small. So we have a lot of students who are involved in sports, or like all the things, they're involved in all the things, so it gets overwhelming for them. So maybe some days if they need it, I give them a day to catch up on. Yeah, some of them are in college. Catch up on college work, or catch up on another class. I don't feel like I'm going to do them any service, if I make them rush into my work, or overwhelm them. I'm more for quality over quantity. And they respond really well to that. It's a mature conversation. It's not them thinking they're getting a free day. It's something they actually need.

### **CHAD**

Have any of your students invoked the term burnout in trying to describe what they have been feeling? Or what kind of synonyms have they brought up that you feel are most resonant with your experience?

### **JEN**

Yeah, I don't think they've ever used the actual term "burnout". It's more 'I'm so stressed. I don't want to be here. I don't know what to do.' I don't know if they have the actual vocab, or verbiage, to *explain* what they are feeling right now. And rightfully so, it's kind of new for them. And we don't probably talk about it enough, unfortunately.

### **SHEENA**

You do an amazing job of, kind of, leading the way, and teaching them ways to cope with that. And I think that that comes with processing our own burnout, processing ways that we can get through. Like, if we're able to address it, if we're able to heal ourselves, then we can show others how to do that. So you have a really cool activity that you did on Mondays. That I think is so fun.

### **JEN**

I do what we call, 'Mindful Mondays.' So every Monday, it's as much for me, as it is for them, honestly. We take about two minutes, and we brain dump. We just write anything that's come to our mind. And then we will practice either some sort of breathing technique, or we might do some stretching. One week I did coloring, and that was actually a big hit. Like to see high schoolers, really enjoying, relaxing, and coloring, it touched my heart. It was awesome. Every Monday we take time, and we just do something *for us*. Kinda slow down.

### **CHAD**

I love that, that isn't, something that is prescriptive just to students that are outwardly exhibiting signs of burnout, or stress, or depression. But this is, at any point, you can take a pause. In fact, in some ways, this is something that you should be doing, when you're feeling *okay*. This is the practice, right? This is muscle memory. This is doing it when it's safe, makes it way more easy to access when life feels like we're in the midst of a crisis. The pandemic is something in and of itself. But burnout happened and will *continue* to happen without a global news line, right? Without a headline that we all can relate to.

## **SHEENA**

So we did a bit of a social experiment in our family around Christmas time, the holiday time. It's always busy. Always stressful, right? And so one year, we decided, you know, we're just not going to do *anything*. All the parties, we're gonna say, 'No.' We are maxed out, we're stressed out. So we're just going to be chill. And we were still maxed out and stressed out. And so the year after that, we decided, 'Okay, we're just gonna say yes to everything.' And we had a lot of fun, it was able to add a lot of joy into our lives, and connection with people. And I think that it taught us a lesson, right? You know, there are seasons that are just going to be busy, there are seasons that are just, if you're working on a project, and you're all heading towards a deadline, or you're launching a new campaign, like we're doing here, you know, just sometimes those things can be really stressful. And there's nothing that you can do about it. Right. But how do we cope? Like, how do we learn how to deal with that burnout? You know, kind of figuring out what works for you, what works for your family unit? For us, more is more, actually. So if we have fun, and we're still stressed out, at least we've added fun.

## **CHAD**

At least fun was part of the equation. Jen, how about teaching, years before the Pandemic? How was burnout kind of communicated, through your professional career?

## **JEN**

For like me starting off, you know, I'm young, I want to do all the things, I'm bringing those papers home, I'm gonna grade on *that night*. I'm taking *all* the calls, and all the things. But *now*, I basically had to reteach myself, 'No, you know what? That paper doesn't need to be graded, right this second. In fact, maybe that one specific assignment doesn't need to be graded at all.' It's okay to take a break from some of these things, that at one point you thought were musts, for your job. Emails, I put a strict boundary on—I don't answer school emails after school's out. I don't answer them on the weekend, because I need that break. Before, I would do all the things all week just because I felt like I wasn't doing my job, or doing my students, or students' parents service. See, you know, I'm here to help them. But really, it's not really helping anyone, if I'm answering all the things, at all times. But I do try to make time for family, and friends, and make sure I go out, and get outside. Like now that I've taken the time of answering emails away, I replaced them with the things that I know will help with my mental state.

[music playing]

**KAYLA COLEMAN:** Hi there! This is Kayla, TWLOHA's Supporter Engagement Coordinator and I'm here to tell you a little bit about Between The Bells. If you're not familiar, it's a one-week interactive program designed for high school students to spark conversations around mental health, spread awareness about the resources that exist, and to remind those struggling that they're not alone. At the present moment, we're able to offer this program free of cost to schools in the US. Whether you're a student, teacher, parent, or guardian, you can learn more by going to [twloha.com/highschool](https://twloha.com/highschool). Again, that's [twloha.com/highschool](https://twloha.com/highschool).

[music playing]

### **CHAD**

It occurs to me that two major themes are emerging. Through my perspective, one is expectation versus reality, of—I've signed on to do this job. And then to what degree are we holding ourselves to unrealistic performance? You know, mileposts. And then also this idea of comparison. Sheena, what you were saying about 'Well, we're all stressed. So this year, we're going to try to do nothing, and just give ourselves all the space.' But, I wouldn't be shocked, if looking back, you're like, 'Man, but those families look like they're having a lot of fun. So like, why? Why can't I have what they have? Why can't I experience that?' And maybe in some ways, some of those older teachers at your school were thinking, 'Man, I would love to have the energy of a teacher that is coming out.' But we're comparing ourselves. So that's a comparison happening in family and social dynamics. Comparison happening in the professional workplace. And then we can add in this idea that we, on some level, know more about our neighbors, and strangers, than ever before through the advent of social media. So to what degree have these themes of comparison, and then just balancing the expectation vs. reality been accentuated? Through knowing too much about the lives of other people?

### **SHEENA**

Yeah, I think you get to see what everyone is doing, like at all times. And that can be sometimes overwhelming. If you think 'Well, I should be able to do that. But that's really overwhelming to think about.' You know, or maybe 'My kids should be involved in that.' Or maybe, 'I should go to that school thing.' It's FOMO. It's like, 'Oh, well, *that* teacher was there, are you going to be able to come?' Or '*That* family was there. We attended *that* school event.' You know? And we just have to decide, 'Okay, how do we balance this? How do we *be there* in ways that we want to?' But also just prioritize our own unit, our own health and our own schedule, that is also insane.

### **CHAD**

Your heart can definitely work overtime. But your body is going to have to rest at some point. And at the end of the day, none of us have figured out how to make a day last longer than 24 hours. Right. So Jen, yeah, kicking it to you, kind of these themes of expectation and reality comparison, what you're seeing.

### **JEN**

We see all these great teachers doing this *amazing* lesson plan, or if it's just personal life, they're going to *this* party, going to *that* party. And for me, it's like, 'Why don't *I* have energy to do that?' But I have to keep reminding myself, versus just seeing their A rolls. It's not the *whole* story. And this is kind of what I hope to convey to my students too, because they are being bombarded with all the social media. All the things, at all times. That they don't really even get a chance to think for themselves. It's just people talking to them, at all times. So *for me*, I try to not engage in social media as much as I have in the past. I gotta create those boundaries.



## **SHEENA**

I feel like that was something I was talking about with my husband last night; about his own burnout, as a teacher, and the kind of lessons learned. He's a decade in. And that, like you keep saying, boundaries, over and over again. And I feel like that has been his number one—just figuring out what boundaries work for him. And I think also having the grace and space, to realize that it looks different for other people.

## **JEN**

Yeah. And I don't think, as a new teacher—that word boundaries, again—was even thought about, because I want as a teacher, and as probably most of my coworkers, it's our nature to want to help these kids. We want to do anything and everything we can. So it's, it's hard when you think, oh, maybe just one more email, because that would really help. But is it really helping in the long run? So yeah, I've had to do a lot of thinking and rethinking about what is important. What can wait?

## **CHAD**

Well, there's, there's certainly a point of diminishing return, right? Like you get to the point where yeah, you can go through the motions, you can type out that email and push send, and that'll be a task that you can cross through. But at what cost? At what point are you sacrificing a bigger gift to your family, to your students, to your community, in the name of serving a 'to -do' list that will *always* be growing? There will always be something that replaces whatever you crossed out. And maybe one of my self-therapizing techniques is, before I start making a list, I know of some things that are already done, and I still write them down, and cross them off. So you know, building momentum to counteract that burnout. But I'm also talking to people that are deeply empathetic. Deeply heart forward people. I mean, we work for a mental health nonprofit. And that's some extra icing on your cake, Jen. You have another job, and you're like an energizer bunny over there. But there is such a thing as compassion fatigue, of caring literally too much. We've seen it be dubbed as human giver syndrome, where empathetic people continually make space for the hardships of others, and oftentimes, to the detriment of themselves. Sheena, this isn't even your first nonprofit gig. You've done this, you've cared for people, in so many different capacities professionally, and in the family context. And you have friends. And Jen you live, and partner, with another teacher. I guess what are the safety nets put in place for people, that just give too much of a damn? How do you protect yourself when you know that you can care for people? Oh, here goes the comparison thing again, but not compared to other people, compared to your previous self, you 10 years ago, knowing what you're able to bring to the table, and maybe the well doesn't feel quite as deep anymore.

## **SHEENA**

I think it's that threshold, and I think for me, especially, as our family naturally works in jobs where you can always pour out. I used to work for a health nonprofit, and there are a lot of sick people, who would just have *the worst* stories, that I would have to ingest. You want to find every resource under the sun, you want to find every funding under the sun, every connection, every trial, every clinical, whatever. And you want to help them. But at the end of the day, you need to be able to help yourself, as well. You need to be able to care for yourself, as well. And I

see it with my husband, as a teacher. I think teachers are honestly like secondary parents sometimes. It can get so overwhelming. You want to give the world, you want to provide the world, and I think it comes back to those boundaries. Right, like those boundaries, and realizing, 'If I give *this*, then there's nothing going to be left here. And what is the priority? Where are my actual priorities? If it's *here*, then okay, I can give that you know, but I need to make sure that I have stuff left to pour *here*, as well.'

#### **JEN**

Yeah, I think what has been my mantra—maybe even for the last couple years—has been, 'I can only do so much.' Like I would love to help the student, and do this, but I am only one person. I only have this much capacity, like you were saying, Sheena, and I can only do so much. And then on top of that, have grace to know that that's okay.

#### **CHAD**

To where do you turn, when that grace is not self-manifesting? When you can't offer yourself that same grace?

#### **JEN**

Well, one thing I try to do now too— I had a mentor who said that I can respond and then *you* refer. You're doing your part, but you're referring them to someone who actually has better tools, and that's maybe even a better situation. But other than that, I try to pause, and really think, and sit with it, for I don't know, however long. And decide, 'Is this harmful or helpful for me? Harmful or helpful for, let's say, a student? Or whatever the situation might be.' So I really take that time, more so than I ever did, 13 years ago when I started.

#### **CHAD**

So on one level, grace is important. Giving yourself a sense of compassion, accepting that compassion, that return to being human instead of a superhero. But also, lockstep with that, is humility. Realizing that there *are* other resources to refer out to. That yes you're a teacher, and at times become a surrogate parent, and at times are an underequipped therapist, and at times a friend. So you're all of these things, but, you know who else are some of these things? Therapists, and parents, or actual surrogate parents, or you name it, real life friends? You don't have to be *everything*, because there's other people that are some of these things, and sometimes in capacities that surpass your own. We had this on staff—we have this funny kind of conversation when people are like, 'Music festivals are like therapy.' And it's like, 'Well, you know what else is like therapy?'

#### **SHEENA**

Therapy.

#### **CHAD**

Yeah, you know, 'This book feels like a friend.' You know what else feels like a friend? A friend. So I guess to the extent where burnout is something that is so hyper-individualized. It's isolating

by design that you feel like, 'It's me against the world.' What are the ways that you bring the world back into you, make yourself feel less like you're the only one carrying it?

### **SHEENA**

So coming back to that idea where I talk about more is more. This idea that I need to have spaces where I'm not just pouring out, and maybe being poured into. And honestly, one of the things that I did recently is I joined a choir again. I used to love singing. And I realized that I was checking the boxes of my responsibilities, and the things that were required of me as a wife and a mom. But there was just something else that I needed. Something else that needed to give me joy, or give me space. And going on walks and being outside, it wasn't doing it. And so, honestly, being a part of a community choir, recently has been just a really fun outlet for me. And I think there's some part of me that feels silly that I need that. And that's interesting. It's been interesting for me to kind of go back and realize like, 'Why do I feel silly that I need something that's just for me? That I need something that, maybe, is frivolous? And that I need something that pours into me, but is going to make me a better person, make me feel like I have more to give to others?'

### **CHAD**

Yeah and, because it's not just for you. I love the metaphor of this, because in a choir, it's not a collection of soloists. This is what we can make *together*. And making it together, sometimes means rest. This is the part where the Altos are actually not singing, because this entire song, this entire piece, needs the voices of other places. Like I have goosebumps just thinking about that. Because I grew up in choir land. Yeah. And realizing 'Yeah, the soloist gets the glory, but that's not the most beautiful part of any production. It's the necessity to lean on other parts to create a more robust whole. Ahhh man!

### **JEN**

That's awesome. I love that.

### **CHAD**

And it's not silly. It's so anti-silly. Yeah, and you kind of mentioned in there, I think you even said, 'It feels weird to rely on something just for me,' but at the same time, your part is important. Just even with the work that we do at music festivals, I try to remind people that you showing up—showing up to choir, you showing up to school, anyone showing up to a show, or theatrical production, that changes in a very real—and talking about scientific physics—way of how that piece is experienced. Your body taking up space in that room, means that the sound is hitting your body in a way that it would sound *actually* different if you didn't exist. Going to a soundcheck before the doors are open for anything, that's a cool experience. But the sound engineers are trying to anticipate the extra mass that's going to be showing up. And you showing up, makes it look different, makes it sound different, makes it feel different, and yeah. Oh man. I'm going to stop talking. Yeah, Jen what are the places—what are some of the wells that you tap into? You mentioned having some mantras that you return to, some nuggets of truth to grasp onto when chaos takes the wheel. But what are some of the other things that you put

into place? And some of the other places that you know that you can find rest in order to alleviate a sense of burnout, or heightened stress?

**JEN**

Personally, I do enjoy going on those nature walks. Being outside, and getting fresh air, is super helpful because I'm in a classroom all day with middle schoolers who have an interesting smell. But anyway, no, so going outside, seeing family, is huge, seeing friends. I also have an amazing women's group that I'm a part of, that is just that community piece that Sheena, we were talking about, it's huge. You can't do this alone. Even my coworkers, it's needed too, to talk about what they're going through. Because they get it. We're kind of in this together. And we have to be in it together.

**SHEENA**

Yeah, my husband's kind of a jock, and just always into sports. And that's one of the things that during the pandemic, some teachers would get together, and play volleyball, just before school. And it was just so random, it ended up being a lot of people coming. A lot of just educators, and faculty, who would come before school, utilize the gym, and play volleyball together. And I think, it was maybe this collective of everyone being like, 'I think we really need this, I think we really need some kind of way to move our body, and connect together, and see each other as humans, and be together just for a moment, before we kind of enter the trenches. And I think as a mom, there are a lot of things that I can equate to 'my volleyball', whether it's just coffee with a friend, or just those moments where you reach out to other people. And you're just saying, 'Okay, before we enter the trenches together, let's just be together and say, I see you, I see that this is hard, and it's going to be okay.'

**CHAD**

Jen, coming from a household of dual educators, have you found that your moments of burnout have happened almost in a coordinated fashion with your partner's? Or are they happening, out of sync with one another? Have you been able to support your spouse and vice-versa? In the midst of this?

**JEN**

Thankfully, ours are at different times. We are able to support each other, we teach at the same school. So we know exactly what's going on. Even with our same students, it's been helpful in that manner. But when I'm down, he supports me. When he's down, I support him. And honestly, he probably supports me more. But that's neither here nor there.

**CHAD**

That's the comparison thing again, right? Like, for people that give so much of themselves consistently, it almost feels weird to accept the care that you would without hesitation, give to someone else. So in those moments, what does support look like? How can anyone who is listening— if we presume that a very compassionate and empathetic person is wrestling with burnout— what does support look like? What does care look like?

**SHEENA**

Well, I think even—speaking to Jen— this idea, that's the comparison trap, right? I am struggling with this a little more—this same exact situation— a little more than *this* person is, I grew up an only child. And my home was very quiet. Having children has disrupted that in so many ways. My capacity for noise is radically less than my husband's. And it makes such a difference. It's such a small thing, right? But it makes such a difference in my capacity, to be able to pour out to my children. If I am maxed out, overstimulated, and have too much noise, I really can't handle it. And that the support for me, comes in my husband being able to say, 'Okay, go somewhere quiet for a moment. Go sit in the car and grab a coffee, or go outside, and just be quiet.' He doesn't need that. And so I think that that is a way that we can reach out. Really taking the strength, and the honesty, to self-assess. And say what is *actually* helpful for me, *not* what worked for *them*. Not what *they* needed. But if I'm struggling *here*, in this specific area, what can I ask for that would actually be helpful?

**CHAD**

My friend Chris says, 'If you can't self-observe, then you can't self-correct.' But self-observation doesn't have to come solely from yourself. Having a community around you, having people that you trust, remind you of the truer things that we forgot. Totally. That's what self-assessing is. It's required to continue to develop into fully functional humans.

**SHEENA**

Yeah. And I think for burnout too, in this one specific area, other people can tell when you're not thriving. Right?

**CHAD**

We're not as convincing actors as we seem to believe.

**SHEENA**

Yeah. And so I think just taking it—and someone's like, 'You look like you're having a hard time.' 'I am *not*.' You don't say, 'Okay, I am.' Just take it. Just take it; and then receive the gift of whatever space, grace, time away, quiet car, whatever is being offered to you.

**JEN**

For *me*, I have a little bit of people-pleasing. So if I really do need time away, maybe out of the classroom, take a day. I have to be like, 'You sure I can do this?' I need that assurance. And luckily, my spouse is like, 'Yes, you absolutely should take this. You have days, you have all the things. Do this for yourself.' So thankfully, he's there to support me in that; and honestly, I have a really good admin team, they also support me in those types of situations too. And I know that's not the case for every teacher, but I am very blessed for that.

**CHAD**

So Jen being 13 years into this journey, what would you say to 'fresh out of school' Jen? What are some of the pieces of wisdom that you would love to reach back in time, to gift, to yourself?

## **JEN**

Yeah. I would, for sure, tell myself back then, to not take the day-to-day so seriously. As far as the requirements that you think that you have to get done. You have students, you have actual humans in front of you, you don't have test scores in front of you. You don't need to do all the things that are in your curriculum. If you don't make it you don't make it. I would, and I still am telling myself, you can't do it all, you need just take some time for yourself. And again, that 'respond and refer' thing, is huge. And I would tell myself that earlier. So I didn't have to feel like I had to carry the world. And "fix" all these problems, and take that home with me, and feel all that, and not be able to just feel like I could just breathe, and enjoy what I was doing.

## **CHAD**

And Sheena, what would you say to the early, and nonprofit world, pre-mothering journey?

## **SHEENA**

I would probably say—yeah, that is a good question. Maybe this idea of 'destroying trying to achieve what you think you ought to', those 'shoulds' don't serve you at all. Maybe just this idea of 'the more that I teach myself who I actually am, the more that I teach myself what I'm actually capable of, where my capacities are, what I actually need,' right? So if I need—what I consider—a silly outlet for joy in my life, to be the best person, that's a need. I don't need to put that to the side, that's a need. But I'm also going to be able to teach that, right? I think that goes for teachers, that goes for parents. I am going to be able to teach my kids, I'm going to be able to teach those in my community that I can be healthy. By knowing myself, and by really asking for what I need. And by really pursuing what I need, by setting strict boundaries on things that are going to take away from my joy, take away from my capacity to be able to serve, and love, and do a job well.

[music playing]

**CHAD:** First, I want to say thank you to both Sheena and Jen for bringing your voices, perspectives, and wisdom to this conversation. We're so grateful for the opportunity to learn from you.

Second, I want to thank our listeners, for finding the time and space to tune in. Burnout is more common than we realize, and we hope that you feel seen and supported in your struggles, and in this conversation.

One of the ways we're trying to address things like burnout is through our Show Up For Yourself campaign in honor of Mental Health Month, which takes place in May. At TWLOHA, we believe caring for your mental health isn't this one-time monumental feat. It's a small, stubborn love for yourself. It's the miracle of repetition. So we're inviting you to join us in setting aside 20 minutes each day to participate in activities that will help you connect with and care for your body, mind, heart, and community.

There's also a Minutes for Mental Health Challenge Group on Facebook that you can be a part of and there's also a Mental Health Month Pack available in our Online Store that features some really cool things like a brand new T-shirt, a progress tracker, self-care dice, a poster, and so much more. You can check it out and learn more at [twloha.com/showup](http://twloha.com/showup). That's [twloha.com/showup](http://twloha.com/showup).

And once again, we're glad you're here. You're in good company. Until next time.

[music playing]

**CHAD:** We hope this episode has been a reminder that your story is important, you matter, and that you're not alone.

If you're struggling right now, know that it is OK to reach out and that there are people who want to help. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website [twloha.com](http://twloha.com). That's T-W-L-O-H-A.com. And click [FIND HELP](#) at the top of the page.

If you're in the US or Canada, and need to talk to someone right now, you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line. Simply text the word TWLOHA—again, that's T W L O H A—to 741741. And you'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7. For a list of crisis support resources for listeners living outside the United States, please visit [TWLOHA.com](http://TWLOHA.com), and click on the [International Resources](#) tab.

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A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The To Write Love on Her Arms podcast is produced by Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. And again, I'm Chad Moses, thank you so much for listening. We're glad you're here.