Chapter 8. Between a Rock and a Hard Place on a Deserted Island: Negotiated Mental Health on College Campuses Through the Lens of a Rebellious Adjunct Professor

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The rock represents people in power, the hard place represents students struggling with their mental health, and the deserted island is where I exist as an adjunct professor—in absolute isolation from any sort of meaningful human contact, let alone a supportive community. I have repeatedly hit barriers whenever trying to advocate for students in a mental health crisis. I have also repeatedly hit my mental health breaking point with seemingly no one to turn to. In a last ditch effort to save my own mental health, I started finding the loopholes in education systems as a way to survive the system and—honestly—survive in general.

This chapter is a confession of all the academic "sins" I've made. In other words, it's a chapter about how I worked the system so the system didn't destroy me. I hope this will be eye-opening for anyone working within or at the mercy of an institution of higher education. (And a little content warning for you: The sarcasm, satire, and cynicism ahead are the only coping mechanisms I have left after working for ten years in higher education.)

The Mental Health Rollercoaster of an Adjunct Professor

I've discovered there are four parts to the mental health roller coaster of an adjunct professor. They are as follows: (1) the new adjunct honeymoon phase, (2) the denial and disillusionment stage, (3) the forget* it milestone (* forget may be replaced with other "f" words), and (4) panic. I will share my regular journey on this rollercoaster to provide some context for why the mental health of adjuncts is not ok.

The new adjunct honeymoon phase is this incredible period of time postgrad school where you feel like you've made it—I miss this phase so much! The honeymoon phase goes something like this: feeling a euphoric sense of gratitude for having a contract (or eight); absolutely loving being in the classroom; being energized by working with so, so, so, so many students (probably serving more students than tenured faculty); and transforming a mediocre curriculum that

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was handed to you three days before having to teach it into a thing of beauty in front of students' eyes (and the students had no idea!). In the honeymoon phase, you're on fire—look at you displaying those skills (that no one taught you in grad school) and feeling like you have an unbelievable amount of agency because no one ever checks on you (like, ever)—and you get a taste of that glorious academic freedom we all yearn for! You have energy, you reply to emails in seconds, you are a fresh young educator multitasking as you haul your highly caffeinated self from campus to campus five days a week, you listen to pedagogy podcast episodes in your car as you cruise to your next class, and you even arrive early ready to implement whatever innovative strategy you soaked up on the car ride over.

This phase is a high. Your confidence and self-esteem are through the roof. This is your dream. You set a goal and achieved it. This phase can last up to six weeks of each semester. But the longer you teach, the shorter this phase becomes. It's called burnout. After teaching consistently for two years, you no longer have the ability to experience this phase because you can't feel positive feelings, so enjoy the honeymoon phase while it lasts.

The second part of the adjunct mental health roller coaster is the denial and disillusionment stage. (Reminder: This is the stage you start on after you've completed two years of teaching). This stage creeps in, sneaks up on you when you least expect it. Its signature is rationalization (i.e., the justification of unacceptable behavior). It starts with little things like being left off an email—we all make mistakes, no big deal. It starts to escalate to not being informed of a required department-wide meeting (the reminder was sent out before you were officially hired, but you somehow should have known about it). It escalates more to not being properly assigned to your course in the system (oops, administrative error). Therefore, you can't access materials, attendance records, or even be paid in a timely manner. This is where subtle denial and self-gaslighting starts to show up.

Our internal voice says, "It's not that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things," "I should have followed up on this earlier, it's my fault," "it was a mistake, they didn't mean to do this, I shouldn't be so upset," which can lead to thoughts such as "I should stop being so demanding," "I must be exaggerating," "I'm being dramatic," and "is this all in my head?" And eventually through this rationalization, denial, and self-gaslighting, you arrive at accepting how disillusioned you were about adjuncting. (And, for the record, we are spoon-fed this illusion from the moment we are taught the "only" thing to do after high school is to go to college. That's where the knowledge keepers and creators live, and we must join them in their ivory tower. And it's not until the gatekeepers allow us in that we see how dirty that facade is.) This phase can last for some or all of your time as an adjunct professor.

Next is the forget it milestone, which can be unbelievably liberating if you just surrender to it. See, you become a bitter old professor who probably should retire, but you're in your early thirties and haven't even had an interview for a tenure-track position. Probably because you don't have time to look for jobs let

alone apply since you're teaching 18 credits in seven different departments while also working any other gigs you can get on the weekends to pay your bills.

So, you resolve to screw the system a little bit (not enough to get fired . . . but it might be pretty close in some cases, and it's quite an adrenaline rush). For example, since canceling classes is taboo (even if you're physically ill, let alone if you need a mental health day), you replace "class canceled" with "day for independent research with digital check in." You get a quasi day off and students get their work done—it's a win-win. You can get really creative in this part of the mental health rollercoaster, so have fun with it. You may also notice new behaviors emerge, such as not preparing for class, showing up barely on time, always dismissing class at least five minutes early, and increasing your grading speed—because your once carefully followed rubric has now been replaced with more gut-level, intuitive grading with statements like "Meh, I guess it's a B," and "Sure, let's call it an A," and "Ehhhhh, C . . . minus . . . or does a D still let them pass?"

And if anyone challenges you on any of this, let them know you're simply working to dismantle a system of oppression, which, according to the antiracist statement the old, White, straight, able-bodied, neurotypical administrators drafted out of guilt in the summer of 2020, is what we all should be striving for anyway. (And for what it's worth, adjuncts are the most marginalized, oppressed group in the academic world.) This part of the rollercoaster usually shows near the end of the semester; however, depending on how long you've been teaching, it could pop in before mid-terms . . . or day one of the semester.

Once you survive the forget it milestone with minimal liver damage, you reach the final part of the rollercoaster: panic. The panic sets in once you realize you've been so focused on surviving the semester that you haven't secured any contracts for future semesters. Now you're unemployed after living paycheck to paycheck with really poor mental health and no way to afford the care you need to start the rollercoaster all over again or the professional development you need to change careers.

So, either out of habit or preferring to dance with the devil you know, you get back in line and wait to ride it again. And I should note, you must ride this rollercoaster alone. Your colleagues may be on the same rollercoaster, but you only see them in passing, never long enough to commiserate or build a supportive network with them. Anticipate this part of the rollercoaster at least twice a year.

Just a "Full-Time" Adjunct

Over the past several years, I've started calling myself a "full-time" adjunct—meaning I'm either in a classroom or in a car for at least 12 hours a day, five days a week each semester. I've been teaching in higher education for about ten years. There's a cycle you go through as a contingent educator. At first, you feel grateful for being given the obscene privilege of being allowed in a precious classroom. There's the honeymoon phase of telling your friends and family you teach at a college. They

don't understand the nuances, so they consider you a full-time, tenured professor (and I gave up on seeing this as an educational moment a long time ago).

Most students also don't understand the nuances of higher education, and they even call you Dr. because they just assume all professors have Ph.D. degrees. I prefer to dodge this educational moment because it's one of the few times in adjucting when you finally feel respected. So, let's talk about where all the disrespect comes from. The decision makers—the rocks—know how to crush you slowly. It's the continuous small comments, the pathetic attempts at empathy, and borderline microagressions that start to wear you down.

The Rocks

When I began sharing with other professionals in the field that I was an adjunct, I was repeatedly told by those in tenured positions that the only way to survive as an adjunct is to get a rich husband (i.e., perpetuate the heteronormative patriarchy, lean into toxic masculinity, engorge in capitalism, and maintain all the systemic oppression that got us here in the first place.) In hindsight, this should have been the warning sign to turn around and reconsider my career choices. But I was in the honeymoon phase, and no one was going to stop me.

I've been on the receiving end of my fair share of passive-aggressive comments from colleagues saying that being childless reduces my value and worth within a department—being childless also seems to green light extra exploitation because I couldn't possibly have any other responsibilities or want time away from working. This is where a lot of the denial and disillusionment showed up for me. I thought we were a faculty, a team, but I learned quickly where I was in the hierarchy of adjuncts.

I also witnessed one faculty member fat-shame a student, then reward her when she lost weight—the department chair said nothing. That same department chair sometimes turned to me in awe and say, "I don't know how you [adjuncts] do it." Because we have bills to pay and need to eat is how we do it. And we don't need your sympathy; we need you to change the system.

I've been told by a supervisor that I'm nothing more than a teacher who should only focus on teaching. That is, of course, unless there is the slightest suspicion that a student's mental health is plummeting. Then, we must submit early alerts and wellness check warnings immediately, only to be gaslit by the department heads who had not witnessed the same behavior, so the head of the department must be right and poor little ol' me is clearly out of touch with how the system of education is expertly [insert eye roll] set up to support students.

The Hard Places

Student mental health is not ok. We've all seen the news stories since COVID-19 hit, but I noticed student mental health deteriorating a few years prior, and

schools were not adapting well then—or now—to this crisis. I think about the times student mental health directly changed my teaching: the student who was on her phone repeatedly in class because her mother had been admitted to the ER, the student who witnessed his mother flatline and be brought back to life, the student who failed out of school because the disability resource center didn't support him in time to pass his classes, the students navigating immigration and deportation with family members, the student with awful attendance whose abusive boyfriend wouldn't let her go to class, the student who was suddenly homeless when the dorms shut down for COVID-19, the student who's on the phone with a crisis counselor instead of logging into zoom, the student who won't turn their camera on because they can't stop crying, and my list could go on.

When you know what stress and trauma students are bringing into the classroom, it's really hard to just teach. It's hard to be a "good" teacher who holds students to policies and protocols that are so insignificant when you know students are dealing with actual life-and-death situations. So, what are we adjuncts supposed to do? Re-traumatize the students by having no empathy and failing them when they don't comply with the system? Get fired for allowing our students too much grace, which might be jeopardizing accreditation? Having to constantly toggle between these two pretty significant questions is exhausting. I need my poverty-wage job so I can survive. But always I am in a position of service where I hope everyone else survives the semester, too.

For me, risking getting fired is worth it to be able to sleep at night with my integrity intact. I choose to bend the rules as much as I can so that the system won't break any of us within it. And, yes, there are options for student to take an incomplete or withdraw due to extenuating circumstances. But the schools I've worked in have denied students those options because I'm an adjunct. What message does that send to students? Do you think they feel supported by the administration? Do you think their perception of me as their teacher changes? It sure does. And I also internalize it.

The Deserted Island

For me, the academic freedom that I felt in the honeymoon phase eventually morphed into a feeling of complete and utter isolation. My community consists of me and my students. That's it. Students are my community. I am connected on social media with more students than colleagues because I actually know my students. I could not pick my colleagues out of a lineup unless their email was taped to their forehead, and even then, 50/50 guess. The colleagues I do know are functional acquaintances at best, not people I can trust or turn to in times of struggle.

I see supervisors only under stressful situations (department-wide meetings and events and when something goes wrong). If I am one of the randomly selected adjuncts to have a teacher evaluation, then I might get some more interaction, but again, this occurs under an umbrella of stress. (Also, I have not received a

teacher evaluation in over three years). Everyone around me operates under the "no news is good news" belief, so as long as I keep students happy enough not to complain, I don't have to see anyone. It starts as an odd blessing but eventually becomes very disheartening.

A Perfect Storm

While riding the mental health rollercoaster between a rock and a hard place on a deserted island, it's inevitable that the mental health of adjunct faculty members suffers. And we know the mind and body are connected, so when mental health suffers, so does physical health. And since some of us haven't found that rich husband yet, we must rely on mediocre health insurance to help put us back together long enough to teach a few more classes. But taking care of mental and physical health is expensive (even if insurance helps out), so we pick up another class or two in order to have the money to see a professional regularly. But that's more stress with more department demands and more students wanting access to you, plus more time in the car driving to and from counseling that could be used grading or eating or sleeping.

So, what can we give up? The contracts that give us at least a little bit of income? The therapist and doctor's appointments that make sure we can function somewhat properly? Deciding this while also navigating the system of education hiring processes, which is different at each school and in each department, while also between contracts navigating the unemployment system, which is not set up to support gig workers, while also navigating the healthcare system, all so we can work and get our basic needs met? Similar to why students don't abide by deadlines when they have a family crisis, as an adjunct, I could care less if I respond to emails fast enough because I'm also in crisis. The adjunct crisis is becoming a perfect storm. Give me one reason why it's worth staying.

Conclusion/Disclaimer Out of Extreme Guilt

Despite all that I've said here, I know somewhere out there positive things are happening in higher education. I would not be where I am and who I am today without my years in higher education (for better or worse). I have met classmates and colleagues who have become like family to me because of the opportunities I've had in higher education as a student and an employee. However, those positives are few and far between. The negatives do not *outweigh* the positives, but negatives do *outnumber* the positives by a landslide. It seems the longer I stay in higher education, the fewer positives I experience. Teaching through a pandemic has left me with few if any positives.

Call it burnout, call it trauma, call it whatever you want. There is not enough resiliency in the world to withstand the demands higher education is placing on adjuncts. With three-quarters of the faculty being contingent, decision makers

need to address this crisis or the ivory towers will crumble. And, I will say, shout-out to those who are full time with secure contracts and benefits. I understand it's not easy, and you are also overworked and underpaid (or at least maybe half of you are). Being in education is not easy, but you have job security and a job that pays for your healthcare coverage during a pandemic. Your basic needs are met.

I was lucky enough to have my primary care physician write a note saying I couldn't teach in a classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic due to an ongoing, undiagnosed health condition. Without that note, I would have been required to be in unsafe work environments or forced to quit. Higher education is abusive to those who donate the greatest number of hours and need their jobs the most. My hope is that there are no rocks, no hard places, and no deserted islands in the future of higher education. But that can only happen sustainably with massive changes from the top down.