

Navigating Circus Artists Through Burnout and Toward Resilience

Keynote Speech: Take Care Workshop, April 17th 2025

It is such an honor to be here with you - leaders, caregivers, stewards, educators, and facilitators who represent the backbone of the circus arts industry - at a time when the ground-rules of arts education, artistic leadership, and society in general, are in tremendous flux, and the need for visionary, compassionate and impactful leaders is more necessary than ever.

Your actions and engagement in the sector impacts the futures of artists who dream with their bodies, who defy gravity, who transform intense physical effort into poetry. I can only imagine that this responsibility is both very gratifying and ridden with anxieties and burdens.

We are here today not just to talk about institutional structures, or leadership, or mental health as something abstract— but to talk about the human ecosystems that sustain, or sometimes fail to sustain, the members of our communities. We are here to talk about burnout. About resilience. And about our role in shaping not only the circus artists of the future—but the conditions that allow them to live full, creative, and enduring lives.

A few words about me: I'm the founding director of The Green Room, a center in Cologne that offers support systems for performing artists, particularly those facing serious crises. I'm also a psychologist, artistic-systemic therapist, and former professional musician - a pianist. I left my artistic work in 2010 because of a web of injury and burnout. So, I have some first-hand experience in this topic. I also, through my work, speak with a *lot* of artists and cultural workers who experience Difficult Things that create severe impacts on their artistic work and may create ideal conditions for burnout.

I. Burnout

We speak often these days about burnout.

We name it. We track it. We worry about it.

But what is it really?

I'll start with what it's NOT.

Burnout is not simply fatigue. It's not solved by a weekend off. Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion—a depletion of internal resources. It's a serious injury to one's psyche. As serious as a serious injury to an athlete or dancer's leg, for example.

The term *burnout* implies that once a flame was burning.

It might have been a flame of intensity. Of dedication. Of love for the art form.

But flames need fuel. They need replenishment. They need space.

When they don't get that, the fire collapses in on itself. And what was once bright and illuminating becomes just smoke and ash.

Psychologist Wilmar Schaufeli described burnout with three main features:

1. **Emotional exhaustion**
2. **Reduced performance**
3. **Cynicism and distancing**

Emotional exhaustion can feel like overexertion, chronic stress, being overstrained and depleted in terms of one's own physical and psychological resources.

Anxiety, fatigue, and depressed mood are also symptoms associated with burnout. Sleep disorders, the inability to feel rested after breaks from work, and physical ailments such as stomach problems, headaches, backaches, and increased susceptibility to infection may also be present.

"Reduced work performance" involves problems with concentration, reduced creativity, and a reduction of competence, as well as a reduction of satisfaction in one's work. One often feels like one needs double the time to accomplish half the tasks.

The third characteristic “cynicism/distancing/depersonalization” is perhaps the most heart-breaking: it means that one experiences increasingly negative or inappropriate attitudes towards colleagues & students,... irritability, a loss of idealism, and withdrawal.

Depersonalization is defined as a psychological withdrawal from relationships and the development of a negative, cynical, and callous attitude.

Are these symptoms familiar to any of you? Raise a hand or even just an eyebrow if you’ve ever experienced anything like this

The Irish Poet William Butler Yeats wrote about burnout, but he used more poetic language:

“Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.”

We know—don’t we?—that this industry, like many of the arts industries, can create ideal conditions for burnout. We know that the circus is no exception to the punishing standards, physical demands, precarious economies, and relentless evaluations that characterize work in the performing arts.

We also know that artists—especially young artists—don’t always speak up when they are struggling. Because to be open about big struggles is, *falsely*, equated with weakness. And in the circus, as in so many artistic professions, vulnerability has often been seen as a liability.

It is scary for young artists to admit that they are struggling and need help and they need rest. This might result in some serious, real-world consequences. They might not be recommended for a job, they might be branded as “difficult” or “weak” or “a burden”. It’s no wonder that many artists choose to ignore encroaching signs of burnout or other psychological or physical maladies. They are smart to know that admitting these things can have a severe impact on their lives.

We must change that.

Let's turn now to resilience. In many ways, resilience is a protective force preventing burnout, or an elixir that can heal burnout.

Resilience is notoriously difficult to identify and define. What is it? You can only know if someone is resilient in hindsight. Resilience doesn't exist unless there is some hardship that it can react to. This means that it's really difficult for psychologists to pin down and identify. And when you're studying it, you have to agree on a basic definition-

Do you treat resilience as a personality trait?

Is it an inborn ability or a developable skill?

Do you treat resilience as a bunch of external factors (i.e. enough money, supportive friends and family, supportive working conditions) that create resilient environments in which individuals can, of course, *be* more resilient?

All of these can be true. That's frustrating for scientists studying it.

The Australian psychologist Dr. Fleur van Rens did really important work in studying the mental health of circus artists and her findings can offer us hopeful news:

To generalize:

Circus artists, as a population, are *highly* psychologically resilient. More so, in fact, than many other performing artists or the general population

And yet—despite this resilience—mental health struggles are common in this field.

Dr. van Rens' studies found that:

- Psychological resilience was related to higher levels of mental health. Interestingly, circus artists scored higher on psychological resilience than members of the general population
- Older circus artists and those with more years of circus experience generally had higher levels of mental health than younger ones
- Amateur circus artists generally reported higher levels of mental health than professional, student, and retired circus artists.

What does this tell us?

It tells us that the circus arts themselves can be supportive for mental health. But the *professionalisation* of these arts can do the opposite, impact mental health negatively.

It tells us that circus artists can be resilient, and the ones that last the longest tend to be the most resilient. It shouldn't be implied that a long engagement in the sector causes more resilience, it may be that those with higher resilience just simply make it longer in the field and that a lot of beautiful artists who might be less resilient members are burned out far too early.

And it tells us that, as directors of schools and leaders of organisations, *you* do not just manage education or organise. You steward ecosystems that directly impact circus artists' health and well-being.

2. Resilience

Let's focus in a bit on resilience: Let me offer you two metaphors.

The first: a thin but very strong branch of a tree in winter.

It is stressed and pulled down by the hardship the snow, it bends, but never breaks. Its suppleness—its capacity to absorb the season's weight—is its strength. It survives not because it resists or shakes off the snow, but rather because of its ability to bend under pressure and spring back into shape with the pressure subsides. This is the resilience of being able to bear hardship and extreme stress but not cracking in two and completely breaking. It's a metaphor for flexibility, resourcefulness, grit, the ability to withstand hardship.

The second metaphor for resilience is Jeff Bezos' yacht. (Full Disclosure: I'm not a Jeff Bezos fan)

That thing is Massive. Inflexible. That Thing so large that Bezos demanded that a historic bridge in Rotterdam be dismantled just to let it pass through. Of course Jeff Bezos' yacht is resilient! Bezos has the financial resources, the connections, and the power to make it so! He has the power to make the environment around it yield to his every need.

These two metaphors represent different visions of resilience.

One shows resilience from within. The core of a strong branch is supple, adaptive, responsive, alive.

The other is resilience by dominance. It is bulldozing and entitled.

I'm going to talk about the first type of resilience, of course. Most of us on this planet don't have the resources of a Jezz Bezos.

And history (and nature) has shown that when too much of a systems resources are gobbled up by one force, are consolidated too narrowly, it tends to go badly. Though it's often difficult to see on a day-to-day basis, this isn't a reliable type of resilience, and will (hopefully) break to pieces at some point.

3. Protective Factors and the Fragile Flame

During COVID, I studied how musicians survived the collapse of their artistic lives. I'm sure COVID had a big impact on many of you here and that you are still navigating the consequences and changes to the world and the sector.

I found this: Those who fared better had access to what psychologists call *protective factors*.

These include:

- The ability to experience absorption or flow states
- Joy in social aspects of artistic experiences
- Strong social support networks
- A sense of coherence in their family systems

Dr. van Rens' research echoes this: the most resilient artists are not simply the strongest—they are the most supported.

Let me say that again: **the most resilient artists are the most supported.**

That means we, as institutions, as directors, as communities—can *build* resilience by creating better support structures.

Not everyone comes from a family or a circle of friends that can catch them when they are falling.

So it must be our schools, our programs, our peer groups that step in.

There are also internal mental strengths that cultivate resilience. There might be a sense that one is born with them. Or one might have gone to great lengths to cultivate them.

1. Flexibility: the ability to adapt to changes and bounce back after adversities, not engaging in black-or-white or rigid thought patterns

Here is a quote from one of the research participants that seems to me to be representative of a mental flexibility:

“I had to adjust my expectations of how I defined success. Throughout my studies, success was a very narrow and concrete concept: *This is Success*.

When I got out into the real world, I had to come up with other definitions [of success], otherwise, I’d go insane.” *Pianist*

2. Grit: perseverance, getting up and doing it again, making long-term efforts

“I can’t tell you how many rejections I’ve received. I’ve gotten good at compartmentalizing these rejections and just storing them somewhere in the back of my brain, and then accepting them as part of the life of a musician, part of the practice, and moving on to the next thing.” *Singer*

3. Cognitive focus and discipline: the ability to create and abide by structures

“I have a warm-up routine. I try to wake up around the same time, I walk the dog, drink morning tea and then I have a very strict warm-up routine, and it’s a routine that I’ve developed as a professional. Before I start practicing, I have to warm up properly. Otherwise, I feel like I can’t find my sound for the rest of the day.” *Violinist*

4. Gratitude: the ability to experience a sense of appreciation for what one has

"I've never been more grateful to have the students I have than in the first couple of months when we were in the [COVID] lockdown ...it was really good for me just to have that contact with them, and to be able to really work on stuff, and it was good for them, it was good for their parents. I was really grateful for it, it helped, it was much better than if we had just not had anything [any employment], and you know I actually earned a little bit of money through that, which was very appreciated." *Flutist*

5. Optimism: the ability to find humor and lightness in difficult situations, to not be discouraged by failure, and to possess a belief in a benevolent world and future
"Don't give up, keep hope. I do trust that time can solve a lot of problems so I really also profit from this. I try to have a long view and most of the time I think it helps ... also, it turns out all right in the end." *Pianist*

4. What Can We Do to cultivate better ecosystems in the circus arts?

1. Cultivate psychological safety.

Allow students and artists the space to fail without devastating consequences. I'm sure that caring for the *physical* safety of the artists you engage with is already front and center in your list of priorities. But allowing space for emotional vulnerability is equally necessary—and we must not accept a false trade-off between psychological safety and excellence.

In elite sports coaching, there has historically been a fixation on something called *mental toughness*. Coaches believed that cultivating mental toughness led to excellence. It's a militaristic way of thinking. The Hungarian-Romanian gymnastics coach Béla Károlyi starved, browbeat, and humiliated his young female gymnasts into becoming gold-medal winners—most famously Nadia Comăneci in 1976. Olympian Betty Okino once said:

"Károlyi structured his training in a way that built your physical and mental strength to such a remarkable level that even he couldn't tear you down. Béla wanted to know that when push came to shove, his athletes could handle any situation thrown at them."

But what are we really building when we use that kind of method?

In sports psychology today, *mental toughness* is recognized as an elusive and largely unhelpful concept. In fact, it may not be a trait at all, but rather a social construct born from macho hero narratives in Hollywood movies. It belongs more to the realm of collective myth-making than to psychological science.

And yet the narrative is powerful: the athlete (or artist) who is torn down, pushed to the brink, and eventually emerges triumphant. That story sells. But there are too many devastating consequences of this approach. The lives of the athletes that underwent such training were often short-lived, and the life after retirement was extremely difficult for athletes like Nadja Comenici. And we've since learned that we don't need this approach to create conditions for world-class excellence

Excellence can emerge through psychological safety—not despite it. We can build cultures where asking for help is welcomed, not shamed. Where failure is part of the process, not a moral flaw. Where strength includes softness. Where resilience isn't about pushing through pain, but about staying connected to purpose, to people, and to self.

2. Make emotional resilience part of the learning .

Help artists in your organizations learn to identify and sit with their emotions. Build a culture in which discussion of psychological and emotional issues is not only tolerated but encouraged. This leads to sensibilization to psychological strengths, rather than rigid "rights-and-wrongs" thinking.

3. Model human and honest leadership.

Share your own experiences of difficulty—when appropriate. Let them know that success includes failure and wayward paths. That you are not always in possession of all the answers

4. Take rest seriously.

Teach pacing. Normalize recovery. Offer mentorship in the rhythms of long careers—not just big starts

5. Tend to your own flame.

You, too, need to take care. It's difficult to share and warm others with your fire if it's in danger of going out.

V. A Final Word: Darkness, Meaning, and Companionship

We live in a culture obsessed with optimization, efficiency, and triumph.

But resilience isn't about constant achievement.

It's about endurance. About presence. About resting and even retreating when necessary to regain strength.

About continuing—not always brightly, not always boldly—but continuing nonetheless.

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

“You, darkness, from which I come,
I love you more than all the fires
that fence in the world...
I have faith in nights.”

He reminds us that difficult and dark times must not be equated with failure. Struggles can and will very much be part of the path.

VI. In Closing

Circus artists do extraordinary things.

But behind every astonishing act is **a human nervous system**—vulnerable, responsive, and constantly learning - the good lessons and the not-so-good lessons.

You, as leaders, hold a crucial role:

Not only to train, but to think about the role of care. **To Take Care.**

Not only to challenge, but to understand.

Not only to push toward excellence, but to protect what makes it sustainable.

Let's see if we can imagine our institutions not just as training grounds or factories of excellence, but as ecosystems—capable of holding ambition with vulnerability, ambitious striving with rest.

Let's think about how we can shape a future where artists are not cultivated to burned out and be discarded, but are encouraged how to sustain their careers.

Where resilience is not a lonely struggle, but a shared commitment.

Where darkness is met not with fear—but with companionship, and a quiet, steady light.

AND ALSO!

Let's think about how to make sure the cultures of care extend not only to the artists but to the cultural workers - the caregivers, the stewards and facilitators who represent the backbone of the circus arts industry. We tend to forget about the care needed to sustain these essential members of the community.