

Academic Burnout: Self-compassion, Connection and Mail Art

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Abstract: Due to institutional pressures within neoliberal university environments, faculty are experiencing heightened burnout. To counter experiences of burnout, two professors and one emerging academic examined the three tenets of the self-compassion framework through arts-based inquiry. We created postcard images, mailed them to one another, and investigated our experiences using Maslach's Burnout Inventory. We analyzed written narratives about the artmaking, receiving, and assessment answers within the self-compassion framework. We found making mail art created spaces for self-kindness and mindfulness. Receiving and discussing our mail art nurtured our relational bonds, decreasing isolation. We recommend future studies explore self-compassion-focused artmaking while integrating assessments.

Keywords: Academic Burnout Mail Art; Self-Compassion; Arts and Wellbeing; Maslach's Burnout Inventory.

Academics are increasingly burdened by emotional labor, escalating workloads, and institutional pressures characteristic of neoliberal university environments. Many faculty, particularly post-Covid-19 pandemic, report feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility to provide pastoral care for students while their own emotional and psychological needs are deprioritized by institutions (Cotter et al., 2024). In addition, neoliberal pressures in higher education have transformed traditional academic roles, intensifying workloads and prioritizing metrics, performance monitoring, and consumer-driven student satisfaction (Hill-Berry et al., 2023). Academics are expected to fulfill expanding duties without adequate institutional support for their own well-being, which leads to increased emotional labor, stress, and the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue. Also, the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility can exacerbate this dynamic, causing academics to internalize stress and feel isolated in managing their challenges. These stressors frequently contribute to burnout, compassion fatigue, and diminished well-being (Dinibutun et al., 2020).

Research highlights self-compassion and artmaking as promising methods for fostering resilience and self-care among individuals facing challenges (Ho et al., 2021). Self-compassion, entailing self-kindness, mindful awareness, and recognition of common humanity, has attracted empirical attention as a buffer against burnout and work stress (Neff et al., 2005). Quantitative studies have shown that higher levels of self-compassion correlate with lower academic burnout, improved emotional well-being, and reduced anxiety (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020). Artmaking has long been a method for combatting stress and for promoting well-being (Bellaiche et al., 2025).

We chose mail art as a creative method that helped us enact the three tenets of self-compassion to cope with burnout. Mail art offered a tangible way to practice self-kindness through a vulnerable artmaking, mindfulness through creative flow, and connection through physically exchanging our art through the slow process of postal service (Colletti, 2010).

In this paper, we explore our own journeys (two university professors and one emerging scholar) to well-being through artmaking within the context of academic work stressors. The purpose of our paper is to document how we came to understand our circumstances of burnout and fatigue. Our formal relationship began before Covid as supervisor (Heather), doctoral course instructor (Cecile) and doctoral student (Haley). As the years progressed, our shared interest drew us into a friendship around art making, alongside our more formal roles. Haley completed her program and we found ourselves geographically spread across Canada. Although we regularly met virtually to continue our friendship, we needed a way to share our art-making now that we were no longer in the same location. In this arts-informed collective self-study, we turned to mail-art as a way of engaging with self-compassion and, also, connection. We ask: How can practicing self-compassion through actively creating mail art help us cope and navigate with burnout symptoms?

Academic Burnout, Self-compassion, and Artmaking

The conceptualization of burnout was developed in the 1970s alongside the first edition of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Aronsson et al., 2017). The experience of burnout includes three separate components: symptoms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism) and reduced personal accomplishment, drawn from Maslach and Jackson (Dinibutun et al., 2020). Emotional exhaustion refers to the stress aspect of burnout. Exhaustion results in depleted emotional and physical reserves. Depersonalization is the interpersonal component of burnout which results in an increased cynical and negative approach towards others, and a lack of connection to the job on emotional and cognitive levels (Dinibutun et al., 2020). Reduced accomplishment refers to the self-assessment aspect of burnout such as a growing feeling of work-related dissatisfaction (Aronsson et al., 2017; Watts & Robertson, 2011). Consequently, burnout results from long term stress resulting in emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of inefficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Moreover, burnout is categorized into three stages (Bhugra, 2025). Firstly, experiencing high stress arousal on psychological, emotional, and physiological levels, resulting in impairment. Secondly, developing unsustainable coping strategies (eg. substance use, social isolation, etc.) Thirdly, experiencing exhaustion that affects affect levels (increased depression) and apathy (Bhugra, 2025).

Often, burnout symptoms are connected to high job demands, low job control, high workload, low reward, and job insecurity (Aronsson et al., 2017). In a summary article, Bhugra (2025) wrote that, “Burnout is a pervasive and debilitating state that can occur in any profession” (p. 1). Nonetheless, burnout symptoms of burnout may be more prevalent amongst service professions in healthcare and teaching (Heng et al., 2020; Rajendran et al., 2020; Watts & Robertson, 2011).

Research shows that university environments often create the conditions for burnout (Coetzee et al., 2019; Sy & San Antonio, 2025; Watts & Robertson, 2011). The experience of burnout often occurs in people who work together with others. Faculty members in universities, due to their relationships with many students, employees, and administrators, are at risk (Dinibutun et al., 2020). Additionally, universities have come under new strains related to increased fiscal pressures, managerial control, and elevated competition for students. Moreover, rapidly changing technologies and diverse structural changes heightened stressful conditions for

both students and faculty (Hill-Berry et al., 2023). Faculty are often exposed to burnout because of the many demanding relationships to navigate, multiple pressures, conflicts and demands, and unrealistic goals and expectations both from self and employer (Dinibutun et al., 2020). Covid has also had an impact, and post Covid, many faculty have experienced burnout symptoms including decision fatigue from continual change and adaptation, and compassion fatigue from additional caring demands (Hill-Berry et al., 2023). Compassion fatigue results from the continual emotional care of students and others, which could reduce capacity for personal care. Thus faculty may respond to student needs and be involved in pedagogies of care, but may ignore care for themselves. Meanwhile constant changes, such as the technological transformations generated by AI in the classroom, increased decision fatigue (Kelsey et al., 2025). The consequences of burnout symptoms include poor physical and mental health, high turnover, social isolation, absenteeism, and poor job performance (Bhugra, 2025; Dinibutun et al., 2020).

While poor organizational culture (such as such as managerial incompetence, unbalanced workloads, lack of transparency of tasks and so on) can contribute to burnout symptoms (Dinibutun et al., 2020), personal dispositions such as perfectionism and over-achievement can also contribute (Flaxman et al., 2012). A study by Heng and colleagues (2020) showed that the role conflict between teaching, administrative tasks, and research added another layer of stressors. While this role ambiguity might be structurally imposed, how an individual coped was internally driven. Consequently, there were both internal and external drivers and mitigations.

There are various methods to help individuals navigate, cope with, or recover from burnout symptoms. While the most effective approach is prevention through occupational, community, policy, and individual strategies, the experience of burnout often goes unnoticed until it reaches clinical levels requiring medical, workplace, or community intervention (such as employee medical leave or physical symptoms). A lack of engagement in or implementation of preventative strategies has been connected to stigma surrounding mental health and fears of *appearing weak* to colleagues and employers (Bhugra, 2025).

At the individual level, fostering resilience and developing coping strategies are vital for both prevention and navigating early symptoms (Bhugra, 2025). In healthcare fields, engaging in self care is considered an ethical obligation, often referred to as *safe and effective use of self* (College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, 2024). Nonetheless, self care and preventative strategies are not always sufficient (Ahola et al., 2017). Hashem and Zeinoun (2020) found that practicing self compassion may be more effective than self care strategies alone, as it acknowledges human vulnerability. Additional non-occupational interventions include group or individual psychotherapy, pharmacological treatment, workplace prevention strategies, and cognitive behavioural approaches to stress management and healthy living practices (Ahola et al., 2017). However, in a systematic review and meta analysis of interventions to alleviate burnout, Ahola and colleagues (2017) concluded that “tackling burnout needs more systematic intervention development and evaluation” (p. 1).

Self-Compassion and Burnout Reduction

As academics and a psychotherapist, we encountered the framework of self-compassion through our work supporting students and adults navigating burnout. During a meeting focused on emergent theories to address burnout and inform our mail art practice, self-compassion emerged as a particularly resonant concept that we could engage with authentically and with self-awareness, which excludes self-blame. It also aligned well with mail art, given its emphasis on:

1. Vulnerability through artmaking and the practice of slow art, as our artwork circulated through the postal system;
2. Community connection through physically mailing our art to one another and anticipating the arrival of colleagues' artwork as gifts; and
3. Reflective practice through tactile artmaking focused on our internal emotions and relationships.

Thus, we collectively agreed to adopt this the self-compassion framework to guide our artmaking and frame our experience.

Self-compassion is a foundational aspect of well-being and mindful living rooted in Buddhist philosophy. In the field of healthcare, positive psychology researcher and author Kristin Neff has expanded on the concept of self-compassion over the past twenty years, highlighting its role as a mediating factor in reducing stress and enhancing quality of life (Neff et al., 2005) with empirical research (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020). Practicing self-compassion may counteract stressors and mediate the effects of stress by promoting adaptive coping strategies, reducing negative self-talk, and enhancing emotional regulation (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2023; Neff et al., 2005; Rehman et al., 2024). For example, Hashem and Zeinoun (2020) found that self-compassion serves as a significant protective factor against burnout among healthcare professionals, which extends self-care techniques to reduce stress and negative self-talk that can be detrimental to long term health (Renna, 2021).

In academic contexts, self-compassion has been linked to greater persistence, academic achievement, and resilience among students, particularly in response to perceived academic failures (Egan et al., 2021; Neff et al., 2005). In a recent study involving 405 academic teachers from four different colleges, “[s]elf-compassion emerged as a significant positive mediator, strengthening the association between resilience and mental health” (Rehman et al., 2024, p. 4119). These studies indicate that fostering self-compassion may be an essential part of preventative mental health support for individuals susceptible to burnout and stress in academic contexts.

Artmaking and Stress Reduction

Beyond established self-compassion practices, interventions, and protocols, expressive artmaking is increasingly recognized as a valuable approach for fostering mindfulness and self-compassion, which may contribute to enhanced well-being and reduced experiences of burnout (Brown, 2022; Franklin, 2017; German, 2019; Miller, 2024; Williams, 2018). Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of art therapy and artmaking in reducing burnout and increasing psychological, emotional, and physical health in diverse adults (Bellaiche et al., 2025; Ifrach and Miller, 2016; Martin et al., 2018). For example, a study by Kaimal and co-researchers (2016) found that engaging in 45 minutes of artmaking significantly reduced cortisol levels, a biomarker indicating physiological stress. Kaimal and colleagues (2016) investigation was later expanded to a subsequent study that found artmaking increased positive affect and self-efficacy in adult participants (Kaimal et al., 2017). Moreover, in a research inquiry with 40 counselors supporting domestic trauma survivors, Ifrach and Miller (2016) concluded that social action art therapy can reduce stress levels.

Artmaking offers people in caring professions a way to externalize and process complex emotions (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; de Witte et al., 2021; Fancourt & Finn, 2019), thereby alleviating stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout symptoms (Tjasink et al., 2025; Torres et al., 2023). Although there is limited research on creative artmaking supporting

academic faculty with burnout and compassion fatigue, some studies exist on teachers (Trautwein, 2024; Urpí et al., 2025) and post-secondary students (Liu et al., 2024; Zhang & Abdullah, 2024; Zheng, 2024). Maiden and Stewart's (2025) literature review explored research on how art therapy can promote well-being and reduce anxiety and depression among graduate students through enabling nonverbal processing, increasing mindfulness, and engaging neurobiological mechanisms. These neurobiological mechanisms include reducing physiological stress responses through mindfulness (Franklin, 2017), sensory and kinaesthetic movement, and flow (Chilton, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; de Witte et al., 2021; Łuczniak et al., 2021; van der Linden et al., 2021). The impact of such neurobiological mechanisms increase the ability to express experiences in a safe way, and stimulate neurological processes that connect creativity with emotional regulation and emotional processing (Barnett & Vasiu, 2024; Tran & Fernandes, 2023).

Artmaking as Self-Compassion

When combined with self-compassion practices, artmaking can help individuals externalize their challenges and emotions, increase mindful awareness, enhance emotional regulation, and cultivate acceptance, which may reduce burnout symptoms (German, 2019; Ho et al., 2021; Rattigan, 2022; Williams, 2018). The three theoretical tenets of self-compassion include: (1) self-kindness, (2) mindfulness, and (3) common humanity. These tenants frame our current study. Various art therapists and researchers have connected artmaking to self-compassion, including Miller (2024), who developed a program based on the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Hinz, 2020; Hinz et al., 2022), and Ho and colleagues (2021), who developed a multimodal Mindful-Compassion Art-based Therapy group program with 56 healthcare workers. We seek to explore artmaking as an act of self-compassion.

Inquiry Process

At the end of our academic year, we engaged in an arts-based collaborative self-study and the steps of this research process are discussed below. We acknowledged that we felt disconnected and burnt-out. Additionally, we were far from each other, and although we met virtually on a regular basis, we wanted the tactile experience of sending and receiving art. With the rapid pace of digital technologies, we felt this was a further way of slowing down. Over the summer, we decided to send mail art and we each completed Maslach's Burnout Inventory: Self-Assessment (Maslach et al., 1996) as a reflective tool. The purpose was to increase our personal understanding of burnout, as well as to identify where and whether we were experiencing burnout symptoms. Additionally, taking the inventory offered language for our emotional experiences.

We each created two postcards, wrote a message on the back and mailed them. Our instructions were open and not too prescriptive to allow for personal interpretations. Also, we wrote individual reflective narratives focused on burnout; the making of our mail art; and about receiving the mail art. Later, we read and discussed our narratives to further our understanding our mail art process in preparation for writing this paper.

Why mail art?

The picture postcard is a relatively recent form of mail emerging in the late 1860s. With cheaper postage, the postcard became a readily available alternative to letter writing. By the 1900s, although extremely popular as holiday mementos, works by leading artists began to

appear on postcards as well and became collectable (Willoughby, 1992). After World War I, the postcard boom ended. People still sent postcards, but not to the same extent as before. Collectors valued the social commentary the cards projected and the postcard as its own art form (Welsch, 1976). The text on the back of the postcard plays a specific role because it is public. Welsch (1976) suggests that, although the postcard had little space devoted to text, the message was usually large: “I am still alive, I remember you, and I want you to remember me” (p. 177). Cure (2018) agrees that postcards transferred unsaid messages because there was little space for any real communication.

Mail art as a more general concept became popular in the 1970s as a means to circumvent the gatekeeping and control of the gallery system (Elleström, 2012; Gangadharan, 2009). The practice consists of making with the purpose of exchanging via an openly visual process of the mail system. The art will be transformed by going through the mail system. It will be stamped and perhaps gain other marks. On the way, others may touch and review, and possibly enjoy the art. This type of art is traded rather than sold and the point is “exchange and interchange” (Colletti, 2010, p. 184).

There is a disruptive side to mail art. We chose postcards/mail art because we were spatially apart and because we wanted to communicate using a slower method than digital technologies. Thus our element of disruption was that we wanted to connect differently. In addition, there is something inherently relational about sending and receiving art in the mail. The sender intentionally connects to the receiver in a tactile, tangible way. The receiver physically touches the art and receives the message of connection.

Postcards and narratives

In this section, we present our narratives and postcards.

Haley

Burnout: I chose to provide my most recent results from the Maslach’s Burnout Inventory: Self-Assessment (Maslach et al., 1996) from September 12, 2025, over a year after we received the postcards. After completing my PhD, I thought I would experience fewer burnout symptoms. Despite recently moving my family to a new country while balancing teaching and scholarly contracts, I was surprised that my scores indicate a high-level of burnout, moderate levels of depersonalization, and high levels of personal achievement.

I may be experiencing a lot of stress, but my motivation levels are high. I see the first section results as an invitation to engage in more reflection and make changes. I identified highly with the question/phrase, “I feel like my work is breaking me down.” The metaphor that my work is breaking me feels powerful.

Making: Creating the postcards felt fulfilling and highlighted my longing for emotional and professional connection (see Figures 1 and 2) through metaphor. Recent photographs were the basis for my watercolour paintings. The postcards combined my inner and external experiences, with reflections on my connections with Heather and Cecile. After creating the postcards, I wrote, “I chose the image of my family in a forest to send to Cecile because her children, who are also boys, have grown” (see Figure 1). I hoped the image would “bring forth memories of when her children were toddlers... It is a way to connect through love.”

Figure 1*A Storybook (a Fairytale?)*

Note. Toll, H. (2024). Postcard for Cecile (front and back). Watercolour on paper. Private collection.

For Heather, I painted an image of a pine tree branch because it represented my “Ph.D. journey almost being over, as the seeds will be let out into the wind soon” (See Figure 2). I anticipated feel[ing] free soon after so much work. I reflected on Heather’s positive role and impact on my academic experience and felt like, “My Ph.D. journey is also her journey, as my guide.” The postcard was filled with gratitude, where Heather symbolized the sunshine, water, and fertile ground that supported me.

Figure 2*Ready to release to the wind*

Note. Toll, H.(2024). Postcard for Heather (front and back). Watercolour on paper. Private collection.

Once complete, the postcards felt precious, yet I wanted to protect them from my wild children by letting go. I decided to “send these cards out right away because I am worried that I

will somehow damage them” (August 15, 2024). I was unsure what I wanted to let go of but sending them gave me a sense of relief.

Receiving: Receiving the postcards felt like an embrace, evoking images of women connecting in community and nature. As an academic and mother of young children working virtually on my dissertation, collegial community was something I missed. I did not realize that I was lonely. I wrote:

I received Heather’s postcard yesterday. I picked it up with the three little ones... along with flyers, booklets, and other mail. This one made me happy... I would like to enter the image and be one of these women along the beach. They look carefree, jubilant, and happy...I will place it somewhere that reminds me of this goal and feeling of being by the ocean and along the beach with kind and loving friends (August 27, 2024).

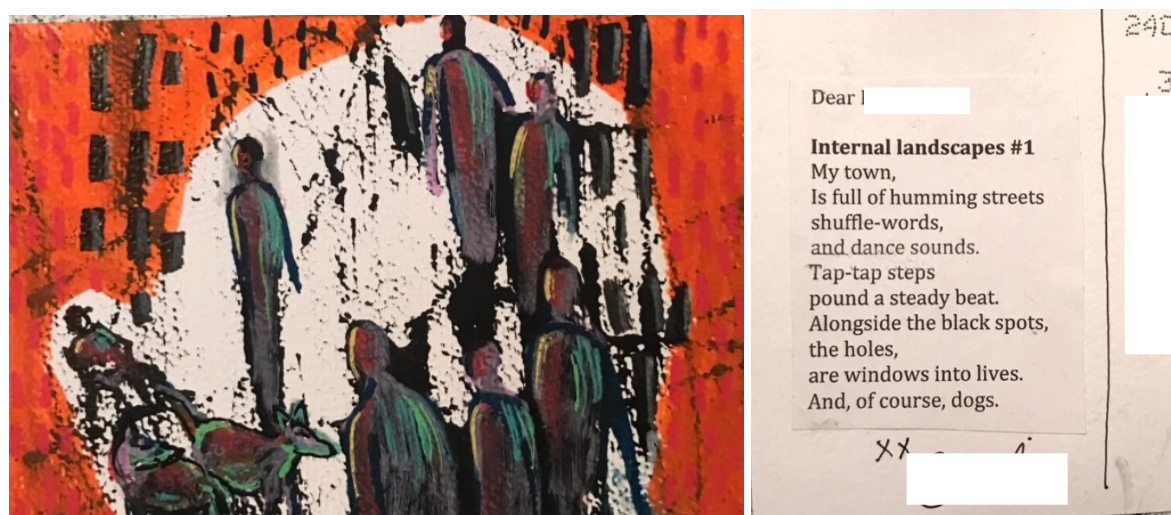
I miss my... Not sure... Receiving this card and poetry is just so wholesome and beautiful. When I entered my car, my husband had the postcard waiting for me...I looked at it and felt the texture of the paint emerging from the paper...The poem made me feel like I was a part of a group of women and that feels powerful (and empowering). It makes me feel like I belong... (August 27, 2024).

Cecile

Burnout: I didn’t know that I was experiencing burnout until Haley sent us Maslach’s Burnout Inventory to fill in. I only knew that I felt overwhelmed and hopeless, and resting or taking time off did not seem to help. As I checked off the Inventory, I began to realise that the exhaustion I felt was not a natural outcome of a busy life but an accumulation of years of depleting any resources I had. Thinking back over the Covid years where we had to “pivot” pedagogically, adapt quickly to administrative demands, and be available emotionally for students. All of this against a backdrop of personal crises like family members being ill and being ill myself. I wasn’t ill with Covid but was seriously ill in a time where it was difficult to receive a diagnosis and care. During it all, work continued. Once Covid was over, we swung into business as usual. Now the pressures came from a financial squeeze. In 2023, faculty members at our university voted to strike, in the hopes that labour action would bring about change. In my daily journal, I wrote: “Can’t believe how taxing physically and emotionally striking is. Every morning, checking Twitter, checking for messages, listening to rumours about the negotiations.” Standing in the freezing cold February temperatures were an added challenge. Once we were back at work, there was a backlog of things to do. I found myself putting my head down and relentlessly getting on with what had to be done. I didn’t want to go to meetings or talk to anyone. I couldn’t articulate the wretched physical and emotional exhaustion until I read the inventory.

Figure 3

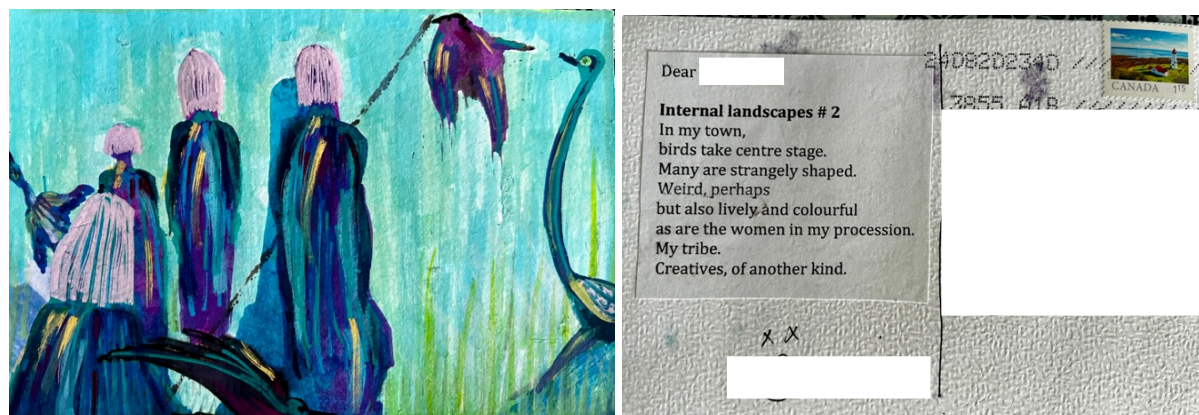
Internal Landscapes #1



Note. Badenhorst, C. (2024). Postcard for Heather (front and back). Mixed media on paper. Private collection.

Figure 4

Internal Landscapes #2



Note. Badenhorst, C.(2024). Postcard for Haley (front and back). Mixed media on paper. Private collection.

Making: Art and making things are the way I cope. In the evenings, I scratch away in my sketchbook at a frenzied pace. After a while, I find myself breathing more deeply and then releasing. I joined an art group in 2022 to extend this release. We meet once a week. One class, our art teacher brought in marbles and a box. We rolled black ink-covered marbles over paper in the box to create random patterns. I enjoyed the randomness of the patterns. Also, the patterns then provided a puzzle to resolve: What would this pattern become? It was all about letting go of control and watching to see what would happen. I used this method for my postcards. I created

several pages of marks. Then used a postcard template to randomly crop sections of the pages. I chose two to develop further. The patterns seem to suggest people, so I used the ink marks on the page and added Posca acrylic pens to create people. They all seemed to be moving away from me, the viewer, so I followed that flow. What was really surprising was the animals that appeared at the tip of my pen. They were unplanned, but animals and birds seem to ground me, so in a way, that they appeared is not a surprise. I enjoyed the spontaneity and the randomness of the ink and marbles. I was delighted by the end result.

Receiving: This project of sending and receiving mail with Heather and Haley filled me with excitement. How wonderful to receive art in the mail! Haley's was larger than postcard size and is a delightful expression of family. It's bold and colourful, and captured a moment where I feel like I am part of the family. I think of time passing (how much the boys have grown) as well as reminding me of my own children at that age. It's full of love and it makes me feel like I'm part of the family to look at it.

Heather's card was more of a puzzle to solve. I wasn't familiar with Maurice Denis' *On the Beach of Tresringel*. Heather altered the postcard by adding bathing costumes. I looked it up online to see what it looked like before alteration because the alteration was very natural. It's a delicate image, with pastel colours and quite abstracted. I wondered why Heather had chosen this image and what she liked about it. Was it the group of women, together, enjoying the moment? I could relate to that since the three of us really connect over making art. Describing the postcard, I would say it's peaceful. Altering postcards is a great idea because it creates a lineage for the postcard or image, a changing trajectory of purpose and intention. The making and receiving was fun. I felt connected to both Heather and Haley, not only because I had a material connection to them through their postcard, but because I felt energized and hopeful again.

Heather

Burnout and Making: While I'd been experiencing long-term cynicism and was feeling exhausted and removed from my work, until I completed Maslach's Burnout Inventory I didn't realize I was actually experiencing burnout. Indeed, on the day I began my art-making my sense of mental/emotional cynicism was deep and it was too hot to walk to buy new materials, so I stayed home. I love art making, but I felt ambivalent - what could I possibly do?

However, as I lingered at my task rifling through some unused postcards, I came across two copies of Maurice Denis' 1898 *On the Beach at Trestringel*. His impressionist painting depicts a small group of women perched on a caramel-coloured beach with a sailboat in the middle distance while a few friends take a refreshing dip. To me it evokes feelings of freedom. Maybe this was connected to my warm and relaxed feeling of working with my friends/co-authors? The colours of the oil landscape glow, and the clothed figures wear simple garments – so perhaps these are working women freed from their physical labours for a few precious hours.

The few swimmers are naked, relaxed in knowing that their actions are socially acceptable. They're not fearful of the possible gaze of unknown viewers in the sailboat. We too are working women, yet swimming naked at a public beach seems untrue/inappropriate to represent my interior landscape of academic burn out. Now I sometimes fear I'm near to drowning. The swirl of conservative values and disinformation can be overwhelming.

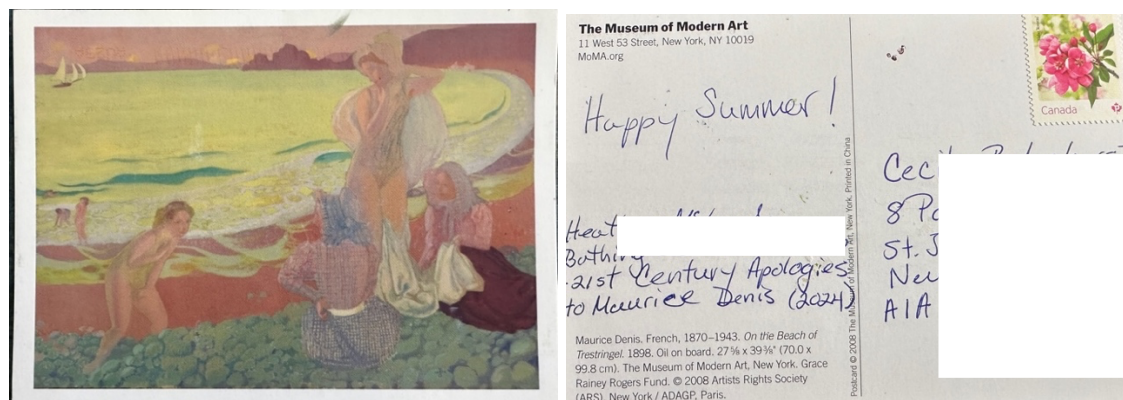
Nevertheless, I thought I could alter the image (with apologies to the artist). Getting out my water-colour pencils and choosing colours well matched to other hues in the painting I drew

a simple bathing suit on each of the swimmers blurring the crayon with water to give a painterly quality.

My alteration of the image is a partial acknowledgement of the current overwhelming strength of conservative values, but nevertheless the women are still enjoying themselves through a trip to a shared public space. And they're still swimming... Thus, my altered work is also a reminder of the value of fun and socializing to remain a whole and healthy academic within a world where dignity and support, especially for women, often seem increasingly threatened.

Figure 5

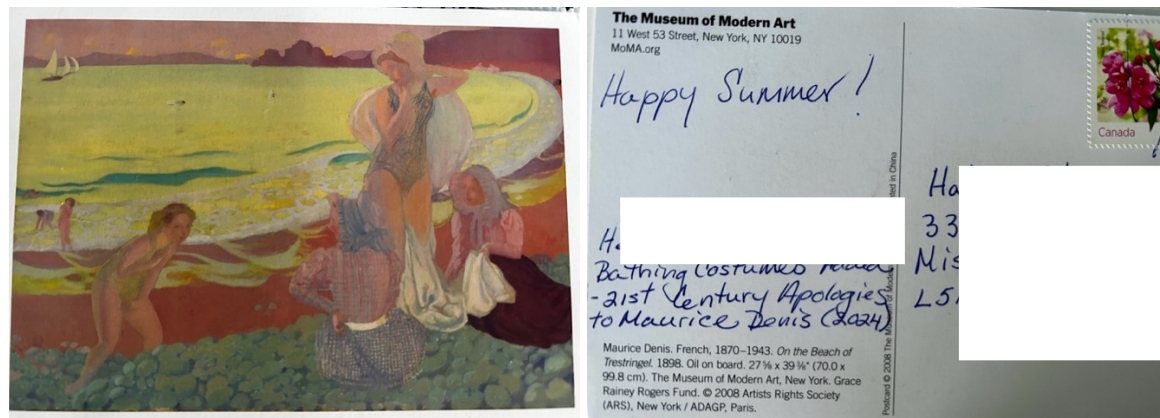
Happy Summer!



Note. McLeod, H. (2024). Postcard for Haley (front and back). Watercolour pencil on paper. Private collection.

Figure 6

Happy Summer!



Note. McLeod, H. (2024). Postcard for Cecile (front and back). Watercolour pencil on paper. Private collection.

Receiving: I sent the same image and message to both Cecile and Haley, yet I was intrigued that we had each interpreted our agreed upon method somewhat differently, and that I received a customized image and message from them. I understood their cards and messages as reflective of our well-established relationships as friends, colleagues and supervisor/student. Haley's polished water colour and message used a metaphor to communicate her gratitude and immanent professional flourishing and growth, while Cecile's image revealed her established strength of experimentation and openness to new learning, while immersed in a social context. The artworks and messages made me feel grateful and lucky to have such thoughtful, talented, and kind co-authors and friends.

Practicing Self-compassion

During our arts-informed collective self-study research, one of the surprises that emerged from our narratives were the experiences of high levels of burnout. Although Haley is more familiar with the concept, it was new for Heather and Cecile. Completing the burnout assessments provided a new level of insight. We found a vocabulary to explain our experiences. Through our understandings of burnout, we were able to encapsulate and articulate our emotional and visceral experiences with words. The process helped us define what was going on internally and externally, while also helping us to value how the artmaking and postcards impacted our ability to connect, process, and be kind to ourselves and others. Therefore, we felt as though our compassion for ourselves and one another was increased, fostering increased internalization of self-compassion.

Making the postcards, we all experienced as a joyful experience, partly because we knew how the receiver would accept the artwork. The making choices were different for each of us but there were similarities. Making art was a way of coping with the challenges we faced, especially work-related stress. Our inner needs surfaced in different ways: Haley's postcards were made to connect to the receiver, Heather symbolically chose a group of women, Cecile let go of control. For each of us there was a sense of freedom and spontaneity, and of gratitude in our friendship and professional connection. We countered the stress with feelings of joy, hope and togetherness. Nature and the natural environment also featured strongly for each of us.

Artmaking, for us, was indeed, a creative act of self-kindness, which is aligned with the first tenant of self-compassion (Neff et al., 2005). Making physical art increased our feelings of relaxation, peace, respite, play, and joy, as we created meaningful images that evoked positive emotions. Making these pieces also increased mindfulness by helping us to process our emotions and experiences through visual language in tactile ways and without self-judgement. Cure (2018) asks: "What exactly does one send when one sends a postcard?" What does it represent? This is what we wondered. Does it represent a nostalgia for human agency and interaction in an increasingly dehumanizing world? For us, the postcard was an expression of the sender, of a shared emotion that brought us closer in a relationship.

Receiving the physical artwork was as joyful as the making, especially because we all felt a sense of belonging and connection even despite geographic distance. Our professional roles seemed to fade into a natural merging of friendship through our open conversations and art gifting. Receiving and discussing our art also connected and nurtured our relational bonds, and countered feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can increase burnout symptoms. Nonetheless, challenges could include comparing the diversity of art methods and technical skills, as we used all used different visual art techniques. Moreover, this process could also make us feel emotionally vulnerable. To navigate these differences, active discussion during our

monthly meetings helped us name these differences within an accepting and collegial space where we discussed and welcomed differences.

Our aim in engaging in this art process was to explore the tenets of self-compassion. Did we practice self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity? Self-kindness, the practice of treating oneself with warmth rather than self-criticism, is reflected in the creative and reflective nature of visual artmaking with supportive others, which could counter self-judgement inner and external dialogue. We created vulnerable and emotionally focused artwork about our current experiences without self-judgment regarding the outcomes, which were limited by the physical dimensions of a postcard paper (approximately 6 x 4 inches). Thus, intentional emotional-focused artmaking, as an act of self-care, may foster self-kindness by offering a non-judgmental space for self-exploration and self-acceptance (Ho et al., 2021; Rattigan, 2022; Williams, 2018). This self-acceptance is then reflected in the eyes of others when sharing this artwork. We focused on the process and felt experience of creating an image and engaged in authentic writing. When creating two artworks, we engaged in a visual and emotional dialogue with ourselves and others, allowing for self-affirmation and self-care through a creative activity that we all enjoy. Artmaking, for us, was an act of self-kindness. Making art increased our feelings of relaxation, peace, respite, play, and joy, as we created meaningful images that evoked positive emotions.

Mindfulness involves the intentional practice of remaining present and aware of our current experiences without judgment, but not to become immersed in negative emotions related to burnout symptoms (stress, fear, dismay, helplessness, sadness, etc.) Creating art, especially in low-pressure and self-reflective contexts, aligns with Neff's (2023) conceptualization of self-compassion by encouraging self-soothing (Kaimal et al., 2016; Bellaiche et al., 2025) and emotional processing (Barnett & Vasiu, 2024; Weinfeld-Yehoudayan et al., 2024). Artmaking that focuses on exploring and expressing our current emotions without judgement can increase mindfulness and awareness by grounding us in an embodied practice (de Witte et al., 2021; Franklin, 2017). The creative process helps us to be mindful of our exteroceptive (five senses), interoceptive (internal body states), and proprioceptive (body in movement) while achieving a flow state (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Through embodied, sensory-based, and active artmaking and writing, we engaged in mindful acts of processing and sharing our authentic experiences and emotions. We focused on the sensory aspects of artmaking while acknowledging our emotions (Barnett & Vasiu, 2024). This increased mindfulness by helping us to process our emotions and experiences through visual language and without self-judgement.

Common humanity is the third core component of self-compassion, which emphasizes the shared experience of struggle and resilience to counter isolation. When we engaged in artmaking together, despite our physical distance, and shared our current emotional states through artwork with one another and in meetings about the process, we engaged in relational connection (de Witte et al., 2021; Ho et al., 2021). The artwork exchange across different Canadian provinces increased our experience of belonging and connection, which can counter feelings of isolation. It can reinforce the idea that challenges in academia are universal rather than individualized. This experience aligns with research suggesting that community and social support can mitigate burnout (Neff, 2023). By exchanging artwork, we were not only engaging in ongoing mindful self-care but also acknowledging one another's emotional strain while nurturing resiliency and self-acceptance to reduce stress.

Concluding Thoughts

Academics operating within neoliberal environments face profound structural and emotional challenges that place them at high risk for burnout, compassion fatigue, and diminished well-being. We rely on our internal resources, social bonds, and creative joy to navigate challenging systems when we experience dehumanization and stress. Self-compassion is an accessible and non-stigmatizing theoretical framework to ascertain how our artmaking can help us reduce burnout symptoms while navigating the challenges of academic stress (Lee & Lee, 2022). The literature substantiates self-compassion as a crucial protective factor and positions artmaking as a potent vehicle for fostering self-compassion and emotional resilience. As higher education institutions contend with persistent stressors, research-informed adoption of self-compassion and art-based practices may offer meaningful pathways toward individual well-being and collective cultural change.

Activities like visual journaling, guided imagery, and creating self-portraits facilitate self-compassion by helping individuals reframe negative self-talk and practice kindness toward themselves. Integrating mindful self-compassion exercises with art therapy contributes to improved self-compassion and emotional well-being, promoting relaxation and psychological restoration. Postcards/mail art were particularly useful to emphasize our process because this helped us to slow down, to wait to receive, to experience the anticipation and experience the physicality of someone's concrete visual artwork. Mail art also added to our connection because the communication stretched from the initial art-making, to the mailing and then, finally, receiving. The aesthetic pleasure added to the relational function. Overall, this process was profoundly relational. It strengthened our connections with each other even though we live far apart. Mail art is stamped, marked and handled by others in the journey (Hyland Moon, 2010) and, in a sense, connects everyone who touches the pieces.

Creating art collaboratively or individually fosters community, combats isolation, and encourages a culture of collective care—counteracting the individualistic ethos of neoliberal academia. We recommend extending this practice to others and for longer periods of time. Maslach's Burnout Inventory: Self-Assessment (Maslach et al., 1996) helped us to identify, in a standardized way, where and whether we were experiencing burnout symptoms, and also gave language to our emotional experiences. In the future, it would be helpful to assess our levels and categories of burnout before, during and after creating and receiving the art postcards to understand whether any changes occurred. Furthermore, it would be fascinating to apply this mail art self-compassion practice with diverse populations. More research is needed on the integrative nature of social, expressive artmaking and self-compassion, both within therapeutic contexts and within our daily lives.

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