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Kelsey D. Howard
Parkland College

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Occupational Burnout and the Causes, Predisposing Factors, Consequences, and Prevention
Strategies

Kelsey Howard

Parkland College

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Abstract

Occupational burnout is a common dilemma for employees working in long term careers. It is characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and lowered efficiency, and it progresses through three stages. Burnout is caused by the increase of demands and the loss of resources. Sleep impairment is also significantly associated with burnout, and also has been shown to hinder the recovery. Lack of balance between work and personal life, as well as perception of stressful events can lead to developing feelings of burnout. External regulation has been associated with a person being more susceptible to develop burnout. Other personal characteristics, such as inability to handle stress, pessimism, and frequently feeling fatigued can result in a person being more susceptible to burnout. Failing to address feelings of burnout properly can result in a variety of negative consequences in the workplace, home life, and personal health. Employees can prevent burnout by balancing their work lives with their personal lives, and keep up with their personal health. In the workplace, employees should reevaluate their goals regularly and prioritize their tasks into manageable lists. Being aware of the predisposition, causes, and symptoms of occupational burnout will help us to recognize and prevent it, and help employees to feel more motivated and accomplished in their careers.

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Occupational Burnout and the Causes, Predisposing Factors, Consequences, and Prevention Strategies

Are you are constantly under stress in your career, leaving you overwhelmed and exhausted? Have you begun to feel like a failure, feel detached, disinterested, or have lack of motivation? If I am describing you, you may be suffering from occupational burnout. This is a common tale for many people working in a long term career. “Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress,” (Smith, Segal, & Segal, 2015). Although stress is a key factor, burnout goes beyond typical stress. What is burnout, and what causes it? What makes one susceptible to it? What are the consequences of leaving it untreated? And how can we prevent burnout? Being aware of the predispositions, causes, and symptoms of occupational burnout will help us to recognize and prevent it, and help employees to feel more motivated and accomplished in their careers.

What is Burnout?

Burnout is a condition of employees in the workforce characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and lowered professional effectiveness (de Beer, Pienaar & Rothmann, 2014). The development of burnout is progressive. The progression can be broken down into three stages, as shown in **Figure 1**. In the first stage, symptoms are sporadic and fairly mild. One might feel mentally fatigued when they end their day. They may feel unacknowledged, frustrated, uptight, and may even suffer from unexplained body aches and pains. They begin to feel like they are falling behind in their work, and have anxiety for the next day. Once a person has reached the second stage, the symptoms begin to last longer. One may begin to feel discouraged, apathetic or

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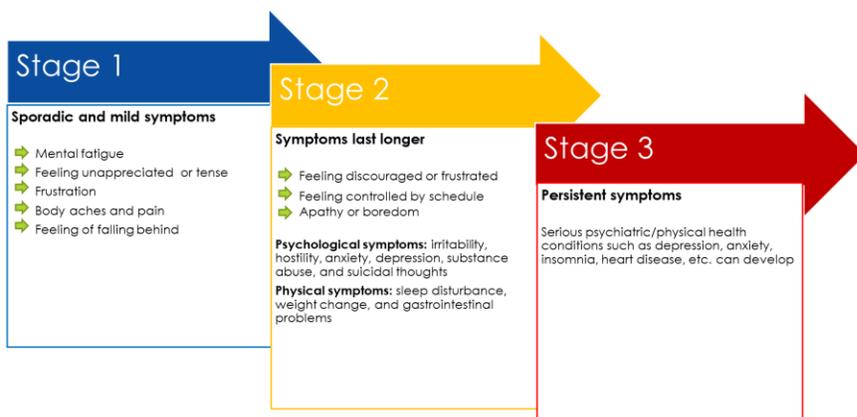


Figure 1. Three stages of Burnout
Adapted from Szigethy, 2014

frustrated. Other potential symptoms are incessant boredom and feeling controlled by a schedule. Psychological symptoms can begin to arise during this stage such as irritability, hostility,

anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. A person may also experience physical symptoms such as sleep disturbance, weight change, and gastrointestinal problems. The third stage is when burnout becomes serious. Symptoms become persistent, and if left untreated, it can develop into psychiatric and physical health conditions (Szigethy, 2014) such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, or heart disease (Mayo Clinic staff, 2012).

Causes of Burnout

The causes of burnout have been studied by many researchers. One aspect of burnout that is agreed upon by several researchers is that there are cyclical characteristics of burnout. One longitudinal study, surveys 352 employees from an international financial consultancy firm once



Figure 2. The “Loss Cycle” of Burnout
Adapted from Brummelhuis, et al., 2011

in 2005 and again in 2007. According to this study, burnout is caused by the increase of demands and the loss of resources. Employees who were experiencing burnout at one point continued to accumulate more demands over the two year period. The amount of work increased, they became overloaded with work, and experienced

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difficulties balancing between work life and home life. **Figure 2** illustrates the “loss cycle” of burnout described in this study. As you can see, a person may begin low in resources used to manage tasks and stress, and as a result demands begin to accumulate. They work harder in order to catch up on the accumulated work, which causes them to lose even more resources. This study suggests that resources continue to be lost while demands continue to increase over time, cycling around and around (Brummelhuis, Hoeven, Bakker & Peper, 2011).

Another study examines how sleep and burnout associate with one another. A random sample of 734 individuals from an organization were surveyed about sleep difficulties, exercise, depression, and two of the components of burnout, exhaustion and cynicism. The results showed that burnout and sleep impairment have a significant relationship to one another even when controlling for other factors which may affect sleep. Whether sleep difficulty is a cause or a symptom is not fully known, but it also was shown to hinder the recovery process (de Beer, et al., 2014).

Working long hours and having a demanding job are two factors that have been shown to lead to developing burnout, especially when one does not have a support system to voice problems and concern in the workplace or at home. Inability to balance work life and personal life, along with tension in personal life, can also produce feelings of burnout at work. Stressful events can prelude the development of burnout. It should be mentioned however, that feelings of stress and burnout are not equivalent. One’s perception of stressful events in the workforce determines whether it will be a motivating factor or a cause of burnout (Szigethy, 2014).

Predispositions to Burnout

Many researchers have studied what makes some employees more susceptible to burnout than others. The study mentioned earlier, which surveyed employees once in 2005 and again in

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2007, looked at personal style of motivation as a variable. This study found that although neither intrinsically or extrinsically motivated employees were able to diminish burnout by reducing their amount of demands, intrinsically motivated employees were able to build up more resources to deal with the demands through seeking help through support systems and asking for feedback. Employees who were externally regulated did not manage job demands efficiently, and increased their time working, further affecting balance between work and home (ten Brummelhuis, et al., 2011). Tendency to have negative feelings, such as guilt and helplessness, and inclination to suppress stress have also been linked to predisposition to burnout. In addition, frequent feeling of fatigue can make one more susceptible (Szigethy, 2014).

Consequences of Burnout

Ignoring the symptoms of burnout can have negative consequences in several different aspects of life, the workforce, the family, and one's personal health, as shown in **Figure 3**. The most commonly listed workplace consequences of occupational burnout are reduced job performance and productivity (even though the employee is working more hours), and frequent

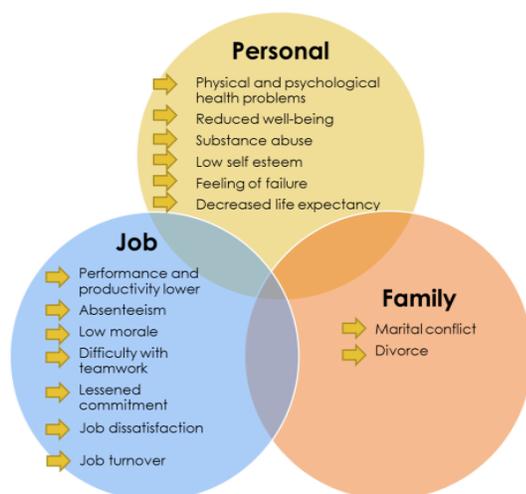


Figure 3. Three Areas of Life Affected by Burnout
Adapted from de Beer, et al., 2014; Brummelhuis, et al., 2011; and Szigethy, 2014.

absenteeism (de Beer, et al., 2014; Szigethy, 2014; ten Brummelhuis, et al., 2011). It can also make it difficult to collaborate with a team (Szigethy, 2014), along with leading to job dissatisfaction, lessened commitment (de Beer, et al., 2014), and job turnover (Szigethy, 2014).

In addition to having negative consequences on work performance,

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burnout can spill over into family life. Marital conflict and divorce have been identified as consequences to burnout. There are also consequences in one's personal life, such as physical and psychological health problems and reduced general well-being (de Beer, et al., 2014; Szigethy, 2014; ten Brummelhuis, et al., 2011). Some even go as far as to say burnout can result in suicide or decrease in life expectancy, addiction, low self-esteem, and feelings of failure (Szigethy, 2014).

Prevention of Burnout

Prevention of burnout is very important because, as we have discussed, burnout is a downward cycle and can be difficult to reverse. As shown in **Figure 4**, employees can take steps to avoid burnout in all of three aspects of life mentioned earlier. In their personal lives it is important to take breaks, take vacations and spend time doing things they enjoy. They must also monitor their personal health by getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, and being active with exercise (Szigethy, 2014). If one is having sleep impairment, discussing the problem with a doctor is essential because of the role sleep plays in the progression of and recovery from burnout. In their family lives, employees should work to maintain a balance between the time they spend at work and the time they spend with their family. It is very important for them to make time to spend with their family, even when they are busy. In their jobs, employees should make a point to

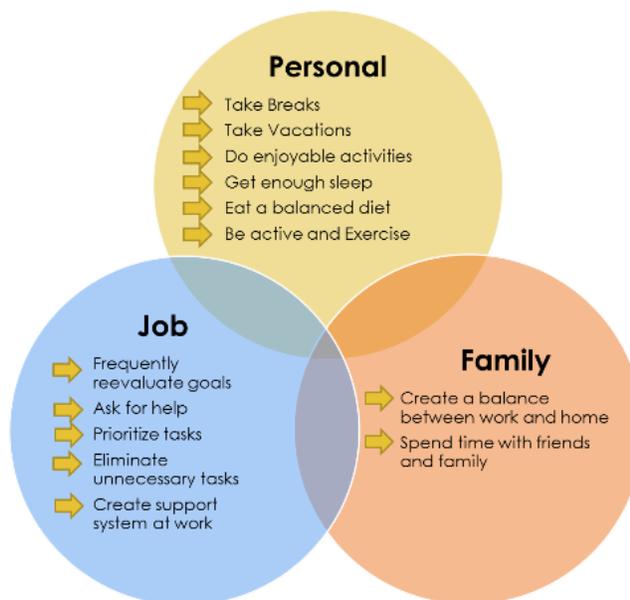


Figure 4. Areas of Prevention Strategies for Burnout
Adapted from Szigethy, 2014

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frequently self-reflect, reevaluate your goals, and ask for help when needed. One could start by organizing tasks into a list, and eliminating any tasks that are not essential. The remaining tasks should be prioritized into manageable lists to be accomplished. It will be very beneficial to set up a support system in the workplace (Szigethy, 2014). Voicing problems, asking for advice, and celebrating accomplishments with others can help to work out problems and get encouragement to stay motivated. Following these guidelines in all three aspects of life can help to prevent the progression of feelings of burnout.

Employers should work to prevent burnout also because, as we discussed previously, burnout has negative consequences on work performance. There are some steps that employers can take to prevent burnout in their employees. **Figure 5** explains four ways in which employers can promote engagement to prevent burnout. They can create or hire organizations to help identify and treat burnout of employees. It is also important for employers to make job duties and expectations reasonable and clear to employees. Employers can encourage employees to create a network of colleagues to act as a support system for one another. Creating opportunities for employees to voice their frustrations can be very beneficial to prevent stress from building up. It is also important for employers to be aware of the work environment that their employees are in,

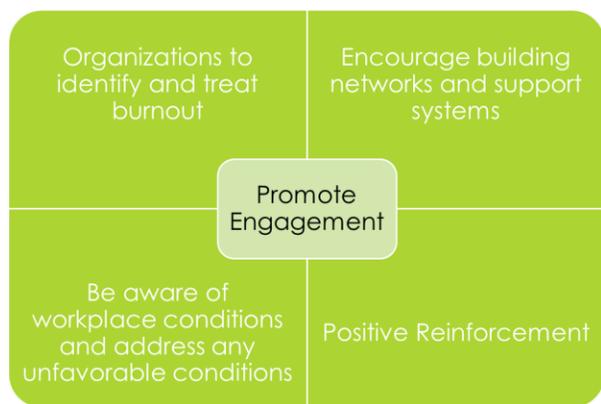


Figure 5. Prevention Strategies for Employers
Adapted from Szigethy, 2014.

and take steps to improve any unfavorable conditions. Positive reinforcement should be used to make employees feel appreciated. Rewarding hard-working employees with promotions or raises can provide a great deal of encouragement. Even when a promotion or raise is not an option, it is important to recognize

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employees for their efforts and show appreciation for the work they do. Preventing burnout is beneficial for employers to keep the workplace running efficiently and to keep the employees motivated and productive (Szigethy, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, burnout has three main components which are exhaustion, cynicism, and decreased efficiency. It is a condition that develops slowly over a series of three stages, from the first with sporadic and mild symptoms to the last with chronic and severe symptoms. Burnout is a continuous process caused by an increase in demands and a loss of resources. Burnout can be brought on by lack of balance between personal life and work life, lack of support system, and inability to handle stress productively. It is also significantly associated with difficulties sleeping. Studies have found that external regulation can make an employee more susceptible to burnout. Tendency to be fatigued, suppress stress, and have negative feelings also make a person more susceptible to burnout. Failure to address feelings of burnout may result in a variety of negative consequences in professional life, family life, and personal health. There are many steps that can be taken to prevent occupational burnout. Employees can balance their home and work life, maintain the health, regularly reevaluate goals, and prioritize tasks into manageable lists. Employers can encourage employees to build a support system in the workplace, create organizations to help identify and treat burnout, and use positive reinforcement to show the employees that they are appreciated. Many workers and students suffer from feelings of burnout. If we make an effort to understand the causes and symptoms, we can use the prevention techniques to ensure that we, and the workers around us, stay motivated and productive in our jobs.

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