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A Psychological Look At Burnout

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Burnout. I am certain you have heard about or experienced it to some degree, whether you are an 18-year-old college student, middle-aged parent, or a 65-year-old retiree. No matter who you are, in the chaotic dance of the current world we live in, burnout can surface as a formidable foe to our health and well-being. Empirically, burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome that arises due to chronic stress from any form of work or school and contains three key dimensions: “overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In simpler terms, burnout acts as a never-ending treadmill where your to-do list is longer than your Target receipt, your inbox morphs into a black hole, and your houseplants even begin to wither with sympathy. In this paper, we will explore how burnout encapsulates the toll of chronic stress via a thorough description of burnout’s three elements and symptoms, its underlying causes, strategies for prevention, and the realities of living with it. Hopefully by the end of this, you are provided with insight into mitigating burnout’s impact and can find a brighter outlook on the matter!

To begin, burnout has already been defined, but let’s dive deeper into its three dimensions and defining symptoms. Christina Maslach and her colleague, Susan E. Jackson, developed the most widely accepted concept of burnout, which we will focus on today, through years of rigorous elaboration and studies, and their results are defined by three characteristics (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Overwhelming exhaustion is the sensation of psychological fatigue and tiredness leading to an energy deficiency (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Cynicism stems from detachment and causes one to be indifferent, negative, and irritable with the people surrounding them (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Thirdly, reduced achievement is the product of

self-doubt, decreased productivity, and low self-esteem (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Symptoms and other effects arise from these three elements. Exhaustion can lead to stress side effects such as headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, muscle tension, cold and flu cases, disturbances with sleep, and more (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Cynicism acts as a great predictor of job turnover (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Also, findings indicate that burnout is possibly contagious and can negatively affect coworkers and peers through social interactions, increasing conflict and internal aggression (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Maybe Dwight from *The Office* was onto something when he bought a hazmat suit! Lastly, burnout lowers efficiency, motivation, and overall satisfaction of work and life and can even increase the risk of health issues (Rehman et al., 2020). Cardiovascular disease is just one example of a health impairment linked to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In all, understanding the three elements and signs of burnout can help us recognize burnout and act accordingly.

Next, let's discuss the root causes of burnout. With over twenty years of research, six main categories have been recognized as risk factors that can trigger burnout including workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Unmanageable workloads, lack of control, inadequate rewards and recognition, rare relationships and little support, unfairness and disrespect, and/or confliction of values in the workplace or classroom undoubtedly leads to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Sounds like my barista job, but hey, at least I get free coffee! Back to the subject, personality traits like neuroticism, Type A Personality, emotional dysregulation, and alexithymia can also enhance burnout to stem in an individual (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Some of these situations and characteristics are not always avoidable. However, knowing the roots of burnout can help us all

make the right decision when it comes to where we choose to go to work or school, whether we stay at a job or in a certain field, and overall, what is best for ourselves as individuals. Life gives us lemons, and burnout squeezes them right into our eyes if we let it!

Now that we understand the causes of burnout, what can we do with it? In this day in age, we have the privilege to practice preventative care which can give us the ability nip burnout in the bud before it becomes harder to treat and deeper issues arise. Burnout affects professional and personal lives of individuals, yet problems have arisen in other areas as well. It has also been shown to negatively impact organizations, businesses, public health, and even the economy (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). This being said, prevention of burnout is crucial to improving the quality of our personal lives, professions, communities, and all aspects of the world around us. Control and support are two resources at work or in the classroom that have shown to be key in reducing the risk of burnout (Rupert et al., 2015). Studies have displayed a relationship that correlates control with greater feelings of accomplishment and less exhaustion, defeating two of the defined dimensions of burnout (Rupert et al., 2015). Maybe we should all just be our own bosses! Of course, being our own manager is not realistic, and complete control at our jobs or at school is near to impossible. Nevertheless, the ability to practice professional autonomy and have a voice in decision making situations can make all the difference (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Now, support is definitely necessary in all aspects of life, and it has also been proven to be a significant factor in avoiding burnout in a working or educational environment (Rupert et al., 2015). Your peers and coworkers can be great friends, too! Next, at more personal level, several methods exist that anyone can incorporate into their life to decrease risk of burnout which include recreational activities, self-care activities, social

support, and cognitive coping skills (Rupert et al., 2015). Also, personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, extraversion, positivity, and a problem-focused nature protect us from burnout (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Finally for prevention strategies, maintaining a high learning motivation is vital to uphold psychological well-being in students (Rehman et al., 2020). An exceptional, collaborative learning environment fosters this high motivation along with greater academic abilities in students, overcoming potential for burnout and other mental health issues (Rehman et al., 2020). In contrast, two strategies to avoid in stress management are escape-avoidance and emotion-focused coping because they are correlated with higher levels of burnout (Rupert et al., 2015). Some specific examples are venting, gossiping, sleeping more, drinking, and abusing substances (Rupert et al., 2015). Similar to using gas to put out a fire, relying on sleeping away your issues or drowning your sorrows in a case of beer will add fuel to the burnout flames instead of extinguishing them. Save the drama and gossip for the season finale of *The Bachelor*!

Lastly, burnout is not avoidable in all cases, so let's go over some coping strategies and treatment ideas that help us face burnout and manage it. A commonly used strategy highlights support from peers, personal relationships, counselors, and others in the community surrounding you (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Seeking help in a time of need is a great first step in any situation! Support systems really do seem like a cure-all, huh? Another technique is diversifying your schedule and even the world around you (Manning-Schaffel, 2021). Making small changes, like driving a different route to work or taking on a new type of task at your job, wakes up our brain and forces us to step outside the burnout box (Manning-Schaffel, 2021). Physical exercise has also been shown to be a moderator of burnout (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Get off your butt and move! Other physical constituents such as healthy food, moderate consumption of alcohol, and consistent sleep patterns are necessary for recovery as well (Van Dam, 2021). Not only can physical activity can alleviate symptoms, but psychological self-care is incredibly important in regard to dealing with burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Taking better care of your well-being and practicing mindfulness to lessen burnout symptoms can include focusing on your spirituality through meditation or prayer, zoning in on a more optimistic mindset, and allowing yourself time off from work or school (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Can I get an “Om”? In addition, cognitive strategies to reduce feelings of detachment from burnout include reflecting on satisfying experiences and maintaining professional identity, self-awareness, self-monitoring, and work/life balance (Rupert et al., 2015). On a deeper level, clinically diagnosed burnout requires more intensive treatment from a therapist. (Van Dam, 2021). Psychologists emphasize individual differences play a role in treatment, so they must adjust interventions and timelines accordingly to specific patients (Van Dam, 2021). Everybody is unique, so burnout itself and management of it will look different for everyone!

In conclusion, to truly navigate burnout, an understanding of its dimensions, underlying causes, prevention strategies, and realities are required. The interaction between burnout’s three elements, exhaustion, detachment, and ineffectiveness, guides us to comprehension of its symptoms and its nature which affect us both mentally and physically. Likewise, examining the roots of burnout builds the groundwork for proactive mediation whether it stems from work pressures, educational stress, or interpersonal issues. Prioritizing preventative strategies is important, too. Measures such as self-care, a supportive surrounding community, a sense of control, and motivation practices offer resilience in times of trouble. Nonetheless, those living

with and experiencing persistent periods of burnout can learn to accept and adapt to its daily challenges with the coping and treatment ideas defined. Ultimately, addressing burnout requires both internal and external betterment to achieve healthier work and educational environments. We deserve to live in a world where burnout is not an unbearable hardship. Instead, it is a challenge met with resilience, optimism, empathy, and maybe a bit of humor!

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