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**Burnout**

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**BURNOUT**

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**Abstract**

Burnout is defined as a syndrome of chronic exhaustion and a cynical attitude towards work that is caused by one's professional life. Examining what causes job burnout is crucial for the prevention of the syndrome and its consequences – including impaired well-being, job performance, and productivity. The study of personality is relevant in this area of research, because personality has been consistently related to burnout. Beyond the objective nature of the work, employees tend to perceive the work environment favorably or unfavorably depending on their personality characteristics. Personality factors also interact with job demands and resources in predicting burnout. Recent research has indicated that burnout symptoms may vary from day to day, depending on the prevalence of daily work characteristics and daily emotional states. This opens the door to new research that sheds light on the process of burnout, and on possible interventions that may prevent burnout.

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### Introduction

It was in the 1970s when Freudenberger first used the term “burnout”. With this term, he wanted to describe the gradual emotional depletion and loss of motivation that he observed among volunteers working for aid organizations in New York. Although Freudenberger observed this phenomenon within a clinical context, after years of research, it has been shown that burnout may occur in any working context.

In the 1980s, Maslach and colleagues interviewed human services workers in California to find out how they handled stressful situations with clients. In the interviews, the workers often used the word “burnout” when explaining how they felt interacting with clients. However, they did not only show symptoms of emotional exhaustion but also reported a lack of professional competence and they endorsed a negative, callous attitude towards their clients. As a result, Maslach and her colleagues identified three core dimensions of burnout:

- Emotional exhaustion: feelings of being emotionally drained by one’s contact with other people. This is the central strain dimension of burnout.
- Depersonalization/Cynicism: a negative or excessively detached response toward these people, who are the recipients of one’s service or care.
- Lack of personal accomplishment: a decline in one’s feelings of competence and successful achievement at work.

Nowadays, most scholars agree that exhaustion and cynicism are the core dimensions of job burnout. Personal accomplishment develops largely independent of the syndrome and is often excluded from the definition of burnout. Since burnout means that employees have lost the motivation and ability to invest effort in their work, research has confirmed that burnout is an important predictor of reduced performance, lower productivity, and reduced client satisfaction. Moreover, burnout has a negative impact on employee well-being and psychological and physical health. It is therefore important to understand the possible causes of burnout. These causes are related not only to the characteristics of the work itself, but also to the way in which people experience their work and how they cope with difficult work situations. Therefore, the study of personality and individual differences is crucial to better understand the burnout syndrome.

### Personality and Burnout

Personality characteristics are relatively stable aspects of the self that can help to explain why some individuals are more prone to experience burnout than others. Alarcon and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis in 2009 and after reviewing 114 samples they concluded that the environment is not the only predictor of burnout. They focused on the Big Five personality factors and found that all these factors were related to the different dimensions of burnout. Individuals high in emotional stability, extraversion, conscientiousness and agreeableness were less likely to experience exhaustion, cynicism and lack of personal accomplishment. Specifically, emotional stability was the most important predictor of exhaustion and depersonalization, whereas extraversion was the most important predictor of personal accomplishment. Finally, openness to experience was positively related only to one dimension of burnout (personal accomplishment). Beyond the Big Five, there are other personality factors that are also important to predict burnout. For example, optimism reduces the likelihood to

experience feelings of exhaustion and to develop a negative attitude toward work (cynicism).

Therefore, regardless of the objective nature of the work environment, people tend to perceive their job favorably or unfavorably, depending on their personality. We can take as an example a specific work task: the submission of an important report. Individuals with low emotional stability may view this task as stressful and threatening, because these people have a tendency to experience unpleasant emotions such as anxiety or anger. However, individuals with high emotional stability may view the same task as challenging and motivating, because these people are usually calm and react favorably to demands. Apart from the perception of the environment as stressful or challenging, individuals may also differ in their ability to cope with job demands. Extraverts may be better able to cope with emotionally demanding situations, because they have the skills to use coping strategies such as seeking out social support and accepting help from others. Personality is indeed reliably related to burnout.

Swider and Zimmerman (2010) used meta-analytic path modeling to investigate the relationships between Five-Factor Model personality traits and job burnout. Their results were consistent with those of Alarcon, and showed that Neuroticism (positive) and Extraversion (negative) were the most important predictors of emotional exhaustion, whereas Agreeableness was the most important predictor of depersonalization (negative). Conscientiousness and Openness hardly explained any meaningful and unique variance in burnout. Furthermore, they found that job burnout partially mediated the relationships between Five-Factor Model personality traits and personnel turnover and job performance, while fully mediating the relationships with absenteeism.

### **Job demands and Resources**

The Job demands-Resources theory developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2014; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001) proposes that burnout is the result of a suboptimal work environment in which the job demands are too high, and job resources are too low. Job demands are aspects of the job that require sustained physical, emotional, or cognitive effort. Repeated confrontation with a high workload and emotionally challenging client interactions is draining and results in high levels of exhaustion. Job resources are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that help to achieve work goals, reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, or stimulate personal growth, learning, and development. Resources such as support, feedback, task variety, and autonomy can be used to deal with high job demands, and are also motivating in themselves. Employees who have access to an abundance of job resources are typically engaged in their work and have a positive, enthusiastic attitude towards work. However, when important job resources are missing, employees may develop negative attitudes towards work (cynicism).

Thus, the combination of high demands and low resources is an important predictor of burnout. This means that work environments can be designed such that the risk of burnout is limited. For example, in 2005, Bakker, Demerouti and Euwema conducted a study among teachers who experienced job demands such as overload or work-home interference. These teachers did not experience burnout when they had access to job resources such as autonomy or social support. However, as discussed above, not only job demands and job resources interact in predicting burnout – personality also plays an important role.

### **Personality versus Environment**

Since personality influences how employees perceive, select, and manage their work environment, it can be argued that personality factors interact with job demands and resources in predicting burnout. For example, since extravert individuals like to meet other people, they become socially competent and may be better able to deal with high emotional job demands. Their social competence will also help them to mobilize their social job resources (e.g., social support, performance feedback, coaching, recognition), which they can then use to deal with their job demands. Only a few studies have examined the interplay between personality and the work environment (i.e. job demands and resources). Bakker and his colleagues (2006) found that volunteer counselors low in neuroticism were hardly influenced by negative interactions with clients, whereas those high in neuroticism reported higher levels of exhaustion and depersonalization after negative interactions with clients.

Extravert employees may also be better able to mobilize their job resources. Because extraversion is characterized by a tendency to be self-confident and to have frequent and intense personal interactions, extraverts are more likely to craft their social resources, i.e. take the personal initiative to ask for help and feedback. Indeed, Bipp and Demerouti (2014) found that employees scoring high on approach temperament were more likely to seek job resources in their work environment such as opportunities for development and social support. Such resources can be used to protect oneself against the impact of high job demands, and thus avoid burnout. Future research should more explicitly investigate the interplay between personality, job demands, and resources.

### **Future Directions in Burnout Research**

Bakker and Costa (2014) have recently argued that burnout may be the result of an accumulation of job demands and strain over time, whereby employees at risk for burnout start to make mistakes and create problems that further add to the already high job demands. They refer to self-undermining – a consistent pattern of undesirable behaviors in the workplace that undermine job performance. Self-undermining may be the consequence of high levels of job strain, and be the fuel of a loss cycle of high job demands and burnout. Future research should try to measure such behaviors and investigate whether self-undermining is an important behavioral predictor of burnout.

Recent research has indicated that burnout may be a slow process of daily symptoms of exhaustion and cynicism that may fluctuate over time. Xanthopoulou and Meier (2014) argue that levels of exhaustion and cynicism may vary from day to day, depending on the daily work characteristics. Exhaustion may also be the consequence of certain performance episodes during which employees need to deal with complex and highly demanding tasks with little resources available – for example a performance episode that consists of a long business meeting with tough negotiations with clients. It is conceivable that repeated confrontation with such performance episodes leads to an accumulation of short-term fatigue, which may eventually translate into chronic exhaustion and cynicism (i.e. burnout).

Future research may also focus on job crafting as a possible means of preventing and reducing burnout. Recent studies have produced some promising results, suggesting that employees can be trained to engage in job crafting – to proactively optimize their own job demands and resources. Job crafting improves the fit between the individual employee and his/her environment, reduces burnout, and facilitates work engagement and job performance. It would be interesting to find out whether such job crafting

interventions are also effective among individuals who already suffer from high (clinical) levels of burnout. Finally, it is important to take into account the role of recovery from work-related stress. In her paper on “Strategies to prevent burnout”, Demerouti (2015) highlights that psychological detachment, engaging in relaxing activities, or engaging in activities with family and friends are all crucial strategies that can reduce symptoms of burnout.

#### SEE ALSO:

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