Occupational Burnout: A Relevant Affliction in the Modern-Day Workplace

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Executive Summary

   This report focuses on Occupation Burnout, and the relevance of the affliction to modern-day workplaces and workforces. Burnout is first defined through an overview of the syndrome, discussing long and short-term impacts and the varying classifications. The subject is then analyzed from a modern perspective, discussing the current standing and rates of burnout as well as standard diagnostic models and related terms. Intrinsic and extrinsic influences are also broken down, sectioned into personal, socio-cultural, and organizational sectors. Secondary research was used as the main method of data collection, an extensive variety of academic books, articles, websites, and journals compared and contrasted to further understand the burnout experience. This paper concludes that, though the syndrome is often seen as a vague concept within scientific communities, through proper analysis and amalgamation of research it is possible to create a distinct understanding of the affliction from both a broad and individualized perspective. The paper concludes with an overview of how this knowledge can be applied in proposing a successful solution related to burnout support and education, addressing the short comings of the current self-help and mental health app market. Recommendation for further research include expanding on the specific content found in modern burnout diagnostic tools, as well as analyzing existing solutions and strategies targeted to the burnout experience.

Occupational Burnout: A Relevant Affliction in the Modern-Day Workplace

Occupational burnout (OB) has become an increasingly prevalent topic in recent years, as a surge of pressure to innovate and perform has blurred the line between acceptable and socially normalized expectations. Though this workplace epidemic affects professional masses, there are specific defining factors that individualize the experience. These defining elements may act as a tool to identify, work through, and overcome professional burnout, addressing an issue currently seen as a right of passage within the modern-day workforce. There is a variety of contributing and defining elements related to the existence and rise of burnout, including analyzing the experience, understanding the modernization of the affliction, and exploring intrinsic and extrinsic influences.

Defining Burnout

An Overview of the Syndrome

In order to properly expand on the topic, the concept of burnout must first be defined and explored as a valid affliction. The word carries vagueness even within scientific communities, with no singular agreed upon definition existing (Rholetter, 2019). It should be noted that there is a considerable gap between the ambiguity of existing medical classification and definitions of burnout, and the way the concept is approached and discussed in public discourse and modern work culture (Heinemann, L. & Heinemann, T., 2017). The most common explanations frequently conceptualize burnout as a "multidimensional psychological syndrome describing individuals' responses to emotional and interpersonal stressors at work" (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). Burnout should be viewed from longitudinal perspective, understanding that it is a progressively developing experience brought on by organizational, occupational, or individual antecedents (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). The onset of burnout often manifests in three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Rholetter, 2019). Emotional exhaustion typically arises from tension and frustration related to

anxiety centered around the individual, depersonalization exists as a reactionary coping

mechanism allowing individuals to distance themselves from stress, and reduction in personal

accomplishment is a self-evaluative experience related to reduced feelings of accomplishment and

heightened feelings of incompetence ("Signs of Burnout", 2020). Burnout is often associated with

common mental health syndromes, most notably the symptoms of depression. Though the two

share similar short and long term effects, "burnout and depressive symptomatology are not simply

two terms for the same dysphoric state…the results do not indicate complete isomorphism"

(Schaufeli et al., 2001). At a conceptual level burnout is limited to occupational domains whereas

depression is relatively context free, depressive symptomology considered an outcome of burnout

rather than a precursor or isolated syndrome.

Short and Long-Term Impacts

Burnout has a wide range of short and long-term impacts, varying in severity. Symptoms of

burnout include cognitive, emotional, and physical exhaustion, all three facets representing the

depletion and draining of energetic resources (Armon et al., 2021). Cognitive and emotional

fatigue is often intertwined, consisting of reduced mental capabilities and a heightened sense of

cynicism or disinterest in work and empathy. A variety of psychiatric symptoms will emerge from

this altered state, including difficulty concentrating, memory problems, and personality changes.

When considering the standard dimensions of burnout include depersonalization and reduced

sense of personal accomplishment, one can connect how cognitive, emotional, and physical

exhaustion may act as both an outcome and antecedent to these factors. It is often thought that a

pattern of emotional overload and subsequent emotional exhaustion is the root of the burnout

experience, contributing to an overall sense of extreme and detrimental fatigue. There are also

biological and anatomical effects from long-term burnout exposure, acting as both a cause and

symptom of a perpetual cycle. Burnout has been shown to wear down structural and connective

elements of the brain, specifically areas related to emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and memory (Michel, 2016). Burnout brains are comparable to those of trauma survivors, including a lowered production of the stress hormone cortisol as a coping and defense mechanism against perpetually anticipated stressors (Michel, 2016). The human body, on a biological level, becomes burned out as a self-preserving response to extreme and prolonged stress. A long-term lowering of cortisol levels can also result in low-grade bodily inflammation, known to cause severe health complications related to plaque buildup in arteries, developing coronary heart disease, and increased risk of heart attacks (Michel, 2016). These bodily alterations on both a functional and structural level cause a cycle of neurological dysfunction, leading to the conclusion that those who have struggled with burnout in the past may be more at risk to future experiences.

Varying Types and Classifications

A further understanding of the topic can be derived from analyzing the different kinds of burnout, including frenetic, underchallenged, and worn-out sectors. Frenetic burnout can be described as individuals channeling an over-exertion of energy into their work in an effort to seek greater internal or extrinsic reward (Montero-Marín, 2019). This type of burnout occurs when there is an imbalance between effort or stress and result or goals, the frenetic worker putting in more effort as a solution and resulting in emotional exhaustion. There are three sub-category trait descriptions that often define frenetic burnout, consisting of involvement, grandiosity, and overload. This worker combines their heightened need for achievement with a fear of rejection or failure, forcing their environment to meet their often unreasonable internal and external expectations. The next type, underchallenged burnout, occurs for individuals in situations that feel "monotonous or unstimulating" ("Signs of Burnout", 2020). These workers are characterized by indifference, a lack of personal and professional development, and boredom, the dissatisfaction with their position resulting in depersonalization. Contrary to common definitions, this burnout

sector is not defined by over-load induced stress. Rather, it is the lack of work over-load and

challenges that result in debilitating monotony. The final classification, worn-out burnout, occurs

when individuals react to stress or a lack of perceived personal accomplishment by neglecting

responsibilities. While frenetic workers increase effort in an attempt to balance stress and results,

worn-out workers decrease effort in an attempt to achieve that same balance. They create coping

mechanisms based on an absence of passion and lack of acknowledgment, often interpreting

scenarios with a heightened sense of pessimism due to damaged self-esteem. The worn-out sector

"tend[s] to minimize successes, maximize failures, and perceive the future [and present] as

inevitably bleak"(Montero-Marín, 2019). These burnout classifications, combined with an

understanding of burnout's definition and impact, help to create a base of knowledge that can be

further expanded upon.

The Modernization of Burnout

The Current Standing of Burnout

Once the general topic of burnout has been discussed, it is important to bring the affliction

into a modern setting and perspective. First, the current validity and influences of the issue should

be proven and explored. In recent years burnout has become "one of the most widely discussed

mental health problems in modern societies (Heinemann, L. & Heinemann, T., 2017). This is

evident in recent studies conducted in the United States, including a survey of 1,000 full time

professionals that cites 77% of respondents experience(d) burnout, while 64% experience above

average stress levels despite 84% having a passion for their work ("Deloitte's Marketplace Survey",

2018). The rise of burnout is also reflected in the amount of published research exploring the

topic, with the number of publications released annually reaching approximately 140 in 2010 as

compared to only 40 in 2000 (Heinemann, L. & Heinemann, T., 2017). In comparison to the general

rise of mental health discussions, burnout publications grew nearly 8 times between 1991 and

2010, whereas depression publications grew at a rate of 3.5 (showing that interest rates in burnout specifically is separate from the general rise surrounding mental health conversations) (Heinemann, L. & Heinemann, T., 2017). Just recently, the World Health Organization classified burnout as an occupational phenomenon (W.H.O., 2016), reflecting a step towards acknowledging and medicalizing debilitating work-related stress. Technology is a modern workplace influence that may be a driving factor behind this steady rise in burnout-related research and concern. The incorporation of technology in workplace settings acts as a paradox, "increas[ing] well-being through positive pathways (accessibility and efficiency) and decreas[ing] well-being through negative pathways (interruptions and unpredictability)" (Claartje et al., 2016). Technology has tremendously impacted work processes on individual and organizational levels while blurring the lines between established work-life boundaries. The autonomy-control paradox or empowerment/enslavement paradox perfectly captures this relationship, describing how technology simultaneously creates and restricts autonomy, flexibility, and connectivity (Claartje et al., 2016). This results in a cycle of responsiveness known as the proposed connectivity paradox, in which technology allows for immediate and constant contact which enhances communication while simultaneously heightening responsiveness expectations. Technology has fostered a modern workforce with capabilities beyond any other generation, in doing so inflating both internal and external expectations and stressors.

Models for Measurement

Occupational burnout is often measured through various models of Patient-Reported Outcome Measures (PROMs). Though there are dozens of OB PROMs, the three considered modern industry standard are the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), and the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OBI) (Shoman et al., 2021). Introduced in 1981, The MBI is the most widely popular scale for measuring and assessing burnout in individuals. It

focuses on analyzing three sectors of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment), by grouping respondent results into tiers of high, average, and low burnout experience. Originally this diagnostic scale was created solely for jobs related to human service work, but has since been generalized and expanded to measure other occupational sectors. Though the MBI is the most popular and recognized scale, there has been notable criticism concerning the included sectors and wording. The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory and Oldenburg Burnout Inventory were created in response to this criticism, adapting the measurement scale to better suit a modern workforce and OB understanding. The CBI is a questionnaire consisting of three sub-dimensions: personal burnout, work-related burnout, and client or human-centered burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005). This PROM was created as a generic scale suitable for any work-sector, the core focus being the experience of exhaustion and fatigue within each dimension. The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory is "based on a model similar to that of the MBI; however, it features only two scales, exhaustion and disengagement" (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005). This scale also captures a broader conceptualization of burnout by being occupationally neutral and focusing on assessing cognitive, emotional, and physical components of exhaustion, unlike the specified focus on emotional fatigue related to human-centered work evident in the MBI scale. Though modernized scientific perceptions of burnout are often still vague, these diagnostic tools help create a systematic way of approaching, evaluating, and analyzing the experience.

Burnout and Workaholism

Modern burnout is often associated with the concept of "workaholism". Defined as "the compulsion or the uncontrollable need to work incessantly" (Arezes et al., 2017), influencing variables include work passion, professional satisfaction, and engagement for life. Work passion can be classified as harmonious passion or obsessive passion, indicating whether an individual has an extreme preoccupation with work to the exclusion of other life domains and resulting in negative social, emotional, and health consequences. These behaviours typically stem from individual factors and

personality traits, home and family characteristics and responsibilities, and internal and external stressors (Sussman, 2012). Beyond excessive time spent working, workaholism is typically characterized by a difficulty disengaging from tasks, frustration or agitation when separated from work related responsibilities, and an inflexible or compulsive work style. Workaholism is the most widely understood and addressed antecedent of clinical burnout, the compulsive nature of these workers similar to the frenetic burnout type. For many, this affliction closely resembles the experience of addiction and can be analyzed from such perspective. Addiction typically involves a preoccupation with a behaviour, engagement to achieve appetitive effects, temporary satiation, loss of control, and negative consequence suffering. It is thought that "the etiology of workaholism may be similar to other addictions in that certain traits such as a tendency to be compulsive and low self-esteem, socio-environmental variables such as a stressful childhood and vicarious learning, and a search for appetitive or behavioral reinforcement effects may lead to workaholism" (Sussman, 2012). The modern instance of clinical workaholism is thought to be as high as 10% in the western working population, close to the estimates of alcohol or cigarette addiction. When considering workaholism from the perspective of addiction similar to that of substance abuse, it helps shift the impact of burnout from a conceptual theory to something more tangible for a broader audience.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Influences

Personal Influences

The final element relevant to the discussion of burnout is individualized factors and their influence on the affliction experience. One of the most prominent individualizing factors is personality and demographic variables, and their specific relationship with burnout. Following the existing Big Five model of personality, human traits can be broken down into five sections: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (Armon et al., 2012). Each section, once defined, has a unique relationship with burnout and a specialized influence on

how individuals may be affected by extraneous stress. The most relevant trait sector to burnout is

neuroticism, or the tendency to experience negative emotions related to anxiety, insecurity, fear,

and depression. Those individuals considered highly neurotic will evaluate and interpret situations

more pessimistically than those with low neurotic levels, and may be predisposed to emotional

exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (the defining sectors of

burnout). Analysing the high versus low end of the spectrum for each of the Big Five categories can

decipher at-risk individual in relation to burnout. Individuals who are low in the extraversion,

agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness sectors and high in the neurotic sector can quickly

be identified as susceptible (Armon et al., 2012). Beyond this personality model, specific

dispositions may also be prone to experiencing burnout. Achievement orientation, discrepancy

perfectionism, and overcontrolling tendencies are all precursors to potential excessive work-

related stress (Sussman, 2012). Demographic variables are another individualized factor relevant

when analyzing burnout, specifically gender and age. It has been a common and longstanding

misconception that females are more prone to burnout then their male counterparts, likely due to

the differences in how burnout manifests in each gender. Women are more likely to show signs of

emotional exhaustion, whereas men are most likely to experience depersonalization (Purvanova &

Muros, 2010). This can largely be attributed to enforced societal roles and gender theory, where

showing emotion is deemed as a more feminine trait. Because emotional exhaustion is the most

commonly associated factor with raised levels of stress, men are often excluded (through internal

and extrinsic judgment) from being classified as "burnt-out". Gender and age also have a combined

effect on the burnout experiences. A study from Finland shows a decreasing linear relationship

with men's age and burnout levels, whereas woman have a bimodal relationship between age and

burnout peaking in both young and aging work stages (and dipping in middle-age years) (Ahola et

al., 2008). This study is corroborated by a Canadian survey, reflecting that gender and age have a consistent and combined effect on the burnout experience (Beauregard et al., 2018).

Cultural & Societal Influences

There are a variety of socio-cultural influences that shape an individual's burnout experience. National culture has a direct impact on burnout through influencing job demands and societal expectations, and, despite neurobiological responses to threats being universal, "perception of threat is largely conditioned by society" (Barker & Gina, 2018). If values of individuals or organizations clash with cultural norms, the friction can aggravate and raise stress past manageable levels. A five-dimensional approach can be taken to approaching and dissecting culture based on Hofstede's model, factors broken down into power distance, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long and short-term orientation, and individualism versus collectivism (Paul et al., 2020). Power distance reflects the degree to which a culture is accepting to unequal distribution of power, directly impacting workplace relationships and dynamics. Masculinity versus femininity focuses on which traits a society prefers, masculine societies focusing on achievement, assertiveness, and heroism, while feminine societies promote values of cooperation, nurturing, and consensus. Again, the traits a workplace environment or an individual fosters can clash with cultural expectations, resulting in abnormal stress levels. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree of acceptance around ambiguity, influencing or predicting the success of specific individuals in relation to specific positions. Long or short-term orientation can be described as a cultural focus on maintaining a link with the past, indicating whether a society prioritises tradition or innovation. The last sector is individualism versus collectivism, simply describing whether a culture is focus on individual desires or collective goals. All of these factors directly impact the experience of burnout, as "culture governs how individuals orient themselves in relation to their communities and societies, including how they perceive their professional

identity and self-image; their sense of adequacy, ability, and significance; and the availability of resources to meet demands" (Barker & Gina, 2018).

Organizational Influences

The final factor relevant to individualizing the burnout experience is organization influences, specifically the concepts of collective burnout and workplace impacts. The concept of perceived collective burnout can be described as "an organizational-level construct defined as the shared perceptions about how burned out…co-workers of the same workplace [are]" (Bliese, 2012). This follows the theory that social climate influences and fosters a mutual perception of an environment through shared experiences and interaction patterns. If the opinions and experiences an individual is exposed too follows patterns and shows evidence of burnout, they will perceive colleagues' resources as being threatened and have a protective, empathetic, and anticipative burn-out mirroring reaction (Barker & Gina, 2018). The process of emotional contagion plays a large part in the experience of collective burnout. Human's mimic and synchronize expression and interpersonal interaction with others, automatically mirroring and empathizing with evident emotions. Perceived collective exhaustion or perceived collective cynicism is often derived from informal community communication, representing "an abstraction of the organizational environment in relation to the phenomenon of burnout" (González-Morales et al., 2012). Working in an environment characterized by exhausted, depleted, exploited, and cynical workers affects an individual emotionally, while negative perceptions of an organization and its characteristics, attitude, and supports impacts an individual cognitively (Barker & Gina, 2018). A workplace defined by an imbalance related to minimal support resources and extensive job demands will often experience collective organizational burnout, regardless of personal or socio-cultural influences (Sussman, 2012).

Conclusion

Burnout is a prevalent issue in modern society, with repercussions far past surface level exhaustion. Through extensive research it is proven that developing a further understanding of the concept, as well as accounting for intrinsic and extrinsic influencing factors, can assist in predicting, preventing, and supporting individuals afflicted by burnout. This supports the proposal of a burnout solution centred around the education of individuals based on unique and specified factors. An app-based platform would allow for the customization of an experience centred around results from individualized assessments, based on existing models, breakdowns, and definitions of occupational burnout. The current self-help app market is flooded with generalized mental health tools taking the "band-aid approach", passively addressing surface level concerns without getting to the root cause (Smith, 2021). The underlying tone of the market approaches issues from a dependency perspective centred around the promise of fixing users afflictions, but fails to give users the tools to actually predict and combat their concerns themselves in real time. A solution focused on the specific sector of occupational burnout will help combat this generalized band aid approach, utilizing methods such as consistent retesting, customization, and education to assist users in combating the burnout experience outside the use of the app.

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