

## BURNOUT SYNDROME – THEORETICAL ASPECTS

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**Abstract:** *In a world where information is invading us, time seems to dwindle and work tasks are becoming increasingly numerous, complex, diversified and urgent, there emerge, more and more frequently, symptom of certain diseases that until just a few years ago did not exist. Such is the case of the burnout syndrome. The present article aims to bring into focus the theoretical bases, the stages and the causes determining this syndrome, which is considered a problem among the employees because of the negative consequences it has on their health.*

**Keywords:** *burnout, stress, emotional exhaustion, work tasks.*

**JEL Classification:** *O15.*

### 1. Introduction

The concept of *burnout* was launched in the 1970s, when the first attempts to establish its content, its reasons and especially the remedies of the newly-emerged phenomenon appeared.

In 1974, Freudenberg H., an American psychiatrist and psychotherapist, discovered the *burnout* syndrome while leading an alternative daycare center receiving and assisting drug-addicts in New York. This clinic was functioning exclusively with the volunteering of some young people offering their services.

Freudenberg watched the young volunteers and noticed a paradoxical phenomenon. While at first they were enthusiastic and deeply involved in the activity they were doing, after a year of activity the volunteer were exhausted, devoid of enthusiasm, complaining of fatigue, and having very irritable emotional reactions.

Following this situation, Freudenberg emitted the opinion according to which the persons vulnerable to experiencing the burnout syndrome are those devoted to a cause, those who like to fight, thus considering the burnout syndrome as the fighter’s disease.

The reasons of the discovered phenomenon lie in some of the individual features of the people, in their idealized self-image, in the fact that they perceive themselves as dynamic, competent, but when they discover that some dream are almost impossible to reach, they fail, they lose their self-trust and become estranged from themselves.

Consequently, exhaustion, professional failure, health problems and the dramatic decline of the accomplishment and work performances are characteristic signals of the newly-identified phenomenon.

### 2. Causes of burnout syndrome

The burnout syndrome represents a state of psychic, physical and emotional exhaustion determined at the work place by prolonged stress, therefore being a consequence of the lack of balance between the demands, the resources and the professional satisfaction degree.

The burnout syndrome can be determined by: causes having to do with the professional environment (large work volume, multiple responsibilities, time pressure, overloading, lack of appreciation), causes having to do with the employee’s lifestyle

(insufficient free time, not enough involvement in relaxing and social activities but also lack of social and family support) and last but not least causes dealing with the employee's personality (personality features).

Overloading in conditions of under-appreciation can trigger the burnout syndrome. Excessive, yet unrecognized and inadequately rewarded work, the unrealistic expectations of the employee from the employer, monotonous or unsatisfactory activities and work under pressure – all these can lead to chronic exhaustion. If the employee's lifestyle itself is not balanced and there are excessive responsibilities, social pressure, workaholism and lack of other preoccupations such as relaxation or socialization, and as personality one manifests oneself as a pessimist, all these develop the burnout conditions.

Those affected by the burnout syndrome are intelligent, very motivated and ambitious people, who out of the desire to stand out or out of their passion for what they are doing make great efforts, work overtime, so this behavior affecting their personal life as well.

Starting with the decrease of the enthusiasm at the work place, the diminution of the professional output and of the power to focus, the sensation that the activities at the work place have become impossible to accomplish, gradually, disillusion and dissatisfaction settle in, accompanied by chronic fatigue, and the decrease of the capacity to communicate with those around.

The consequences of the syndrome affect the employee both on the individual and on the organizational level. The awareness of the failure, of the incapacity to face the situation, the non-achievement of one's own expectations lead to the diminution of one's self-appreciation, to the emergence of frustrations, irritability. The persons affected become impatient, critical, suspicious, being convinced that they have a difficult life.

The employee's behavior is affected, conflict states and lack of interest for the activities proposed emerge, thus one also affects one's interpersonal relations.

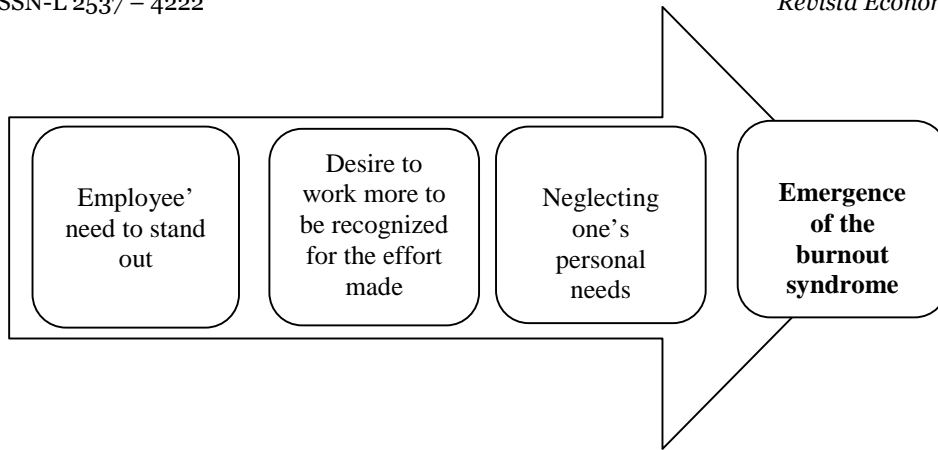
The lack of family support as a consequence of the unaware attitude of rejection of them, combined with the problems emerged at work, can lead to the development of depression and of the vicious circle that the employee affected by the burnout syndrome finds himself in.

This seems to be rather a social than an individual phenomenon. The individual factors have a less significant role in the explanation of the development of burnout than the large quantity of activities. Yet, some employees are more prone to the burnout syndrome than others.

People with certain personality features (low self-esteem, competitiveness, higher vulnerability and excessive need of control) and certain expectations in relation to the work place tend to develop the burnout syndrome. Underestimation, ignorance or a superficial interpretation, a delay in the prevention of the burnout syndrome can have quite serious consequences: depression, frequent diseases, low self-esteem, family problems and organizational problems, abandon in the professional domain, decreased performance and absenteeism.

### **3. Burnout syndrome stages**

The burnout syndrome, as one can observe in Figure 1, develops during several stages. The employee wishes to stand out in the organization, establishing for himself high objectives to accomplish, thus dedicating very much attention to his job, having no time for his personal life.



**Figure no. 1. Stages of emergence of the burnout syndrome**

Source: elaborated by the author

The effects of this syndrome settle in slowly, as a consequence of some chronic stressors having to do with the activities at the work place. The burnout syndrome is characterized by three dimensions, i.e.: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished professional achievements.

1. *Emotional exhaustion* supposes the emotional emptying of the person, the loss of one's energy and motivation, permanent fatigue, the emergence of concern and tensions. This is considered the basic dimension of this syndrome.
2. *Depersonalization* is associated with the emergence of impersonal attitudes, of detachment from or dependence on those around, of stigmatization or rejection of them – all being meant to cope with the exhaustion of the internal resources.
3. *Reduction of the professional achievements* involves the diminution of the feelings of accomplishment, the limitation of one's own possibilities, or the tendency of negative self-appreciation of one's professional achievements and capabilities, or the diminution of one's self-esteem, of the capacity to focus, of one's spontaneity and creativity. So, the employee feels that what he does is insignificant, unappreciated.

Until the effects of the burnout syndrome set in the employee goes through 4 preliminary stages.

1. *Ideal enthusiasm*: is the stage when the employees who are at the beginning of their career invest, from an emotional perspective, very much, in the activities they develop, desiring to get to improve themselves (to reach perfection) as soon as possible.
2. *Inefficient stagnation* is represented by the fact that work loses its primordial aspect, no longer has the same stimulating effect on the employee. In this case, a decrease of the capacity of work results, added to the association of the employee's desire to have achievements in the social life as well.
3. *Feelings of frustration*: in this stage, physical, behavioral and psycho-emotional disorders develop. The feeling of frustration grows: the more the employee thinks about the sense of his work, reevaluates his aspirations and chances, the more tired he feels and his interest for work diminishes.

#### **4. Symptoms of the burnout syndrome**

The burnout syndrome represents the state of depersonalization and mental, emotional, physical exhaustion, based on the existence of chronic or persistent stress.

The specific symptoms appear at first as signs of stress and physical and mental exhaustion, these becoming gradually chronic and coming together as time goes by. They can be grouped into three categories, i.e.:

- **Physical symptoms** manifest themselves by states of physical fatigue, exhaustion, low immunity, sleep modifications;
- **Emotional symptoms** are: self-devaluation, negative feelings and thoughts like helplessness, apathy or lack of trust in the future, but also detachment from the others, absence of the motivation needed to develop certain activities;
- **Behavioral symptoms**: not assuming personal responsibilities, social isolation, postponing the realization of certain tasks and inadequate accomplishment of the professional tasks.

Burnout is considered a **complex phenomenon** appearing as a consequence of the interaction between individual and organizational factors. **The individual factors** are represented by the physical and mental factors involved in the individual capacity of coping with stressful situations and include aspects such as: self-efficacy, self-image, perception of personal control.

**The organizational factors** refer both to the organizational climate and to the aspects related to the individual responsibilities within the firm. Here are included the number of tasks taken over by the employee, the time needed to solve them, but also the work volume or the equilibrium professional life – personal life.

### 5. Burnout syndrome vs. stress

It is important to make a difference between the symptoms determined by stress and those of the burnout syndrome. While stress appears out of excessive implication, hyperactivity (everything is urgent and ultra-necessary), but also the loss of the physical energy, in the case of burnout we are discussing about despair, emotional numbness, lack of involvement, but also helplessness. We can affirm that the stage posterior to stress will be reached, where the employee no longer asks for help, and isolation makes the intervention impossible.

The two states seem to be similar because burnout is the result of the presence of a prolonged state of stress, the main difference being the fact that that in the case of stress, the latter has a temporary character, being triggered by an event characterized as stressful and which diminishes gradually, whereas in the burnout syndrome stress has a persistent or chronic character. In Table 1 are highlighted the differences between the stress phenomenon and the burnout phenomenon.

**Table no. 1. Differences between stress and burnout**

No.	Stress	Burnout
1.	Stress has a greater extension, being met both in the sphere of the professional life, and in that of the private, extraprofessional life	The burnout phenomenon is specific of the sphere of the professional life
2.	On the emotional level, stress is translated into hyper-activation	Burnout supposes emotional “leveling” or “anesthesia”
3.	Stress is a state characterized by intense activity and vigilance	Burnout is a state of apathy and helplessness
4.	On the level of consequences, stress supposes mainly physical exhaustion	Burnout supposes mainly a mental and emotional exhaustion (lack of motivation, of hope or of goals)

Source: elaborated by the author

In stressful situations, the organism is in a state of alert and the tension is episodic, but in the case of the burnout syndrome the tension is permanent, the employees affected feel devoid of energy and generally cannot notice any solution to get out of some problems. We can say that in the case of stress, the way the stressing stimulus is perceived is important, whereas in burnout, to the forefront come the real features and constraints determined by the professional life.

Stress exists independently from burnout, whereas the latter is indispensably related to stress; well-managed stress can be overcome, whereas badly- or incorrectly-managed stress turns into burnout.

## 6. Conclusions

The burnout syndrome appears when the employee loses the balance between the requirements (tasks) received and his own resources. In many cases people choose themselves to over-responsibilize themselves out of the desire to obtain a better status or to earn better. Although the stressors are identical for all the employees, only some of them will get to suffer from psychical and physical exhaustion.

Thus, the employees cannot stop the activities incumbent to them because they consider they are endangering all they have built so far and so they decide to continue to work even more to consolidate the position they are in. The more they consolidate their position at work, the more they responsabilize themselves.

In this case, any change in the daily routine produces a state of insecurity, which automatically leads to fear of failure. Thus, the employee continues to work, to draw away from people to finally become estranged and be absent, increasingly more, from the social life.

To conclude, well-organized people, sure of themselves and keeping a balance between their professional and their personal life do not get to suffer of this syndrome.

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