

BURNOUT - THE THIEF OF JOY AND PERFORMANCE.

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Abstract. *This article seeks to analyze the importance between burnout and its cognitive costs from a better angle as well as answer the question of how it is possible to return to the normal state. Looking through the lens of modern-day life and the increase in stress sources and their unpredictability we can anticipate the spike in the rise of mental illnesses and exhaustion. Furthermore, understanding stress and its crucial role in our attention and memory systems has never been more valuable as it can help us achieve an equilibrium. The article will also address the idea of a balance between boredom and anxiety and how it might be possible to reach maximum performance.*

Keywords: *burnout, stress, cognition, workplace, emotional exhaustion*

Introduction

In 1974 when the term “burnout” was coined by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger and brought into the research lexicon it was defined as a loss of motivation, growing sense of emotional depletion, and cynicism [1]. Nowadays it is a well-known fact that burnout is a valid medical disorder and has its ICD-10 code (Burn-out state of vital exhaustion). Recent research showed that 2.7 million workers in Germany were affected by burnout. Also, a 2013 survey of human resource directors showed that 30% of their organizations reported burnout symptoms [2].

Still, it is a mistake to consider burnout only as an emotional response to the long hours or challenging job that we are experiencing. Scientific evidence shows that burnout takes a physical toll that influences us well beyond our professional lives. Burnout is not just a state of mind but a condition that leaves marks on the brain and the body of the person that is affected by it. In addition to numbing professional growth, it has been shown to impair people’s social and personal functioning and overwhelm their cognitive skills, eventually leading to significant changes to the functioning of their brains [2].

Burnout Concept

As burnout got more attention, a specific trend was observed among workers: profound emotional exhaustion, negativity directed at clients and patients, and a crisis in feelings of professional competence. Furthermore, similar to depression it inhibits the sense of worth and the ambitions of the individual. Emotional exhaustion being the primary effect is described as having all the emotional capacity drained by one’s work [3]. Cynicism is also a prevalent trait for those that experience burnout as it manifests as a negative or detached response from work or the members with whom the affected person interacts. Last but not least, is the lack of accomplishments inferring the decline of achievements and competence at work [4]. In addition to that, these individuals experience high levels of chronic fatigue and are also more likely to report a range of physical and psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, memory impairment, and sleep deprivation [5]. Burnout disorder has been also found to be an independent risk factor for infections and type 2 diabetes [6,7]. Consequently, burned-out workers are susceptible to withdrawal behaviors such as lateness, absence, or turnover [8].

Taking into account the state that the person enters when he/she is subjected to burnout can bring us closer to improved methods of analyzing the systems in which we work and study most of our lives. That being said, the main causes of burnout are of 2 types: individual and situational factors [9]. Individual factors are concerned with personality and how it influences how people perceive their

work or study medium, and as a consequence how they deal with job demands and resources. The difficulty may arise from the misalignment of work and personality, leading to the neglect of individual needs. Due to a lack of synergy between inner ambitions and the requirements of a job, serious reactions may result, particularly when employees are often exposed to demands that do not fit with their skills and preferences. For example, when an introverted person becomes a leader, he will need to act in situations he is not used to such as, giving presentations for a group of co-workers. Moreover, people who reported being high on optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem were more likely to be able to deal with job demands, since they most often feel in control of their work and proactively solve problems and seek resources when faced with these demands.

On the other hand, situational factors take place when there is a lack of job resources but an increase in demands. As a consequence, job demands are associated with physiological and psychological costs, such as an increased heart rate and fatigue. This may lead employees to feel exhausted and to psychologically distance themselves from work [10].

The accomplishment of work objectives, stimulation of personal growth, or reduction of job demands and their costs is eased by job resources. These are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job [11]. Furthermore, the cynicism that emerges from burnout and its relation with job resources is reported to be negative where higher levels of burnout are correlated by lower levels of job resources [12]. The Demands-Resources theory proposes that job resources play a mitigating role in the connection between job demands and burnout [13,14]. It was also found that when workers experienced autonomy, received feedback, had social support, or had a high-quality relationship with their co-workers, leaders, tutors the intrusion of work overload and emotional distress did not seem to result in high levels of burnout. Thus, burnout is more likely to develop when high job demands are combined with low job resources [15].

Burnout Reversal

Cataloging the symptoms of burnout is one thing but reversing the effects is another that requires the same if not more effort. A research paper in 2009 concerned with the inner workings of stress and how it exhausts the mind and the body, revealed the fact that intense stress over prolonged periods impacts the functioning of specific areas of the brain involved with learning, memory, and mood regulations, which are also distinctive signs of burnout [16]. The same research team also found promising evidence with regards to reversing burnout effects. In an experiment that sought to demonstrate the aforementioned findings, the team brought 40 medical students in total, 20 that were preparing to take the medical license exam, and 20 that were proportionately less stressed and which were taken as a control group. From the beginning, it was hypothesized that the pressure of the upcoming exam will lead to stress-related changes in the brain. More specifically, impairments in the brain areas concerned with attention shifting such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (PFC). The area is concerned with “superordinate control functions for various cognitive tasks such as decision making, novelty detection, working memory, conflict management, mood regulation, theory of mind processing, and timing” [17]. After all, the medical students completed an attention-seeking task and at the same time underwent an fMRI scan, it was confirmed that the connection between the PFC and other regions related to the attention network was weaker compared to normal brain functioning [16]. It appeared as though stress disrupted the neural wirings of the affected students. Despite that, after 4 weeks the groups did not show any relevant difference between their scores on attention shifting tasks. Neuroimaging data also revealed that the stress-related effects have been reversed. Even though 4 weeks is incomparable to the years of strenuous stress and burnout that some individuals experience, it is still a step forward for further advancements and research.

Optimal Stress

Although most often than not stress helps us function and be prepared for flight or fight situations, we only recognize its presence when it is in large quantities and already affecting us. Moreover, it is also active when we take a test, make an important decision, or even choose our

garments for a night out. Nevertheless, here comes into play the theory of the inverted “U”, which demonstrates how the lack of stimuli leads to boredom but its opposite to anxiety, and only in the middle does it bring forth the optimal cognitive efficiency that helps us solve intricate systems of problems. Figure 1 below illustrates graphically the relationship between the levels of stress and mental performance.

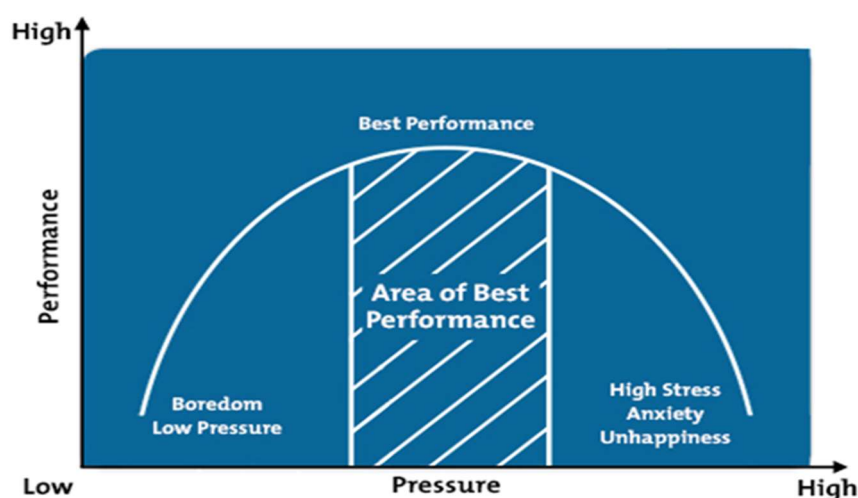


Figure 1. The Inverted-U Graph [18]

At low levels, little to no curiosity creates disinterest, but while the challenge increases so does motivation and attention which at the optimal level produces the maximum efficiency and success. Likewise, at the end of the spectrum, the pressure being too overwhelming brings the collapse of the ability to study and perform.

As we get fearful and panic settles in, the brain secretes high levels of cortisol and norepinephrine which in turn block the normal functioning of its neuronal pathways for learning and memory. The hormones in increased quantities also intensify the function of the amygdala and interfere with the prefrontal cortex and, thus there is no rationality in place to stop the emotional impulses from overloading ourselves. As everybody knows, before an exam or an important task the mind begins to focus and motivate itself to succeed, as time progresses and the term gets closer, importance increases and the tension abruptly explodes. Focused attention means that our short-term memory functions at a higher capacity and with increased potency. So that in the end it can culminate with a return to a relaxed state of mind. In today’s context, the aforementioned concepts prove to affect our work, study, and research places equally likely. If we feel upset or furious, we will probably lose interest even in the things that previously mattered to us. This weakness troubles professors, leaders, and students in the same way, and as a consequence it is crucial for understanding unexpected behavior as it affects the empathy of the individual and how he cares for others. We give our all when the levels of stress are moderate to intense, but our mind gets disconnected as soon as the pressure gets extreme [19].

Conclusions

Most processes that are built within the confines of our body have valid and vital functions for our survival and wellbeing, only in extreme cases can it overthrow the central command unit. As a consequence, it is pivotal to know how to avoid and foresee the effects of burnout and other major stress factors. Building an understanding of them will boost our performance and the resistances that help us cope with the everyday stressors. Eventually, the habits will tend to spread and influence the entirety of the institution in which we work. This feedback loop should matter not only to students and co-workers but also to tutors, leaders as they have a better grasp on the matters at hand and should preemptively be familiar with it. The faster we take the initiative and start spreading information and awareness the more people can avoid burnout and intense stress and the better they will perform most of the time.

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