

## **BURNOUT: THE REAL THREAT NOT ONLY FOR TOP MANAGERS**

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### **Keywords:**

Burnout, employer, employee

### **JEL classification: M5**

### **Abstract:**

This paper deals with the issue of burnout. It describes the causes, course and treatment of burnout in cases of two employees holding completely different job positions. It is a comparison of two different professions, a manager and a saleswoman at a bookstore, or a subjective evaluation of their burnout experiences. Common signs have been described as follows: it is primarily a psychological condition, an exhaustion experience that was typical among employees who professionally work with people. Symptoms are mental, physical and social – total exhaustion and overall fatigue that have been caused by prolonged stress.

### **Introduction**

The present time provides a wealth of goods and services, almost limitless job opportunities, travel opportunities and many other benefits associated with open markets and globalization. Companies are expanding into foreign markets, and become more predatory in matters of competition, since the pressure on companies has been increasing. In exchange for these benefits, people must face very strong pressure that comes along with this time. To establish visions, missions and strategies of a company, to figure out the best marketing plan, to ensure the attention of sponsors and to build a brand, to keep a product in the minds of customers or just to be able to sell well, all of this is based on the human factor.

At present, the pressure on the top management personnel has been a quite often discussed topic. The issues of stress and psychological problems caused by an excess of work have been more topical now than ever. However, the concept of occupational disease still means rather physical problems associated with performing primarily industrially oriented jobs. Now, employees face an entirely different, new kind of „disease“. Psychological problems, depression, stress, these are the terms that have been increasingly mentioned. This is current and very important threat concerning all employees. The objective of this paper is to describe the process of burnout in cases of two employees holding completely different job positions and professions.

## 1. Methodology, research

The concept of burnout has been most often used in connection with doctors and health care staff, top managers, etc., in short, with positions, where a person is put under a lot of pressure concerning working with people. This kind of work is hardly assessable in terms of a visible result of performed work. Within their work, employees find themselves in new non-stereotypical situations that require new and original solutions (for each patient, client or customer is an individual and requires a different approach than the other one). When working with people, it is difficult to see the results of performed work and if there is also an amount of stress and responsibility, it means a great risk for the development of burnout and other psychological problems.

The concept of burnout was introduced in the literature by Herbert Freudenberger in his article published in the „Journal of Social Issues“ in 1974, and it almost corresponded with the current concept. (Kebza, 2003, p. 6)

Freudenberger defines burnout as exhaustion, passivity and disappointment (Kebza, 2003, p. 7). Kallwass defines it in a similar manner (Kallwass, 2007, p. 123): exhaustion and depression. Koubek (2014, p. 187) defines burnout as stress without prospects for a solution that threatens especially employees who have an intensive contact with people (managers, teachers, consultants, traders, etc.).

Herbert Freudenberger presents twelve stages of burnout (Honzak, 2013, p. 28). Priess (2015, p. 25) identifies four stages – alarm stage, resistance stage, exhaustion stage and retreat stage. Kebza (2003, p. 13) also mentions four stages of burnout which are the stage of first enthusiasm, the stage of physical and mental exhaustion, then the beginnings of dehumanized perception of environment as a defense mechanism against further exhaustion and the stage of total exhaustion, negativism, apathy and indifference. The most frequently, five stages of burnout are being described, the stage of enthusiasm, stagnation, frustration, apathy and burnout (Koubek, 2014, p. 188)

The first stage is the stage of enthusiasm when an employee starts working at a new position. It may be a promotion, change of workplace, etc. Such employee is initially very enthusiastic about his newly acquired position, often voluntarily works longer to perform responsibly all tasks, and as time goes by, he is willing to sacrifice even his leisure activities for the work. Setting often unrealistic goals is another sign of the first stage of burnout. For such employee, the work becomes his whole life, it becomes his only meaning. The need of respect from others and gaining a higher position is a bright vision of the future that gives opportunities to strong rivalry. The employee in the first stage of burnout tends to feel to be indispensable at work, but also becomes a victim of fear of failure and a bad evaluation from his superior.

In the second stage, which is called the stagnation, the initial enthusiasm fades and the employee begins to realize that the set goals are not feasible, he begins to be tired from the work and so he is looking for other activities such as new leisure activities or tries to return to the old ones. Unfortunately, he is not necessarily successful. In this stage, the employee clashes with reality, which is obviously in conflict with his initial ideas. At this time, there may be the feelings of misunderstanding from colleagues as well as management, there are obstacles that are getting harder to overcome.

The third stage, also called frustration, then further develops the feelings of underestimation of accomplishment. Given the ever-increasing problems with co-workers and disgruntled clients or patients, the employee in the third stage of burnout begins to question his importance at his position. He begins to miss the point of his work, which is reflected in his unwillingness to work and perform other working tasks. The employee may begin to disregard the working time and try to find a new purpose in life, as he might do it in the first stage of enthusiasm. This behavior is reflected in workplace relationships, the employee occasionally loses his emotional control and then, even signs of physical aggression against his environment may start to occur.

The stage of apathy is the fourth stage, when the syndrome is in full swing. This stage manifests itself after the prolonged stage of frustration with a condition that the employee feels even more that his work is meaningless. He goes to work only out of necessity and any task bothers him and makes him very exhausted. Such person tends to be distracted and it gives room for mistakes. After a while, it often results in feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. The employee has no desire to continue to work and perform tasks given by superiors. Signs of indifference towards clients or business partners are frequent as well.

The last stage is the actual burnout or the stage of intervention. At this time, the employee already lacks any emotional stability, is completely exhausted and suffers from depression. In the burnout stage, it is no longer only about the problems at the working environment, even the closed ones of the employee are fully affected by his depression. The employee loses any sense of being, the ability to regenerate. The employee in the last stage of burnout suffers from sleep disorders and other physical symptoms, such as backache, migraines, circulatory disorders, high blood pressure and associated higher risk of heart attack. These people often seek solace in substance abuse, such as cigarettes and alcohol. In this stage, an intervention from outside is needed, an assistance from outside, because mental problems can be so strong that in some situations they can lead to suicidal thoughts.

Individual stages described above continuously follow each other, of course, and given that it is a long-term process, it can sometimes be difficult to tell, at what stage the sufferer may be, before he reaches a final stage of burnout.

In the next chapter, two case studies will show the process of burnout in two employees.

## **2. Results**

Many years of work at the same company and the median age, these are the factors linking two persons who do not know each other, but have experienced burnout. A man working in top management of a large multinational company, a woman working as a saleswoman at a bookstore. These are people holding different working positions, having different lifestyles, but were linked with an equally powerful moment in the past – burnout, depression, as well as change and strength resulting from the negative experience, its successful overcome and rediscovery of the meaning of life and joy. As a part of the survey, an interview with previously prepared questions was conducted with given employees, in order to compare their answers. The actual questions were based on studies of the relevant scientific literature.

The man works as a Head of Sales and Marketing for Eastern Europe, his scope of work has included the work for the marketing department, technical support and sales of textile dyes and chemicals, price management and logistics support in the assigned region. At the time when the symptoms of burnout manifested themselves, he was forty-six years old and has been already working for the company for ten years. He had been aware of burnout as a possible threat even before it became his personal problem. From his employer, however, there was no warnings at that time. Employees of the company had the opportunity to talk about their problems with a professional.

The second person of interest worked as a saleswoman at a bookstore for seventeen years and her job was to serve customers, to work with computer and to select suppliers. The woman began to experience the symptoms of burnout and depression when she was forty-five years old. She had been aware of the existence of the syndrome and its severity as well, however she associated it primarily with health care workers. She knew, however, that the problem may not relate only to a narrow group of occupations, but it can be a real threat for all occupations without exception. Even in this case, the employer did not inform his subordinates about the syndrome and employees of the bookstore had no opportunity to talk about their problems with a professional. It is five years since the woman has left the position, after overcoming burnout she changed her job.

### *2.1. The emergence of burnout*

Never-ending influx of negative news, lack of time for a complete solution to the problem, the constant improvisation, the suppression of self-determination, all of these are the factors considered by the interviewee as the most stressful at his job position, which is the position of top manager. The important factor is also a lack of support from superiors, which is confirmed by the interviewed woman, who sees covered-up conflicts and unresolved problems with co-workers as the biggest problem. When interviewed she stated that customer contact was not stressful for her, but there was poor communication among workers at the workplace that she blames the most (this communication was characterized by the fact that workers hardly talked to each other during working hours). This was a great pressure on her mental health, and created space for negative stressful working environment.

### *2.2. The physical symptoms of burnout*

Any stress brings negative physical manifestations on human health, and may be a trigger for a majority of serious and less serious health problems and diseases. People are often unaware of the consequences that occupational stress may have for their physical and mental health. Therefore, they tend to relegate the issue to the background of solved work issues. The physical manifestations of a psychological problem are the last stage, the final stage of stress, depression and, of course, burnout. It may be a persistent pain, loss of appetite, abdominal discomfort, dizziness, symptoms of a variety of serious diseases, for example cardiovascular diseases or diabetes, respiratory problems and visual disturbances, sweating and shaking limbs.

The interviewed saleswoman overlooked the signs of physical and mental exhaustion and did not address the situation at all. The respondent herself described the situation when she had realized her suffering from burnout as follows: „I exactly remember the moment. I was making records of goods to my computer, and suddenly I felt like I was out of my mind, the text on the screen blurred, I was dizzy and wanted to scream, I stood there for a while and then I just left. Then I realized that I was very exhausted, but I did not think it could be a psychological problem.“

The interviewed manager, on the other hand, described the feeling of utter physical devastation, exhaustion. He demonstrates it with a noticeable weight loss (the interviewed woman stated the weight loss by as much as 12 kg), inability to concentrate, constant fatigue, sleep disturbances, the feeling of being a physical and mental wreck. These are the consequences of burnout as described by the interviewees. Both respondents show a noticeable transition from physical to mental exhaustion.

### *2.3. Solving the problem of burnout*

In the burnout stage there no longer has been possible for the sufferers to get rid of the problem by themselves, an intervention by a professional, a psychologist or rather

psychiatrist was necessary. Both interviewees attended psychotherapy sessions that helped them.

To overcome burnout was not a matter of a week or a month, it took several months to years. Thanks to intensive support and understanding from family, friends and support from employer, it took the male respondent „only“ one year to overcome the syndrome. Due to additional stress in her personal life, the female respondent was treated for two years.

#### *2.4. Life after overcoming burnout*

Despite all the difficulties and suffering, both respondents are full of joy, optimism and strength now. It shows that every problem can be solved and there is a way out of every situation.

The manager evaluates his burnout experience as follows: „I have rethought my life priorities and values, changed the approach to problem solving at work, learned how to use my vacation and leisure time intensively. I have also intensified my social contacts, I take more rest, an active recreation, I have changed my lifestyle.“

On the other hand, the interviewed saleswoman said: „My view of life, of the future, has vastly changed. I have realized that I was the driving force of my life, that I was the one who was making decisions on what to do and what not to do. I am stronger, I love myself, I do what I like, what fulfills me.“

### **3. Discussion**

In recent years, demands related to one's own working activity have received considerable attention. The works of experts in the area have shown that highly stressogenic work is characterized by high demands on quality, responsibility and commitment of a employee while having low autonomy of work activity. The autonomy of work activity means the possibility for the employee to decide on the pace of work, its nature and conditions. Research has shown that the combination of high demands and low autonomy of work activity is a factor that plays a crucial role in the determination of health outcomes of job requirements in the sense that it is a risk factor for various diseases. (Kebza, 2003, p. 6)

The interviewed manager said that a major factor that contributed to his problem was the suppression of self-determination. Therefore, working conditions should be adjusted so that an employee could influence his working situation.

The interviewed woman blamed zero communication at the workplace as a major cause of her state of burnout. It resulted from conflicts and unresolved problems with co-workers.

Since it is very important not to suppress feelings, to talk about them, to express them, it is necessary to create a suitable environment (it can be a meeting where difficult cases at the workplace are being discussed, Balint groups, etc.). It is also possible to go to see a colleague and discuss your feelings with him. An important aspect is also a strict separation of professional life from personal life. (Dekel, 2011, p. 241)

### **Conclusion**

The paper gives a reader insight into the issue of burnout, it warns him about it. The comparison of two different employees was performed, both in terms of job position, profession and workplace, and in terms of experienced burnout. Even though the reasons for the two were different, the consequences can be described as the same. Interviews with employees and their comparison shows that it makes sense to talk about the syndrome, to not be afraid of it, to not be afraid to communicate one's feelings. It is in the interest of all parties (employers, employees and even the whole society) to eliminate the threat of burnout as much as possible. If someone is suffering from burnout, a collaboration with professionals on given issue is very important. Such cooperation has made an improvement of the situation and resulted in return to normal life in both cases. This fact is best described by a direct quote from the interview with the female respondent: „I must add that even though it was not a good time in my life, I am grateful for that, because it made me understand, to find self-confidence and the joy of life. And that means a lot to me.”

### **Acknowledgement:**

This paper was supported by the student grant competition SGSFES\_2015001.

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