

Reference document
Burnout



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Burnout: winning strategies for managers

Introduction

Burnout is not officially recognized as a mental illness and, for the time being, is not listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (DSM IV), which is the medical handbook of mental disorders. Instead, it falls into the category of adjustment disorders. According to research studies, burnout originates in the workplace, where the initial difficulties are first encountered and concentrated. Burnout is also always caused by chronic stress and the cumulative results of this stress. The major cause is a decline in the quality of life at work, which brings about a feeling of exhaustion.

Definition

According to the World Health Organization, burnout is characterized by “a feeling of intense fatigue, loss of control, and an inability to produce concrete results at work.” The term “burnout” was used for the first time in 1969. Since then, it has had numerous definitions. The Douglas Institute, which specializes in mental health, notes that “burnout is the result of disproportionate efforts (in time, emotion and commitment), low satisfaction as a result of these efforts and stress in the workplace.” Although, in the 1970s, this expression was reserved for workers involved in helping others (nurses, doctors, social workers and teachers), we now know that all workers can be exposed to burnout.

Causes and factors leading to burnout

According to the experts, nobody is shielded from burnout. Men and women are both equally affected. Moreover, no age group has been defined as being more at risk. According to Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey (2010), one in four Canadian workers claims to be stressed and 60% of these workers say that work is the source of their stress. Experts have not yet been able to provide a clear scientific explanation of what leads to burnout. However, all workers who experience a burnout period are experiencing chronic stress. Vulnerability is therefore an important factor.

Burnout is not only an individual problem. A series of individual (40%) and organizational (60%) factors that lead to burnout have been identified. According to some studies, the main organizational factors include work overload, lack of autonomy and not participating in decisions related to one’s tasks. An imbalance between the efforts made and the recognition received (salary, esteem, respect, etc.), poorly defined responsibilities, insufficient communication, ambiguous roles, unhealthy atmosphere and difficult schedules are also harmful to psychological health when the situation persists.

Among the individual factors that lead to burnout, the most frequent are those that place too much importance on work and perfectionism. According to research, it also seems that low self-esteem, cognitive rigidity, emotional instability and attributing what happens to us to external causes are also determining factors. In addition, certain personal situations, such as major family responsibilities or loneliness, can jeopardize the work-life balance.

More specifically, having difficulties in setting limits (in an overload situation), having high expectations of oneself, making work the sole focus of one’s life and demonstrating perfectionism in every aspect of one’s work without considering priorities contribute to burnout. Other elements include having a heightened professional conscience and not knowing how to delegate or work with a team in a stressful professional environment. Personality type (type A: ambition, competitiveness, need for control), age and gender, as well as inadequate adaptation strategies (dependence, poor time management, major need for support, unwise lifestyle habits, difficult interpersonal relationships) are also involved.

Stress at work

Stress, whether it is positive (stimulating) or negative (paralyzing), appears in various situations: a new situation, an unforeseen situation, a feeling of losing control, a situation that is threatening and destabilizing for the individual. Regardless

of the sources of stress, an imbalance is created between the pressure endured and the internal and external resources we have at our disposal to confront it. Some individuals suffering from burnout have difficulty recognizing their needs and expressing them to their employer. It also happens that these difficulties go unheeded due to the organization's management style or the type of position held. The quest for perfection and the difficulty respecting one's limits, on top of the pressure related to the quest for profit and performance, cause an imbalance in peoples' lives.

The body often sets off alarms that are important to heed, such as fatigue or various frequent infections. Burnout is not an individual problem. It's the person who breaks down, but the sources of the problem go beyond the person himself. In fact, it is in the interaction between the individual and the structures that surround him that burnout develops. The more the gap between requests and resources widens, the more the worker risks finding himself in a burnout situation.

Development of burnout

Burnout develops insidiously and sets in over time. It is a process of disillusion with work that unfolds in four phases: idealist enthusiasm, stagnation, frustration and, finally, apathy. Intervention is possible at any stage of the process. To describe what happens, words like "depersonalization" and "dehumanization" are often used, as if the individual loses, for some time, a part of himself. The individual gradually uses increasing amounts of energy to accomplish his work, without getting any satisfaction from it. Frustrations pile up and cynicism increases. Concentration becomes more and more difficult, and physical symptoms can appear. To correct this type of situation, the worker will invest himself even more in his work up to the point of exhaustion and withdrawal from work. Denial is typical of burnout because this is often considered a failure.

Main symptoms

Various physical, psychological, motivational, behavioral and emotional symptoms gradually set in and intensify over time. These symptoms include persistent

fatigue, pain (backaches, migraines, etc.), digestive problems, stomach ulcers, skin problems, disrupted sleep, weight loss or gain, frequent infections (cold, flu, ear infections, sinusitis, etc.), constant loss of motivation with regard to work, detachment from work, pronounced irritability, spontaneous anger, feelings of incompetence, inefficiency and exhaustion, a desire to isolate oneself, a feeling of failure, a drop in self-confidence, anxiety, worry, insecurity, difficulty concentrating, loss of memory, difficulty using good judgment, indecision, confusion and, in the most serious cases, suicidal thoughts.

Recommended treatments

The goal of treatment is to enable those suffering from burnout to regain their health and be able to do their work in a satisfactory manner, without getting worn out. Stopping work is often necessary. The duration of sick leave varies, but long leaves tend not to be prescribed. In fact, a very long leave could make returning to work even more difficult. The rest associated with sick leave is essential because the energy reserves of burnout victims are depleted. However, rest alone is not enough to solve the problem and prevent relapses. "Rest does not cure burnout. Real change must be integrated into these peoples' lives in order for them to regain a feeling of control over their life (...) whether it is a change in work environment, lifestyle, meaning given to work, philosophy or worldview," emphasize the specialists at the Douglas Institute. Therefore, change is also part of the solution.

It is important to be aware of the reasons that led to the burnout. Consulting a duly trained psychologist or psychotherapist can provide invaluable help in uncovering the cause of the stress and finding solutions to combat it. There are several types of psychotherapy, but cognitive behavioral therapy is the most frequently used. With regard to the use of antidepressants, experts from the Douglas Institute believe that hormonal changes that occur during burnout gradually return to normal through rest. However, for some individuals, these medications can give a boost to help overcome the ordeal. They should discuss this with their doctor.

Indicators of burnout risk in the workplace

Individuals bring their personality, expectations and, especially, their personal and family problems to work with them. Personal and organizational risk factors have been described. Since burnout is a major cause of absenteeism, of mental health problems and of an unhealthy work environment, it is possible (and important) to be able to recognize the problem before arriving at a work stoppage.

The main signs of detecting a problem in the workplace are: frequent absences and tardiness, drop in productivity, increased errors, lack of motivation, increased work accidents, difficulty concentrating and memory problems, complaints of fatigue, neglected appearance and/ or physical care, impatience, increased and unusual irritability, lack of collaboration, crying, isolation, interpersonal problems, inappropriate working postures, weight gain or loss or any other observable behavioral change.

Conclusion

Preventing burnout is not only an individual concern but the company's concern as well. Managers therefore have a key role to play. Prior to an absence, the manager can become actively involved with the employee, since it is possible to detect the warning signs of burnout or of an absence. The manager can then meet with the employee to advise him properly and refer him to an aid program or service. This type of proactive approach will often make it possible to prevent or shorten a work stoppage due to burnout.

References

Statistics Canada; General Social Survey (2010), Overview of Canadians' schedule management

The following resources can also be helpful for managing a burnout situation:

- Browse the FAQ
- Take advantage of Health *InSight* Support Services
- Turn to your company's EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency