

## B. What is Job Burnout?

### 1. Job Burnout

Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. The past 25 years of research has established the complexity of the construct, and places the individual stress experience within a larger organizational context of people's relation to their work. Recently, the work on burnout has expanded internationally and has led to new conceptual models. The focus on engagement, the positive antithesis of burnout, promises to yield new perspectives on the interventions to alleviate burnout. The social focus of burnout, the solid research basis concerning the syndrome, and its specific ties to the work domain make a distinct and valuable contribution to people's health and well-being.

Excerpted from Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W.B., and Leiter, M.P, Annual Review of Psychology, V.52, 2001, pp.397-422.

### 2. Teacher Burnout

Statistical data indicate that teachers are abandoning the profession in increasing numbers. According to Shinn (1982) and Katzell, Korman, and Levine (1971), teachers are three times more likely to quit their jobs and even more likely to want to quit their jobs than are similarly trained professionals. Many are finding jobs in private industry, others are seeking early retirement, and still others are simply dropping out. Thousands of teachers have laid down their pointers and chalk largely because of decreased funding, limited personal control over their teaching, and lack of societal commitment.

One important factor that contributes to this trend is teacher burnout. Burnout is a more serious problem to the profession than job change or early retirement because it renders a teacher unable to cope, although he or she remains in the classroom. According to Truch (1980), teacher distress costs at least 3.5 billion annually through absenteeism, turnover, poor performance, and waste. It is estimated that one-quarter of all teachers feel burned out at any given time.

Job burnout is a problem in many professions, but it significantly more prevalent in the helping professions. Teachers, as well as administrators, counselors, doctors, nurses, police officers, and so on have the additional burden of extreme responsibility for the well being of others on top of the multitude of stressors that stem from routine job activities. This heavy responsibility combined with limited resources, long hours, marginal working conditions, and often unreasonable demands from those receiving services, lead to chronic stress, and ultimately, burnout.

*Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools: Structural Causes and Consequences for Children*  
A.G. Dworkin. 1987. State University of New York Press.

### 3. Support Staff Burnout

I have heard counselors complain that they are just going through the motions of their job. They feel that whatever they are doing makes no difference at all and that they have nothing left to give. Some of these practitioners have convinced themselves that this feeling of burnout is one of the inevitable hazards of the profession and that there is not much they can do to revitalize themselves. This assumption is lethal, for it cements the feeling of impotence and leads to a giving up of hope. Equally bad are those practitioners who do not realize that they are burned out.

Burnout manifests itself in many ways. Those who experience this syndrome typically find that they are tired, drained, and without enthusiasm. They talk of feeling pulled by their many projects, most of which seem to have lost meaning. They feel that what they do have to offer is either not wanted or not received; they feel unappreciated, unrecognized, and unimportant, and they go about their jobs in a mechanical and routine way. They tend not to see any concrete results of the fruits of the efforts. Often they feel oppressed by the “system” and by institutional demands, which, they contend, stifle any sense of personal initiative. A real danger is that burnout syndrome can feed off itself, so that practitioners feel more and more isolated. They may fail to reach out to one another and to develop a support system. Because burnout can rob us of the vitality we need personally and professionally, it is important to look at some of its causes, possible remedies, and ways of preventing it.

From *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*  
(1996), by Gerald Corey

“...Burnout is used to describe a syndrome that goes beyond physical fatigue from overwork. Stress and emotional exhaustion are part of it, but the hallmark of burnout is the distancing that goes on in response to the overload...”

“The Truth About Burnout” co-author Christina Maslach (Jossey-Bass, 1997, \$25). Excerpted from <http://friedsocialworker.com/truthaboutburnout.htm> A mismatch in the workplace sparks employee burnout Review of The Truth About Burnout (Christina Maslach), by Carol Smith, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

# What Causes Burnout?

Job burnout is “a consequence of the perceived disparity between the demands of the job and the resources (both material and emotional) that an employee has available to him or her. When demands in the workplace are unusually high, it becomes increasingly impossible to cope with the stress associated with these working conditions.”

Its roots are found in the daily transactions stemming from the debilitating physical and emotional overload that arises from stress on the job.

Job burnout is both an occupational hazard and a phenomenon induced by distress. It is generally characterized by: (1) some degree of physical and emotional exhaustion; (2) socially dysfunctional behavior, particularly a distancing and insulation from individuals with whom one is working; (3) psychological impairment -- especially strong, negative feelings toward the self; and (4) organizational inefficiency through decreased output and poor morale.

In *Job Burnout in Public Education: Symptoms, Causes, and Survival Skills* (1982), Anthony Cedoline offers the following analysis of seven causes of job burnout that have received the most attention in research findings:

## ***Lack of Control Over One's Destiny***

As organizations become large and impersonal, employees are frequently less involved in decision making. Even simple tasks can be delayed due to legal dictates, administrative policy, or lack of funds. Employees' participation in decision making promotes more positive job attitudes and greater motivation for effective performance.

## ***Lack of Occupational Feedback and Communication***

Like other workers, educators want to know the expectations of the organization, the behaviors that will be successful or unsuccessful in satisfying job requirements, any physical and psychological dangers that might exist, and the security of the job. Education employees need feedback to develop job values, aspirations, objectives, and accomplishments. Lack of clear, consistent information can result in distress. If evaluation only happens once or twice a year without regular, periodic feedback, the possibility of stress increases the longer the employee works in a vacuum. Regarding communication, organizational structures that foster open, honest, cathartic expression in a positive and constructive way reap large dividends from employees. When management reacts to open communication on a crisis basis only, it reinforces negative communications.

## ***Work Overload or Underload***

Researchers have found high levels of stress among individuals who have excessive work loads. Long or unpredictable hours, too many responsibilities, work at a too-rapid pace, too many phone calls, dealing directly with difficult people without sufficient relief, dealing with constant crises, and supervising too many people (e.g., large class sizes and overcrowding) or having broad multifaceted job descriptions are characteristics of a work overload. In addition, boring tedious jobs or jobs without variety are equally distressful.

### ***Contact Overload***

Contact overload results from the necessity for frequent encounters with other people in order to carry out job functions. Some occupations (teaching, counseling, law enforcement) require many encounters that are unpleasant and therefore distressful. These workers spend a large proportion of their work time interacting with people in various states of distress. When the caseload is high, control over one's work and consequent job satisfaction is affected. Contact overloads also leave little occasion or energy for communication and support from other employees or for seeking personal and professional growth opportunities.

### ***Role Conflict/Ambiguity***

Although role conflict and ambiguity can occur independently, they both refer to the uncertainty about what one is expected to do at work. Role conflict may be defined as the simultaneous occurrence of two or more opposing pressures such that a response to one makes compliance with the other impossible (e.g., mass education versus individualized instruction). The most frequent role conflicts are (1) those between the individual's values and those of the superior or the organization; (2) the conflict between the demands of the work place and the worker's personal life; and (3) the conflict between worker abilities and organizational expectations. In numerous studies, role conflict has been associated with low job satisfaction, frustration, decreased trust and respect, low confidence in the organization, morale problems and high degrees of stress. Role ambiguity may be defined as a lack of clarity about the job, that is, a discrepancy between the information available to the employee and that which is required for successful job performance. In comparison to role conflict, role ambiguity has the highest correlation to job dissatisfaction. Role ambiguity is especially common amongst school administrators.

### ***Individual Factors***

Personal factors such as financial stability, marital satisfaction, as well as personality factors such as neuroticism, excessive shyness, inflexibility, and poor stress management skills all contribute to how one is affected by stress on the job. The mutual interaction and accumulation of both personal and occupational stressors can certainly contribute to job burnout.

### ***Training Deficits***

Several different areas of job training are necessary to prevent occupational distress. The most obvious area is adequate initial preparation. Training and competencies are necessary to bolster confidence, as well as to allow the worker to get through each day without unnecessary dependence upon others or upon reference materials. On-the-job training is also necessary as technology advances. New professionals are most susceptible to some forms of distress. Secondly, training in communications skills is necessary in order to facilitate the ability of the employee to relate successfully with supervisors, fellow workers, and recipients of services or products. According to one survey, jobs are more frequently lost because of poor communication than because of any other factor. Finally, one needs to be taught how to deal with stress. Everyone needs to learn methods of coping with the variety of stressors faced each day.

### ***Other Factors and Considerations***

There are other secondary factors that can exacerbate stress such as poor working conditions, lack of job security, lifestyle changes, and a rapidly changing society that force individuals to make unexpected adjustments in their way of life and work. Administrators, teachers, and staff all face specific stressors that are unique to their position or role; however, most of these stressors fall within the general framework outlined above.

.. while having too much to do can cause stress, it doesn't necessarily cause burnout ...  
...More often, burnout happens when people feel out of control. If employees are working in a chaotic environment where it's not clear who is in control, they can burn out...  
...Other critical factors that contribute to burnout are a lack of recognition and reward, a lack of community and support in the workplace, or an absence of fairness...  
The biggest contributing factor in burnout, however, is a mismatch in values.  
"When there are value problems or conflicts, you see greater instances of burnout"...

Excerpted from <http://www.friedsocialworker.com>  
A mismatch in the workplace sparks employee burnout  
*Review of The Truth About Burnout* (Christina Maslach),  
by Carol Smith, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer

In his book, ***Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*** (1996), Gerald Corey lists the following as the causes of burnout:

Rather than having a single cause, burnout results from a combination of factors. It is best understood by considering the individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors that contribute to the condition. Recognizing the causes of burnout can itself be a step in dealing with it. A few of them are:

- C doing the same type of work with little variation, especially if this work seems meaningless;
- C giving a great deal personally and not getting back much in the way of appreciation or other positive responses;
- C lacking a sense of accomplishment and meaning in work;
- C being under constant and strong pressure to produce, perform, and meet deadlines, many of which may be unrealistic;
- C working with a difficult population, such as those who are highly resistant, who are involuntary clients, or who show very little progress;
- C conflict and tension among staff; absence of support from colleagues and an abundance of criticism;
- C lack of trust between supervisor and mental-health workers, leading to conditions in which they are working against each other instead of toward commonly valued goals;
- C not having opportunities for personal expression or for taking initiative in trying new approaches, a situation in which experimentation, change, and innovation are not only unrewarded but also actively discouraged;
- C facing unrealistic demands on your time and energy;
- C having a job that is both personally and professionally taxing without much opportunity for supervision, continuing education, or other forms of in-service training;
- C unresolved personal conflicts beyond the job situation, such as marital tensions, chronic health problems, financial problems, and so on.