

JOB BURNOUT

BY PROFESSOR DR PHILIP GEORGE

Mr KH worked in a multi-national company and was happy in his job and role in the company. He scored high on his work appraisal and was cited as a role model to other co-workers. A new manager took over and made some significant changes. The manager wanted things to be leaner and more efficient, focussed mostly on the weaknesses of the workers rather than their strengths. Over time, KH had to work late on weekdays to complete tasks and then come in on weekends to prepare for the following week. He started to have no time to work-out and was sleeping poorly. His health deteriorated resulting in frequent headaches which affected his focus and concentration. Hence, he was always on medical leave. He finally sought mental health assistance by consulting a Psychologist.

Recently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) classified Burnout as a syndrome making it a real medical condition for the first time. Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest and motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place.

Burnout reduces productivity and depletes your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful. Eventually, you may feel like you have nothing more to give. The negative effects of burnout spill over into every area of life, including your home, work, and social life. It also causes long-term changes to your body that make you vulnerable to illnesses. Because of its many consequences, it's important to deal with burnout right away.

It's easy to misunderstand job burnout as daily work stress but, identifying the difference between the two is key. If you're simply tired or frustrated with your job, a nice relaxing weekend or a vacation can make a huge difference. But if you have burnout, the situation is more serious and may require changes at work or even a career change. It needs intervention and lifestyle changes.

Elizabeth Scott, the author of "8 Keys to Stress Management," developed a list of questions that can help identify if you are experiencing job burnout:

- Have you found yourself to be increasingly critical or cynical about your job?
- Do you have feelings of dread or fear about going to work?
- Do you find it difficult to stay productive and focus on your job?
- Are you easily irritable or constantly exhausted?
- Do you spend most of your time at work bored or overwhelmed?
- Do you find yourself impatient and snapping at others?
- Do you feel that you're under an unhealthy amount of pressure?

If you find yourself answering yes to most of these questions, there is a chance you are approaching or experiencing job burnout. The WHO International Classification of Diseases definition of Burnout is:

"A syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by

three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy".

The effects of Burnout can be physical, psychological or behavioural.

PHYSICAL SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

- Feeling tired and drained most of the time
- Lowered immunity, frequent illnesses
- Frequent headaches or muscle pain
- Change in appetite or sleep habits

PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world
- Loss of motivation
- Increasingly cynical and negative outlook
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment

BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

- Withdrawing from responsibilities
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done
- Using food, tobacco, drugs, or alcohol to cope
- Taking out your frustrations on others
- Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early

The causes for job burnout include lack of control. If there is an inability to influence decisions that affect your job like your schedule, assignments or workload it could lead to job burnout.

The other is unclear job expectations. If you're unclear about the degree of authority you have or what your supervisor or others expect from you, you're not likely to feel comfortable at work. The environment and dynamics can also contribute, like working with an office bully, or you feel undermined by colleagues or your boss micro-manage your work. Also, when a job is monotonous or chaotic, you need constant energy to remain focused which can lead to fatigue and job burnout. When there is lack of social support, for example if you feel isolated at work or in your personal life, you might feel more stressed. Finally, creating a work-life balance is essential. If your work takes up so much of your time and effort that you don't have the energy to spend time on exercise, hobbies or with your family and friends, you might burn out quickly.

HOW CAN WE MANAGE JOB BURNOUT

KH decided to quit his job but only after securing another one. His 5 years of previous experience did get him something with an equal position and salary. He built a new work-life balance and his superior believed in this too. His headache dissipated and sleep improved, and he was once again working to his peak performance.

So how do we manage job burnout? First, evaluate your options. Discuss specific concerns with your supervisor. Maybe you can work together to change expectations or reach compromises or solutions. Try to set goals for what must get done and what can wait. You need to also seek support. Whether you reach out to co-workers, friends or loved ones, support and collaboration will help you cope. If you have access to an employee assistance programme, take advantage of relevant services.

Try a relaxing activity. Explore programmes that can help with stress such as mindfulness, yoga, meditation or tai chi. Regular physical activity through exercise can help you to better deal with stress. It can also take your mind off work. Ensure you get adequate sleep. Sleep restores well-being and helps protect your health. Overall, keep an open mind as you consider the options.

Try not to let a demanding or unrewarding job undermine your health and eventually decrease your quality of life.



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