

A LITERATURE REVIEW ABOUT BURNOUT SYNDROME AND HOW IT CAN BE PREVENTED

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Abstract: Burnout syndrome refers to the appearance of a physical and mental exhaustion state that occurs as a result of a high stress level, associated with excessive workload. Burnout is characterized by three components- emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. Its diagnosis is established by using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). According to MBI, burnout is defined by the presence of a high level of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization while personal accomplishment is low. The prevention and treatment of burnout syndrome includes lifestyle changing measures, mindfulness, mental wellness programmes and cognitive behavioural therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Burnout syndrome refers to the appearance of a state of exhaustion, both physical and mental that occurs in people whose profession involves a special responsibility.(1)

Often burnout occurs as a result of a chronic and high level of stress associated with excessive workload, leading to a state of emotional exhaustion, lack of social accomplishment and depersonalization.(1,2) Burnout may manifest as decreased cognitive performances and motivation, indifference in the activity that the individual carries out, aggression or even depression and it was associated with increasing blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.(3)

This paper is a review article focused on discussions about general aspects of burnout syndrome. The article is not focused on only one category of people susceptible for develop this syndrome. On the contrary, it is an overview on all people who could develop burnout. The information was collected from the medical literature previously published by others.

The aim of this paper is to identify the characteristics of burnout syndrome, risk factors which are associated with this syndrome and how can prevent its occurrence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Burnout can be assessed by using several measuring instruments. The most used of these is Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which consists in a questionnaire structured into 22 questions, which are focused on the three components of burnout - emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment.(3,4)

According to MBI burnout is defined by the presence of a high level of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization while personal accomplishment is low.(3,4)

The evaluation of emotional exhaustion consists in questions which determine the exhaustion' type like fatigue, sleeping troubles or physical problems. The evaluation of depersonalization is based on questions that are focused on detachment, cynicism, negatives attitudes and withdrawal. The

personal accomplishment is characterized by motivation' loss and failure to achieve goals that the individual has proposed.(5) All items- emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment- are scored on a seven-level frequency scale, 0 means never and 6 every day. For each section, a score is generated that aims to identify people who have low, medium or high levels of burnout.(5)

There are other tools for assessing burnout, depending on the conceptualizations of burnout. Some of them are focused on exhaustion alone such as the Shirom Melamed Burnout Questionnaire (SMBQ) or Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), or on two dimensions- exhaustion and personal accomplishment like Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI).(6,7)

According to a study by *Schaufeli WB*, which aimed to find a connection between the level of burnout and economics, governance and cultural values in European countries, it was observed that the level of burnout is high in those countries less economic developed, where people work many hours per week and the productivity is low. The same study observed that the level of burnout is higher in those countries with poor democracy, little integrity, dishonest ruled and gender inequality. In addition, in those countries where work plays a central role in people's lives, higher burnout level was observed.(8)

Other studies researched the frequency of burnout in different categories of people, depending on their occupation. Thus, people who have risk to develop burnout are those who are exposed to a high emotional level and who need to interact with as many people as possible such as healthcare workers, including medical residents or medical students, teachers, public workers or even students.(5,9,10)

A study by *Montero et al* showed that there are 3 types of burnout syndrome.(11)

Overload burnout which includes that category of people who work too hard, in order to satisfy the growing work demands of the employer, neglecting themselves both in terms of health and personal life.

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND MANAGEMENT

Under-challenge burnout includes those people who lack the motivation to perform certain requirements at work. This type is characterized by indifference and monotony in carrying out activities that they realize superficially.

Neglect burnout includes those people who do not have enough skills to keep up with the demands of the workplace. Often, these individuals are going to give up when they experience certain difficulties, because they consider that their effort is not recognized.

Risk factors leading to burnout syndrome can be divided into two categories, as shown in table no. 1.(12)

Table no. 1. Risk factors associated with burnout

Internal factors	External factors
Too much ambition	Many work hours
Perfectionism	High demands at work
Always desire to impress	Lack of resources
Neglect own needs	Lack of positive feedback
Feeling unique	Communication problems
Overestimation in order to deal with challenges	Few development opportunities

It is good to know that burnout is a process that occurs gradually. At first signs being more discreet, and then worsening over time.(12)

Burnout symptoms are divided depending on the syndrome' stage. Thus, there are five stages of burnout.(12)

Stage 1 (honeymoon phase) is characterized by job satisfaction, accepting responsibility and compulsion to prove oneself and it is followed by stage 2 (onset of stress) which includes inability to focus, irritability, lack of social interaction, sleeping disorders, changings in appetite and neglecting the personal needs.

In stage 3 (chronic stress) symptoms like persistent tiredness, social withdrawal, aggressive behaviour, feeling pressured, apathy and alcohol or drug consumption are present.

Stage 4 (burnout) includes pessimistic outlook, self-doubt, social isolation, headaches or gastrointestinal disorders.

Stage 5 defines habitual burnout characterized by chronic sadness, chronic mental fatigue, chronic physical fatigue and depression.

It is important that these signs be recognized from early stages, in order to prevent a breakdown. If it is not intervened at time, burnout can have several consequences on individuals' life.(12)

Regarding healthcare workers, burnout has effects on both medical staff and patients. Thus, the exhaustion of the medical staff led to a lower level of care and patient satisfaction. The consequences of burnout on people working in the public domain include poor quality of work and damage to people's life. Often, individuals are unhappy, anxious or even depressed, which leads them to make use of substances, such as alcohol or drugs. Among teachers and students, it was found that high levels of stress and exhaustion led to lower levels of learning in the classroom, truancy and deterioration of student behaviour.(3,12)

Because burnout is a process that occurs due to the interaction between external factors, related to the environment in which the individual operates, and internal factors that affect the attitude and personality of the individual, the prevention and treatment of burnout is multifactorial. Thus, measures are needed to target both the work environment and the implementation of individual adaptation strategies. Of course, these measures are taken depending on the severity of the symptoms of burnout.(12)

If the symptoms of burnout syndrome are recognized from an early stage, measures are taken to find a balance between professional and personal life. Thus, lifestyle changing

measures are recommended - healthy diet, sport, improving sleep quality, spending more time with family.(12,13)

Other ways to avoid burnout are mindfulness and mental wellness programmes.(12,13)

Mindfulness represents a way to avoid burnout. Mindfulness refers to a mental state obtained by drawing someone's attention to the present moment, by being aware on where he is and what he is doing, not what is happening around him. So, the person needs to be focused on himself and tries to disconnect from things that are happening around him.(13)

This practice allows people to identify the triggers of emotional stress and teach them coping strategies when stress reactions occur. Everyone has the ability of mindfulness, but they must learn how to access it. Individuals can practice mindfulness in an informal manner like reading books or making online researches, or in a formal one such as joining in mindfulness structured programmes.(3,13)

One of these formal programmes is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a meditation technique developed for stress management and other health disorders including depression, anxiety, hypertension, diabetes or immune disorders. MBSR combines meditation techniques with yoga practice.(14)

Medical centres around the world offers MBSR as an alternative treatment for patients suffering from mental health disorders. This programme runs for a period of 8 weeks and during a course of 2.5 hours/week, patients are trained formal mindfulness techniques, consisting in a combination of meditation and yoga, in order to learn how stress can be managed.(3,14)

Many studies have evaluated the efficiency of MBSR programme in reducing burnout among medical workers, social workers and teachers. Thus, participants who received mindfulness practices were found to have notably decreased levels of emotional exhaustion and increased levels of personal achievement.(3,14)

Mental wellness programmes aim to improve well-being, quality of life and happiness. These programmes include deep breathing practices and activities which are focused on positive things. The objectives of these practices are teaching people a different way to accept negative thoughts by incorporating gratitude, compassion and acceptance.(15)

Burnout prevention measures which focused on the work environment refer to promoting autonomy, adequate work resources, facilitating teamwork, offering a flexible work schedule, respecting breaks and granting days off.(13,15)

If the symptoms of burnout are severe, psychotherapy is needed.(13,15)

A form of psychological treatment is cognitive behavioural therapy which has proven its effectiveness not only in psychiatric disorders such as personality disorders, substance abuse, anxiety disorder depression, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder but also in non-psychiatric disorders such as insomnia, migraines, chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia.(16)

Cognitive behavioural therapy aims to teach people to understand their ways of thinking and behaviour and offer them some tools in order to help them to change their cognitive and behavioural patterns.(17)

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, burnout syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment represents an important public health problem.

Its symptoms must be recognized from the early stages in order to intervene as early as possible.

Preventive measures are intended to help individuals to recognize the triggers of burnout and teach them how to

control its.

It is important that these measures be implemented both from the employee but especially from the employer who should be concerned about the health of his workers, if he wants to be successful in what he does.

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