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**BURNOUT:
Is It Time For
Kittens?**

by Kathy Graham



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Burnout—we know it when we feel it, but do we really know if it’s burnout, depression, an underlying health condition, or is it that we’re just plain tired?

It’s been 40 years since Freudenberger¹ coined that concept—burnout—and yet there’s still no agreement as to how to distinguish burnout from other disorders and no agreed upon definition, diagnosis, or rates of prevalence². In fact, a literature review concluded that there has been 40 years of discussion and yet this “concept remains vague and blurry”³. Maybe it’s time to give up on defining burnout and move forward to figuring out how we can use what we know to avoid, minimize, and treat burnout.

Here are the areas experts agree upon regarding burnout:

1. It’s a “person-in-environment system⁴”—i.e., you take the person away from the environment OR you change the environment OR the system and what the person experiences as burnout changes, sometimes their burnout even disappears. Burnout is a person’s reaction to chronic stress in an environment that evokes three changes in the affected individual: exhaustion (mental, physical, and/or emotional lack of energy); alienation from activities related to the stress; and reduced performance⁵.
2. Burnout is not solely work related⁶ nor is it culturally exclusive—my research⁶ on burnout originated in Sweden, Germany, France, Finland, The Netherlands, Australia, Spain, Belgium, Greece, U.K. and the U.S. In fact, any activity that elicits chronic stress may cause burnout in individuals wherever they reside, including academic burnout⁷, parental burnout⁸, and family caregiver burnout⁹.
3. Burnout risk factors vary per person. In psychology, there’s a Five Factor Model of Personality (FFM) that’s been proven to be on target when describing an individual’s personality traits—i.e., their usual/underlying lifelong patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. Highly-sensitive and conscientious individuals are most at risk for burnout in high stress environments, whereas extraverts, agreeables, and open personas usually can shrug burnout off, even in the most pressure cooker situations¹⁰.

These three points of consensus actually carry the possibilities of how to avoid, minimize, treat burnout, which are:

1. Corrective actions need to be taken by BOTH the person and the environment to change the stressful conditions. These actions need to happen before states of exhaustion occur to be most effective¹¹.
2. Intervention should focus on tackling stress because burnout is about stress reaction. Stress, however, can be an important positive factor in the adaptive adjustment of a person to its environment¹²—i.e, stress, up to a certain point, is what makes us humans grow mentally and emotionally.

The three stress-induced evolutions (i.e., growth) for people result from our adaptation to stress (if you can't beat it, join it), our avoidance of stress (if it's going to kill you, run), and our development of stress-buffering techniques.

The work adjustment theory shows a way that burnout adaptation could occur. It says that “person-in-the-[workplace] environment is actually two-way: people adapt (i.e., “reactive adjustment”) to the workplace that their initial personality traits fit AND an active adjustment by the workplace to the person's personal traits also occurs and continues as workflow/skills change¹³ and extrinsic motivation¹⁴ (more money/rewards) is added. In other words, over time:

- New employees start talking, acting, etc. like the other employees/boss/department/company.
- Company (bosses, more senior co-workers, etc.) start adjusting to new person's traits, changing/adding functions to their jobs, getting use to their idiosyncrasies, etc.

A positive avoidance technique for an employee might be to leave a job/field if that person can find a better alignment and more intrinsically motivating work¹⁵ elsewhere. A positive avoidance technique for an employer wanting to avoid negative turnover can be choosing employees with specific personality trait profiles that are resilient to stress for the company's high stress areas¹⁶.

As for stress-buffering techniques, humor is one of the most effective for both individuals and employers. It worked for Industrial-Organizational psychologist Munsterberg in the early 1900s at knitting mills where women worked 12-hour days. When he introduced kittens playing with yarn on the mill floor, laughter increased, stress decreased, and productivity soared¹⁷. Shared laughter significantly decreases cortisol and epinephrine, leaving less of these stress hormones to fuel burnout. Employing *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life*¹⁸ produces laughter, profits, and [kittens](#) – please click on “kittens” to experience this technique.

References

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- ¹ *Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement*, Freudenberger, 1981.
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 - ³ Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017.
 - ⁴ Wapner & Demick, 1998, 2005.
 - ⁵ Otto et al., 2020.
 - ⁶ Grossi et al., 2015.
 - ⁷ Vizoso et al., 2018
 - ⁸ Mikolajczak et al., 2021; Roskam et al., 2018.
 - ⁹ Brodaty & Donkin, 2009.
 - ¹⁰ Swider & Zimmerman, 2010.
 - ¹¹ Otto et al., 2020; Ahola et al., 2017
 - ¹² Badyaev, 2005.
 - ¹³ Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Wille & De Fruyt, 2013.
 - ¹⁴ Gagne & Deci, 2005.
 - ¹⁵ Gagne & Deci, 2005.
 - ¹⁶ Fleischhauer et al., 2019
 - ¹⁷ Conte & Landy, 2019.
 - ¹⁸ Aaker, 2020.