

Banishing burnout takes work

Burnout — a catchphrase popularly misapplied to mean worn out from any kind of effort — was originally coined for job stress among those in the caring professions. The term has now become part of our '80s vocabulary, loosely used for the results of occupational stress in anyone who devotes too much time and energy to working activities, too little to outside interests. Experts emphasize that burnout is a complex interaction between the job and a personality that overinvests in the work situation.

A recent article in Health News, published by the University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine, explains the confused terminology around stress, with many useful tips on recognizing workplace stress, how it may lead to burnout, who's most prone to it and how best to cope with it.

Although even its critics admit that burnout exists, controversy surrounds its precise definition. Some clinicians argue that burnout is simply another form of depression, unworthy of a separate label. One University of Toronto expert calls burnout a poor interaction between the person and the work environment that results when someone with unrealistic expectations fails to receive anticipated workplace rewards.

Essentially, burnout is one possible endpoint of excessive worksite stress. Other possible results of prolonged stress include: depression, alcohol abuse, stomach ulcers, heart problems, hypertension and reduced

immunological defences. The mind-body connection, or "psychobiological pathways," by which stress is translated (somatized) into physical effects (via chemical messengers) is on the verge of being explained, and will be explored at a major conference this summer at the University of Toronto.

By analogy with engineering terms, stress is the force on an object (person) that produces a response. As Health News explains,

experts generally refer to stress as the demand placed upon physical and mental resources due to the impact of various stressors.

Workplace stressors include time pressure; job overload; job underload; role ambiguity (uncertainty about lines of responsibility); role conflict (trying simultaneously to please those above and under oneself); fear of making mistakes; thwarted career

plans; lack of promotion; shiftwork; poor relationships; an aggravating work environment (noise, pollution, cigarette smoke, insufficient safety).

Health News describes the individual factors that influence people's response to stress, pointing out the fallacy of believing that high-level positions are the most stressful.

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