

Burnout Syndrome: A Study among Lecturers

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Burnout syndrome has been described as a lack of ability to cope with emotional stress at work and as a psychological syndrome. We investigated whether the lecturers experience burnout. The relationship between gender and the syndrome of emotional burnout was also explored. *Method:* Burnout was measured with an 84-item questionnaire developed by V. Boyko. An interpretation of the results of the experiment was presented using mathematical statistics. *Findings:* The results suggested that the second stage of burnout (resistance) was significantly higher than others – 38,51 %; tension had 29,85 % of the participants and exhaustion – 31,51 %. Of the participants, 10,16 % experienced psycho-traumatic events; 7,25 % had dissatisfaction with themselves; 4,53 % had the feeling of being caged; 7,94 % felt anxiety and depression; 8,59 % experienced inadequate emotional response; 7,69 % had emotional-ethical disorientation; 12,73 % experienced economy of emotions; 9,5 % felt reduction of professional responsibilities; 5,19 % had emotional deficit; 6,43 % experienced emotional detachment; 6,15 % felt depersonalization; 13,74 % had psychosomatic and psycho-vegetative disorders. The most developed stage of emotional burnout syndrome of men was tension (47,45 % of the participants). Women are more likely to respond by the second stage of the syndrome – ‘resistance’ (42,73 %). *Implications for research and practice:* Analysis of revealed phases and symptoms of burnout syndrome (psychosomatic and psycho-vegetative disorders, economy of emotions, experiencing psycho-traumatic events), and psycho-physiological features of professional work of lecturers (workload, sleep deprivation, work in stressful conditions) allowed us to determine psychological strategies to decrease the risk of development of lecturers’ burnout syndrome.

Keywords: *Burnout, Higher education, Lecturer, Students, Teaching, Workload.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The urgency of the study of emotional burnout syndrome in psychology is conditioned by the report that professional burnout recognized as a disease in Belgium. Burnout has a negative influence on motivation, productivity, and well-being of people. According to the reports of TV channel VRT and Le Soir, more than ten thousand people annually seek medical help because of fatigue at work. At the end of November 2016, Belgian Health Minister Maggie De Block promised that the authorities will soon recognize burnout as a disease. In 2014, some employers of Belgium made a ‘burnout’ at work in the list of insurance cases because of redundancy. People do not protest although the load on the remaining staff increases. In fact, they are afraid of redundancy. So, professional burnout has become rampant nowadays. In 2015, more than 8.2 thousand Belgians took time off or left because of chronic fatigue from the labor activity. It

is amazing that almost half a thousand of them were freelancers. It is reported that eventually every tenth inhabitant of Belgium will lose motivation, hate his or her lifestyle and have effects of work fatigue. The journalists think that such measures will increase the number of funds to visit the doctors by seventy percent. So, insurance companies will be forced to cover these costs.

Burnout is quite common in developed countries. It has been shown to associate with physical illnesses or depressive disorders [1]. Several symptoms of burnout were explored by scientists. For example, investigators defined depression as a mental disorder that affected person with feeling tired and sleep disorder [2]. Other scientists wrote about the Beck depression inventory that was designed to measure the severity of depression [3]. Another symptom of burnout which is anxiety was determined as a feeling of fear and concern that was not

associated with a specific situation [4]. Also anxiety was investigated as special test taking anxiety [5].

Nevertheless, burnout has most often been studied in caregiving professionals, nowadays teaching is one of the most stressful occupations [6]. Sources of stress and lack of job satisfaction include: low salary and status of the profession [7]; student misbehavior [8]; relationships with leaders [9]. Lecturers also have emotional interactions during their working day and have a great number of emotional demands compared to other specialists [10]. The stress and lack of job satisfaction can lead to emotional or physical exhaustion, negative behavior about teaching, reducing the feeling of one's own accomplishment [11].

Teaching is an emotional profession, nowadays there is little research on the emotional aspects of teachers' lives [12]. To our knowledge, teachers who experience more positive emotions report greater job satisfaction [13] and less burnout. Positive emotions help teachers to struggle with negative emotions and build good personal relationships with others [14]. Consistent with previous research, teachers who report greater support from leaders also have greater job satisfaction [15] and less burnout [16]. Some researchers have focused on burnout syndrome and job satisfaction of secondary school teachers [17].

We will investigate the fourth level of education. Higher education in Ukraine is managed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine which coordinates the activities of higher educational establishments. It controls the higher schools which are under other ministries. According to the Education Law, higher education includes the following categories of establishment: level I – vocational schools and other higher educational establishments of a corresponding level; level II – colleges and other higher educational establishments of a corresponding level which teach Bachelor's and Junior Specialist's courses; level III – institutes, conservatories, academies and universities that teach Bachelor's and Specialist's, as well as Junior Specialist's courses; and level IV – institutes, conservatories, academies and universities which teach Bachelor's, Master's and Specialist's courses. Nowadays the educational system comprises two stages: undergraduate and graduate, with several degree levels.

Teaching is quite a demanding activity. Every year a lot of lecturers feel themselves unable to continue their professional activity. They feel tired and exhausted. Investigations in this field show that a great number of teachers experience exhaustion symptoms during their careers. Although, teachers are regarded as a group for excessive labor, several studies investigating burnout have been conducted in the health care profession and nurses [18], few studies have measured burnout of teachers [19]. University lecturers experience a great deal of stress throughout their careers. So education is a 'very

or extremely stressful' profession [7]. Stress and burnout of lecturers have reached all levels, threatening the quality of education.

Burnout was first defined in 1974 by psychiatrist H. Freudenberger [20] as a syndrome that is commonly observed in health care workers [21]. Scientist described a negative occupational phenomenon 'burnout' that is a state of physical exhaustion [22]. It occurs in people-oriented and service work. Characteristic features of this syndrome are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. The first symptom is an emotional exhaustion which refers to feelings of being depleted of the emotional resources. The second symptom is depersonalization which is a cynical attitude toward people at work. Lack of personal accomplishment, that is the third symptom, is the self-perception of a decline in personal self-efficacy and competence. People who experience all three symptoms have the greatest degree of burnout, although emotional exhaustion is a powerful symptom of burnout. So, burnout is a psychological syndrome that takes place in reply to chronic job stressors [21].

Burnout syndrome has been described as a lack of ability to cope with emotional stress at work and as an extreme use of energy which leads to a feeling of exhaustion [20]. C. Cherniss defined five clinical symptoms of burnout syndrome. They include: physiological illnesses (insomnia, tiredness, headaches, exhaustion); emotional symptoms (insufficient amount of emotions, emotional instability, indifference, sensibility, pessimism, impatience and inflexibility in relationships with colleges, friends and relatives); behavioral symptoms (eating problems, indifference to food, during the professional activity such people have a desire to relax); intellectual displays of a teacher (decline of interest in new concepts, ideas and alternative approaches to solving problems concerning the professional activity); social symptoms (low social activity, decrease of interest in leisure and hobbies, social contacts are limited, miserable relationships with colleagues at work and in family, etc.) [23].

In 1976 a famous psychologist C. Maslach wrote about professionals who lose their emotional feelings after months of listening to clients' problems. She said that burnout occurred when professionals could not cope with such emotional stress [21]. Since the development of the Maslach Burnout Inventory [24], burnout syndrome has been widely studied. Although no final consensus for the definition of burnout and no binding diagnostic criteria for its evaluation [25] have been declared. Burnout syndrome is considered as a consequence of constant work-connected stress [21].

Therefore, burnout syndrome has been described as a lack of ability to cope with emotional stress at work and as a psychological syndrome. Relatively little is known, however, about lecturers' burnout. However, such

lecturers experience unpleasant emotions that lead to emotional exhaustion and they are not effective at their working place.

Specifically, we investigated whether the lecturers experience burnout. The relationship between gender and the syndrome of emotional burnout was also explored. The aim of this article was to explore the presence of phases and symptoms of burnout syndrome among university lecturers. Our survey included the following tasks: to estimate the phases of burnout of lecturers; to estimate the symptoms of burnout of lecturers; to explore the relationship between gender and the emotional burnout syndrome.

2. METHODS

2.1. Participants and procedure

An observational study was conducted with 22 lecturers at National Aviation University, Kiev, Ukraine. National Aviation University is one of the most powerful higher educational facilities and has the highest IV accreditation level. In 2018 National Aviation University celebrated its 85-th anniversary of successful activity. Educational process is ensured by a team of highly qualified lecturers. The University provides professional work to promote educational services and the development of students as specialists in selected fields. Our sample consisted of 14 females and 8 males. The age of the lecturers varied from young lecturers (the youngest was 25 years old) to retired lecturers (the oldest was 61 years). The influence of working conditions on physical health, emotional well-being and development of burnout syndrome was investigated. The main instrument we used was the questionnaire designed according to the methods developed by V. Boyko [26], which allows identification of burnout syndrome in its three phases with four symptoms in each of the phases. Lecturers were informed about the investigation in written information several weeks prior to onset of the study.

2.2. Measures

V. Boyko is one of the most prominent researchers of burnout syndrome. Boyko's inventory contains items related to various forms of burnout. He described in detail the clinical picture of burnout syndrome as a dynamic process. V. Boyko introduced some additional features into the burnout syndrome definition. He distinguished three phases in the syndrome (tension, resistance and exhaustion) each expressed with four symptoms (Phase Tension: experiencing psychotraumatic events, dissatisfaction with oneself, feeling of being caged, anxiety and depression; Phase Resistance: inadequate emotional response, emotional-ethical disorientation, economy of emotions, reduction of professional responsibilities; Phase Exhaustion: emotional deficit, emotional avoidance, depersonalization, psychosomatic

and psycho-vegetative disorders) with 7 items for each of them.

V. Boyko developed an 84-item questionnaire to estimate the phases and appreciate the degree of hardness of burnout symptoms [26]. Each item in its positive or negative variant implements a different number of points (1, 2, 3, 5 or 10 points), which allows the formation of a total score (range 0 to 30 points) for each of the symptoms. The higher is the total score, the more expressed is the symptom of burnout syndrome. After the total score by symptoms is achieved, the questionnaire starts forming a total score by phases. The rating by phases can be from 0 to 120 points. The quantitative indicators can represent what is the level of development of the phase. Special attention is devoted to symptoms scoring more than 20 points. They are the leading symptoms and the phase that contains them is determined as dominant. It is significant to note to what phase of the appearance of burnout syndrome are related to the leading symptoms and in which phase they are the most numerous.

Such interpretation of the scales is an essential advantage of V. Boyko's inventory. It makes it easier for psychologists to compare the obtained results with other psycho-diagnostic techniques. Such an instrument can give you enough information to be used in applying an individual or group approach in psycho-prophylaxis and psychological correction. Depending on the aim of the research the questionnaires can be completed either with identifiable details or anonymously. The respondents can be tested individually or in a group. The proposed estimation method should be analyzed by a professional psychologist. An appreciable advantage of this instrument is the ability to use it in the prophylaxis and prevention of the burnout syndrome. So, V. Boyko's method is appropriate for assessment of the burnout syndrome.

3. RESULTS

The workload is always associated with burnout. The work of lecturers is psychically demanding, allows limited rest and is associated with sleep deprivation. The below results suggested that the second stage of burnout was significantly higher than others. Consequently, participants had such stages of burnout: 29,85 % – tension, 38,51 % – resistance and 31,51 % – exhaustion (Figure 1). Thus, those who reported higher stages of burnout also reported the higher quantity of negative emotions connected with their job.

The symptomatology of burnout proves to be extremely complex. However, the syndrome has nowadays been described in around 60 professions and groups of people. After all, burnout is associated with considerable suffering, health problems and reduced personal accomplishments at work.

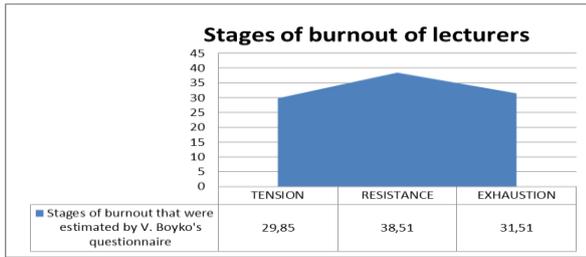


Figure 1 Formation of burnout phases depending on the score obtained

Of the participants, 10,16 % experienced psychotraumatic events; 7,25 % had dissatisfaction with themselves; 4,53 % had the feeling of being caged; 7,94 % felt anxiety and depression; 8,59 % experienced inadequate emotional response; 7,69 % had emotional-ethical disorientation; 12,73 % experienced economy of emotions; 9,5 % felt reduction of professional responsibilities; 5,19 % had emotional deficit; 6,43 % experienced emotional avoidance; 6,15 % felt depersonalization; 13,74 % had psychosomatic and psycho-vegetative disorders (see also Figure 2). All in all, we found a high prevalence of resistance among 38,51 % of staff. The active symptoms of burnout were psychosomatic and psycho-vegetative disorders, economy of emotions, experiencing psycho-traumatic events and there was a complication. We found that the youngest and the most educated lecturers had lower levels of burnout syndrome. The results suggest that there is a need to develop effective strategies to reduce the development of burnout symptoms and stages. It is the individual, social and economic consequences of this that show the hurried importance of the diagnosis of burnout syndrome because of a rise of lecturer’s working activity in days off. Figure 2 shows the level of formation of burnout symptoms depending on the score obtained.

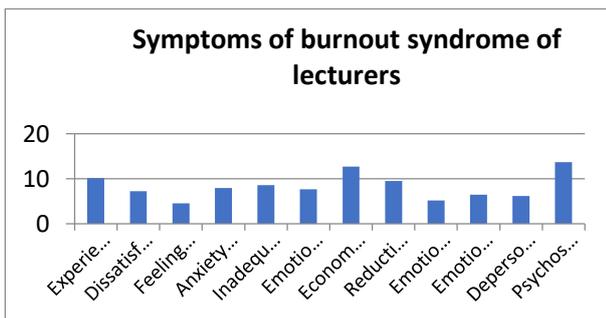


Figure 2 Symptoms of burnout syndrome of lecturers

The relationship between gender and the syndrome of emotional burnout is not monosemantic. It is notable that men burn more than women, others – vice versa. Consequently, there is influence of gender on the phases of emotional burnout. We further decided to reveal the interconnection of gender and stages of burnout. Interconnection of gender and phases of the emotional burnout syndrome are presented in the Figures 3 and 4.

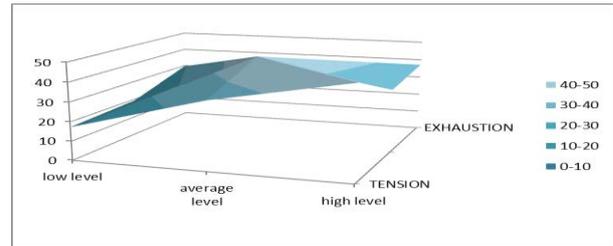


Figure 3 Formation of men burnout phases

Burnout is connected with a lower effectiveness at work, a decreased job satisfaction and a reduced commitment to the job (Maslach C., 2001). It is associated with tendency to leave one’s job. The display of burnout depends on gender aspects and individual well-being. Therefore, the most developed stage of emotional burnout syndrome of men was tension. It was diagnosed in 47,45 % of the participants (Figure 4).

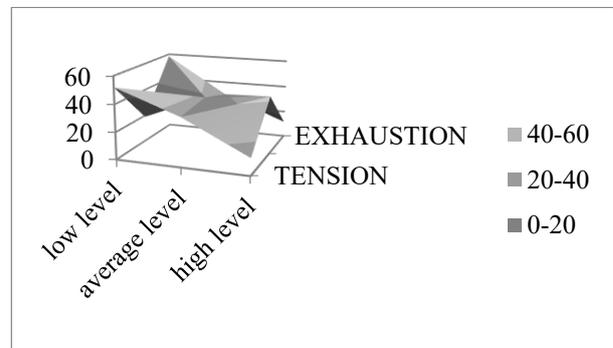


Figure 4 Formation of women burnout phases

Among those with more severe level of burnout, resistance (42,73 %) was more common than other stages.

Thus, we can conclude that men are more likely to respond through the first phase of the emotional burnout syndrome – ‘tension’, while women are more likely to respond by the second stage of the syndrome – ‘resistance’ (see Figures 3 and 4). In our study, both perceived conflicts and poor relationships with other staff members were strong risk factors for severe stages of women burnout. Preventing conflicts and improving communication at work may therefore decrease the risk of burnout syndrome. Intensive communication between colleagues at work may help lecturers feel that the work they do is valued and escape from feelings of guilt.

Some studies point out that negative effects of burnout can appear not only in those directly touched, but also in people around them. For example, one study showed that doctors with high stages of burnout report more treatment errors than do doctors without this syndrome. As well, the risk of the appearance of burnout syndrome increases when there are any treatment errors (West C.P. et al., 2006). In comparison with other professions, teachers show high levels of burnout. In Ukraine as well as in many other countries, there are beginner lecturers who leave the profession after a few

years because of low salaries. Also, poor work organization is connected with more stress and creates burnout. Increasing of the salaries and preventing teachers from burning out, seems to be one promising approach in resolving the issue of overstrain in teaching.

4. DISCUSSION

Nowadays burnout is a problem more common than generally believed. It has a great influence on both society and lecturers. Lecturers showed high burnout rates, especially older specialists. They had such symptoms of burnout: psychosomatic and psycho-vegetative disorders, economy of emotions and experiencing psychotraumatic events. Although, it is important to mark that the majority of lecturers are not stressed, overloaded or burned-out. Nevertheless, the great majority of lecturers are pleased, rapt and find their work satisfying. However, the negative aspects of teaching have dominated. So, lecturers need to regulate emotions that help them to be more effective in achieving academic goals, building high-grade relationships with leaders, and maintaining good discipline practices (Sutton R., 2004).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of phases and symptoms of burnout syndrome and psycho-physiological features of professional work of lecturers allowed us to determine psychological strategies to decrease the risk of burnout syndrome. They are: improving communication at work; preventing conflicts; specifying objectives precisely; preparing evidence for questions of students; preparing counter arguments to the likely objections of students; deciding in advance what compromise to accept; becoming more task-orientated. Developing good communicative process 'student – lecturer' can help lecturer succeed in career. Interpersonal communication is certainly able to be increased. Intensive communicative process 'student – lecturer' at work may help lecturers feel that the work they do is valued and escape from feelings of guilt.

Obviously, approximately half of the participants (men) had the first stage of the burnout syndrome. The prevalence of stages of burnout was higher among women than among men. Moreover, participants (women) who had a current major burnout reported work-related problems. Although, there were significant gender differences at the general stage of burnout. This may reflect the importance of work in men's and women's lives.

Finally, lecturers should consistently manage their own emotional displays as well as the emotions of their students. To cope with stress at work lecturers need to have high ability of regulation of emotions which is associated with positive effect, principal support and job satisfaction. Lecturers with higher ability of regulation of

emotions are better equipped to deal with the intense emotion-laden demands of their work (e.g., student misbehavior: interruptions, rule violations and also relationships with leaders) that may increase tension, resistance, exhaustion and decrease job satisfaction. Although, most lecturers are aware of the repercussions of poor emotion regulation, they do not want to destroy forever a lecturer's relationship with any student. The more difficult students burden lecturers, the more probability of appearance of burnout is and vice versa. Similarly, many studies on teachers show that negative emotions, e.g., due to student misbehavior, are the important predictors of work overload. In conclusion, teaching is traditionally viewed as a profession with high requirements. The aim is to reduce stressors. Individual strategies have been considered to prevent burnout. They include relaxation, time management, training in interpersonal and social skills, teambuilding and meditation. Although, today's lecturers have many different motives for working in the classroom, teaching can be said to be a mission for many entering the profession.

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