

*Understand it to prevent it: revisiting the six risk factors of  
Burnout in the workplace*

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The best way to prevent burnout is to understand its mechanisms in context. After coaching so many people who no longer recognize their skills and lost self-confidence in this storm, that affected their ability to concentrate, their memory and emotional regulation, I consider this experience a shock, a life transition that will never be forgotten, fortunately. Yes, you read it correctly: fortunately! Even though, in the first months or even years, the tendency is to wish that everything was just a nightmare, by experiencing the limits of our own body and the grief involved in the process, the lessons learned become great allies over time. The outcomes of this experience are usually more self-knowledge and clearer criteria about what can be accepted in the work environment. The context plays a key role in this process. Burnout is not caused exclusively by individual factors, but at the crossroad of individual, social and professional dimensions. Let me pause at this point: if you are going to remember only one message from this article, let it be this: the symptoms of burnout begin for physiological reasons due to the mechanism of chronic stress! It is not weakness, not choice, and much less laziness to work. It is necessary to stop the taboo around this subject and inform yourself about your own body and the mechanisms of stress, agreed? Now we can continue... There are many definitions of Burnout, but in 2021, a scientific group of 50 experts from 29 countries reached a consensus that defines it as a state of physical and emotional exhaustion linked to prolonged exposure to professional problems.<sup>1</sup> In our liberal society, work takes a lot of space

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<sup>1</sup>CANU, I. G. et al. Harmonized definition of occupational burnout: A systematic review, semantic analysis, and Delphi consensus in 29 countries. *Scandinavian journal of work, environment & health*, v. 47, n. 2, p. 95-107, 2021.

in our routines and is valued as a component of one's identity. Do you know a lot of people who can claim not to have any problems at work? I don't.

Besides, today we know that people who are extremely engaged and perfectionists represent the main candidates for experiencing a burnout at some point of their careers. But it does not mean that engagement leads to burnout! The six risk factors summarised by Christina Maslach, the main expert in this field,<sup>2</sup> can be a precious compass for each one of us to rethink our relationship with our jobs and react in time. The factors are workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values,<sup>3</sup> as explained below. It is possible to prevent burnout if there is a healthy dynamic between the person and the work environment to remediate the triggers soon enough.

The notion of *workload* is subjective. This means that a task's level of complexity depends entirely on one's personal evaluation, that is, whether the demand seems to require more effort than the resources available to him/her or not. When a colleague is out of office for burnout symptoms, it is, unfortunately, very common for peers to make comments such as "but I have twice this person's work and I'm here". Besides being incoherent according to this perspective, these comments are difficult to deal with, after all the person who has reached burnout usually feels lost, ashamed and confused about his/her own capabilities, with a tendency to compare him/herself to others.

In addition, we all have a cognitive tendency of functioning that will influence our pace of work and our perception of the criteria for a "well done" job. Fayet and Commeignes (2008)<sup>4</sup> propose two types of cognitive tendencies: analytical or objective. The analytical tendency is characterized by the need to deepen the understanding or explanation of a concept or task in the smallest detail, which will probably take a long time and result in an extensive, complete, and rigorous work. The objective tendency, on the other hand, prioritizes the speed of task accomplishment, focusing on the main points, which results in concise and less time-consuming work. Throughout life, we can adapt to the contexts and learn to react in a balanced way between these two tendencies, coping with external demands and adapting to the time and resources available, but it might take time and training.

Our cognitive tendencies will probably manifest themselves in the work environment and every organization needs different profiles, so that specific tasks can be accomplished efficiently and completely. Let's imagine the following example: the manager asks two HR

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<sup>2</sup>DA SILVA SCHUSTER, M.; DA VEIGA DIAS, V. BATTISTELLA, L. Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS): Aplicação em Universidade Público Federal. *Revista da Faculdade de Administração e Economia*, São Paulo, v. 6, n. 2, p. 182-195, 2015.

<sup>3</sup>MASLACH, C.; LEITER, M. Early predictors of job burnout and engagement. *Journal of applied psychology*, v. 93, n. 3, p. 498-512, 2008.

<sup>4</sup>FAYET, M.; COMMEIGNES, J-D. *Méthodes de communication écrite et orale*. 4. Ed. Paris: Dunod, 2013.

professionals to prepare a report with all the training actions carried out that year. Professional “Andrew” (objective tendency) believes that a quality report goes to the essentials and concisely presents what was done, so he prepares a document of a few pages with one paragraph per action taken and considers he has done a great job. He sends this first draft to his colleague “Brian”, who has an analytical bias and thinks “what a poor job, he left everything for me! I will have to look through the files of each of these actions to complete the report with more data”. In this example the prescribed task was the same for both people, but the perceived and realized load was not.

The *control* dimension refers to the feeling of being or not able to perform a certain task and knowing exactly your role within the team. We all need to know the rules of the game to function without the constant worry of adapting to the unforeseen (this point also explains the increase in stress and discomfort with the uncertainties of the current pandemic context).

We know that the main protective factors against burnout in cases of institutional change are support and job control, which represents the main symbolic reward for the worker.<sup>5</sup>

Another protective factor is to be able to feel proud of working where we do, which involves the feeling of belonging to a team, of identification with colleagues, that define the *community* dimension.

However, for a group to function as a community, its members must feel valued and treated equally. Well-being in a group also comes from the perceived equality of treatment among all members. Affinities exist, but they should not justify the exclusion of peers, which influences self-esteem and feelings of *fairness*.

Besides the perception of fairness in relation to peers, the feeling of inner fairness depends on our *values*. Feeling that the work activity does not correspond to personal values leads to a daily negotiation with oneself. This process can generate feelings of shame and inner conflict that favor burnout.

These dimensions are linked both to the individual and to the organization. The responsibility to take care of each one of them belongs, therefore, to everyone. These ideas are not a magic recipe to avoid burnout, but they represent allied tools in the process of finding meaning in our work routine.

If it is not possible to prevent burnout, having patience and understanding the process is essential, as it takes time to feel a considerable improvement. Some studies indicate an average of two years of recovery.<sup>6</sup> A metaphor that Catherine Vasey (burnout psychotherapist specialist in Switzerland) shared with me once is that of a building under construction: in the

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<sup>5</sup>DAY, A.; CROWN, S.; IVANY, M. Organisational change and employee burnout: The moderating effects of support and job control. *Safety science*, v. 100, p. 4-12, 2017.

<sup>6</sup>VASEY, C. *Comment rester vivant au travail: Guide pour sortir du burn out*. 2. ed. Paris: Dunod, 2020.

moment of demolition there is a lot of dust, noise, and confusion...It seems unimaginable that there was ever a functional building there before! At first it is hard to breathe, but as time goes by, the dust falls to the ground, the noise goes away, and we start to eliminate the rubble, everything that is no longer useful for the new building we want to construct. This deep work on the base of the building takes time, but with regularity, patience, and acceptance of what is already there, the process results on an even more solid base, which allows you to act differently, with more self-respect and healthier boundaries.

At the end, it is important to remember that recovery after each phase of acute stress is the healthiest way to avoid burnout<sup>7</sup> at an individual level, but unfortunately it still receives little attention regarding the ways to exercise it. An interesting clue is to exercise self-observation to notice what we are doing at times when we feel well-being and comfort. Each moment in life can demand a different form of recovery, whether it is sports, time with friends, reading a book, etc. Recovery is essential, it is the fuel to keep moving forward, and it should not be neglected. Not taking time for oneself is like, on a car trip, wanting to get to the destination so quickly that we do not stop to refuel...The inevitable consequence is a breakdown, sooner or later.

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<sup>7</sup>NAGOSKI, E. et NAGOSKI, A. *Burnout: the secret to unlocking the stress cycle*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2020.