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Strategies used by individuals to prevent burnout

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ABSTRACT

Background Burnout represents a syndrome that is related to demanding job characteristics combined with the absence of resources or motivational job characteristics. The aim of this position study was to present strategies that individuals use to minimize burnout and its unfavourable effects.

Materials and methods The study focuses explicitly on strategies that individuals use to (i) deal with diminished resources that come with burnout, (ii) change their job characteristics such that the job becomes less demanding and more motivating and (iii) manage the interplay between the work and nonwork domains.

Results Individuals seem to use coping, recovery and compensation strategies to reduce the impact of work stressors by changing the stressor or their responses to the stressor. Moreover, they use job crafting to alter the characteristics of the job such that it becomes less hindering and more motivating. Finally, individuals create boundaries between their work and nonwork domains to experience less work–family and family–work conflicts by actively detaching from work.

Conclusions Finding bottom-up strategies that individuals use to minimize burnout or its unfavourable effects may be essential to complement the top-down interventions initiated by organizations.

Keywords Burnout, coping, job crafting, work–family interface.

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Freudenberger [1] introduced burnout in the 1970s to describe the gradual emotional depletion and loss of motivation he observed among individuals who had volunteered to work for aid organizations. Although burnout was initially believed to be the result of the provision of services (e.g. [2]), research in the 90s suggested that burnout can be found in virtually every job that has a specific constellation of working conditions. Burnout has been defined as a long-term consequence of aversive working conditions characterized by the simultaneous experience of the symptoms of exhaustion and cynicism/disengagement from one's job [3–5]. Exhaustion is defined as a consequence of intensive physical, affective and cognitive strain, that is as a long-term consequence of prolonged exposure to certain job demands. Cynicism/disengagement refers to distancing oneself from one's work object, work content and work in general. The third dimension, (reduced) personal accomplishment, is generally not considered as a core component of burnout [4]. When employees are confronted with high job demands and are provided with inadequate job resources, they are at risk of developing burnout [3,6]. Ample evidence has confirmed this suggestion (overview in [7,8]).

Besides the justified impact of job characteristics on burnout, from both a theoretical and practical point of view, it is

important to examine whether there are strategies that individuals use to minimize burnout and its unfavourable effects. Individual strategies represent methods or plans that people choose to achieve a goal or solve a problem. In the business literature, strategies generally involve some planning or marshalling of resources for their most efficient and effective use. Uncovering such bottom-up strategies can help the development of interventions targeted to guide individuals such that they apply strategies that are more effective and under the control of the individual, and refrain from using noneffective strategies to prevent burnout or minimize its effects.

By applying a positive view to burnout, this position study aims to organize the scattered research on specific individual strategies that have been linked to burnout, to discuss their effectiveness and to inspire future research. Rather than being an exhaustive overview of all possible strategies and of the whole literature on burnout, the study is based on Maslach and Goldberg [9], who suggested that effective approaches to prevent burnout can be individual-centred and situation-centred. Specifically, it focuses on categories of strategies to (i) deal directly with diminished resources that come with burnout, (ii) change their job characteristics such that the job is less demanding and more motivating and (iii) manage the interplay

between the work and nonwork domains. Thus, the paper covers a broad range of possible strategies that individuals may use during or after work to avoid burnout or to deal with it. Having recognized these categories, a literature search was conducted to locate studies that provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of specific strategies that fall under these categories. This literature search was not systematic but aimed to uncover example studies that provided some insight on the role and effectiveness of the different strategies. Using Google Scholar as a database, the following terms were used for burnout: burnout, exhaustion, cynicism, depersonalization or disengagement. To find literature on strategies, the following terms were used: strategies, moderator, interaction or buffer. Finally, these terms were combined with each of the following terms: coping, resources, recovery, job characteristics, job crafting, work–family conflict, work–family interference and spillover. No timeframe restriction was set.

Strategies to deal with diminished resources

Inherent in burnout is the experience of diminished resources in terms of ability and willingness to invest effort in work tasks. Therefore, it is not surprising that burnout has been linked to strategies that individuals may use to deal with the diminished resources. All these strategies share a common objective of addressing diminishing time, mental and energetic resources.

Coping strategies

Applying a transactional approach to stress, Lazarus and Folkman [10] defined coping as ‘those changing cognitive and behavioural efforts developed for managing the specific external and/or internal demands judged as exceeding or surpassing the individual’s own resources’ (p. 164). Although several classifications of coping strategies exist, the most established is the distinction between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping [10]. Problem-focused coping represents an attempt to respond directly to the stressful situation, while emotion-focused coping consists of attempts to alter the emotional response to stressful events. Additionally, avoidance coping represents the refusal to face problematic or stressful situations [11].

Empirical evidence suggests that burnout seems to be related to different types of coping, but generally, avoidance and emotion-focused coping are stronger related to burnout than active and problem-focused coping. Whereas avoidance or emotion-focused coping is positively related to burnout experiences, problem-focused coping is negatively related to burnout (e.g. [12,13]). Moreover, employees use less problem-focused or more passive forms of coping, like emotion-focused coping [14], in reaction to emotional exhaustion or disengagement/cynicism, indicating that the lack of an effective coping

response might have served to reinforce subsequent feelings of helplessness and futility [15]. The third component of burnout, personal accomplishment is positively related to the use of active, problem-focused coping, suggesting that a problem-focused response and a positive self-appraisal may be mutually reinforcing [10].

The effectiveness of problem-focused coping has been found to depend on effective control of the potential stressors of the environment and individual emotions [16,17]. Specifically, persistent use of problem-focused coping strategies when there are few possibilities of controlling and/or changing the environmental stressors may exacerbate the undesirable effects of work stress [18,19]. In less controllable circumstances, strategies oriented to the problem in combination with strategies oriented to avoidance have been found to be useful for improving adaptation and well-being [20]. Thus, flexibility in utilized coping strategies is adaptive rather than maladaptive, that is, problem-focused coping seems adaptive in controllable situations, whilst coping oriented to avoidance is adaptive in situations that are difficult to control [13,21].

Recovery from work

Perhaps the most relevant strategy that individuals may use daily to reduce their burnout levels is to recover from work. Recovery occurs after strain when the stressor is no longer present and refers to the process during which an individual’s functioning returns to its prestressor level where fatigue is reduced and a status of physiological and psychological performance readiness is restored [22]. Under optimal circumstances, the stress-related acute load reactions return to prestressor levels during after work hours, and recovery is completed before the next working period starts [23]. Prolonged exposure to work demands (e.g. daily overtime work) may lead to a total breakdown [24], when work demands strain the *same* psychophysiological systems that had already been activated on the job. Particularly, employees at risk of burnout may be willing to work even when they are at home to avoid the backlog that may come with their feelings of exhaustion.

Of all recovery experiences, detachment from work (i.e. stop thinking about work and disengaging oneself mentally from work; [22]), relaxation (i.e. low-effort activities that require hardly any effort and therefore pose no demands on the psychobiological system; [25]), and social activities (i.e. time that individuals spend with other people when they have finished work; [26]) are found to be beneficial in diminishing the daily experiences of burnout, as well as the risk of burnout over time (particularly detachment). Detachment diminishes exhaustion [27] after controlling for a range of background variables. Relaxation is negatively correlated with health complaints, exhaustion and sleep problems [22]. Whereas talking to family, colleagues or friends about positive emotions is found to have a

beneficial impact on vitality at the end of the day, talking about negative issues led to higher levels of exhaustion and work–family conflict [28]. The good news is thus that sufficient recovery on a daily basis represents a clear daily strategy that individuals can apply to diminish their burnout levels [29].

Selection, optimization with compensation

The Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model [30,31] suggests that the use of SOC strategies facilitates optimal allocation of individual resources; maintenance and enhancement of functioning in the face of challenges; and adaptivity to the loss of resources. The SOC model was developed to explain how individuals could deal with diminishing resources that come with ageing (e.g. illness and physical deterioration). To do so, they apply management strategies of (i) selecting the goals to pursue and set goal priorities (e.g. abandon nonimportant goals), (ii) optimizing and using goal-relevant means (e.g. learn new procedures) and (iii) using compensatory means to maintain goal attainment when previously employed resources are no longer available or blocked (e.g. use external aid).

The SOC model has been applied to explain optimal functioning even when experiencing burnout [32]. Specifically, a combined use of selection, optimization and compensation strategies was found to buffer the unfavourable effect of disengagement on supervisor ratings of task performance and adaptivity to organizational change. Compensation was the most successful strategy in buffering the negative associations of burnout with supervisor ratings of task performance and adaptivity to organizational change. Individuals may compensate for the burnout experienced using different external resources, such as the help of others or of technology, by increasing their efforts or by learning new skills [33]. In contrast, selection was found to exacerbate the negative relationship of exhaustion with adaptivity to organizational change but not task performance as they manage to avoid performance decrements, for example by setting performance goals high on the hierarchy and ignoring other goals. However, in line with the reasoning of Hockey [34], in this case they fail to keep their optimal functioning on more peripheral, discretionary behaviours such as adaptation to changes [35].

Other strategies

Beyond coping, recovery and SOC strategies, other strategies to deal with diminishing resources have been uncovered, mainly by qualitative studies. On the basis of interviews with physicians in hospice and palliative medicine, Swetz and colleagues [36] found that the most common strategy for dealing with stress and preventing burnout was promoting physical well-being such as exercise, proper nutrition and rest, and focusing on one's own health. Another common category involved

taking a 'transcendental perspective', which focuses on spirituality and nature and varies from prayer and meditation to structured attendance at religious services. Finally, humour is suggested to serve as a coping mechanism that helps individuals appraise and restructure stressful situations [37]. Particularly, *self-enhancing humour* (i.e. a tendency to be amused by the incongruences of life and by having a genuine humorous outlook, even in times of stress) and *affiliative humour* (i.e. to amuse others, facilitate relationships and reduce interpersonal tensions) have been found to buffer individuals against the effects of stress [37,38] and to be negatively correlated to burnout [39].

Strategies to change job characteristics

Because burnout experiences are related to work, individuals may use strategies to change or adjust their work (characteristics) such that they avoid enhanced levels of burnout. This comes close to active coping but differs in that coping represents a reaction to stressors, while the driver of the main strategy presented here, that is job crafting, is the search for meaning and for a motivating and healthy work environment.

Job crafting

Job crafting [40] represents actions employees take to alter the tasks (i.e. type or number of activities), the relations (i.e. whom one interacts with at work) and the cognitive task boundaries of their job (i.e. how one sees the job). An example of job crafting could be hospital cleaners starting to interact with patients [40]. Recent literature [41,42] conceptualized job crafting as the changes employees make to balance their job demands (i.e. job aspects that require effort and therefore are associated with psychophysiological costs) and job resources (i.e. job aspects that are functional for achieving work goals and can eliminate the costs of the demands) with their personal abilities and needs. Following this stream of literature, job crafting refers to voluntary self-initiated employee behaviours including: seeking resources (i.e. asking a manager or colleagues for advice), seeking demands/challenges (i.e. asking for more responsibilities) and reducing demands (i.e. eliminating emotionally, mentally or physically demanding job aspects).

Job crafting has been examined both as a predictor of burnout (in the sense that it can facilitate or hinder it) and as an outcome of burnout (in the sense that it represents attempts to deal with it). Employees who crafted their job resources showed an increase in their job resources 2 months later and this increase in job resources was negatively related to burnout [43]. Seeking challenges (i.e. workload) was related to decreased burnout, whereas reducing hindering demands (i.e. cognitive demands and emotional demands) was unrelated to future burnout. Partly similar findings were reported for longer time frames where employees who attempted to reduce their

demands reported higher exhaustion, a state that, in its turn, led to further decreasing demands [44]. Thus, reducing demands was not a successful strategy to reduce exhaustion. This latter finding agrees with the findings of a daily diary study [45] that showed that on days that employees were more exhausted they also reported lower job crafting behaviour (i.e. less seeking resources, less seeking challenges and less reducing demands). The lack of resources experienced by exhausted employees is so detrimental that they are unable to craft their job and thus to generate the benefits of these strategies.

Other strategies

Besides job, crafting, other specific strategies aiming to change work aspects have been linked to burnout [36]. One of the most common strategies in [36] was that the physicians promoted supportive and nurturing professional relationships with colleagues, which emphasizes the important role of teamwork, and collegiality in the workplace. Physicians often reported talking with others, and expressed the need to debrief with colleagues, explaining to them the difficulties that they had confronted in their work on a specific day and how they felt. In addition to these social resources, one-third of the physicians reported the search for clinical variety. Accordingly, they combined the provision of care, which is more draining, with other less draining activities such as research, writing and teaching. These strategies together with job crafting indicate that individuals can initiate actions (bottom-up rather than top-down or driven by the organization) to avoid or reduce burnout and to remain healthy and motivated.

Strategies for inter-role management

Although burnout is considered a work-related syndrome, unsuccessful boundary management of work and nonwork life has also been found to be related to burnout. This occurs not only in the form of work-related experiences (e.g. exhaustion) that spillover from work to home, but also because ineffective inter-role management might be another trigger of burnout.

Spillover vs. segmentation

Classically, the relationship between the work and the nonwork domains has been the basis of three different hypotheses [46]. The earliest hypothesis is the *segregation* (or segmentation) hypothesis [47], postulating that there is no relationship between 'work' and 'non-work'. Both domains are considered (psychologically, physically, temporally and functionally) separate domains. Next, Wilensky [48] suggested the *compensatory* hypothesis, which represents attempts to make up for the deprivations experienced at work. Third is the *spillover* or generalization hypothesis, which posits the carry-over or generalization of alienation from work into alienation from

nonwork. These hypotheses are based on a negative view on the work domain, whereby negative experiences at work are counterbalanced or carried over to the nonwork domain.

Next to these static, negative views, recent literature examines inter-role management in a more dynamic and differentiated way. Boundary theories generally suggest that creating and maintaining boundaries around life domains represent the attempts of individuals to simplify and order their environment [49–51]. Boundaries may be viewed as helping individuals to structure and delineate the various roles they have in their different life domains [50]. Depending on their segmentation preferences, people tend to construct more or less permeable boundaries around their work and home domains to get the degree of segmentation or integration they prefer [52].

A clear segmentation between work and home limits the psychological influence of work on the home domain by preventing the spillover from work aspects such as job-related thoughts and worries into the home domain [53,54]. Individuals with cynicism are likely to ruminate about the problems that they may have with customers, colleagues or supervisors while being at home [51]. This behaviour will make their feelings of cynicism even worse as they will repeat and re-experience the triggers of their cynicism. Individuals who segment their work and nonwork roles are less likely to think about work while they are at home [53]. When employees do not bring their work into their home domain, it is less likely that they encounter work-related cues that stimulate rumination and prevent detachment from work [51]. Individuals preferring to segment work and home were better able to detach [27,54].

Inter-role conflict/interference

Not only the management of work and family roles but also the experience of incompatible norms and requirements are related to burnout [55]. Specifically, work–family conflict (when participation in the work role is inhibited by virtue of participation in the family role [56]) reflects the role scarcity hypothesis [57] suggesting that managing multiple roles (e.g. of employee, spouse and parent) is problematic as they draw on the same, scarce resources. High job demands require employees to devote more resources (e.g. time, effort, emotions) to work, leaving them with fewer resources to devote to their families [58]. Not surprisingly, it has been found repeatedly that job and home demands may lead to burnout because they increase the experience of work–family conflict and family–work conflict, respectively. Several scholars [59,60] found that job demands and home demands appeared to have a direct and indirect effect (through work–family conflict and family–work conflict, respectively) on burnout. Additionally, Haar [59] showed the moderating effects of employee coping strategies in the relationship between both types of conflict and burnout.

Limitations

The following limitations of this position paper should be acknowledged.

- 1 Most of the reviewed studies are cross-sectional, self-report studies, which can be inflated by common method variance and unclear direction of causality. There is lack of intervention studies that examine the actual effectiveness of the strategies on burnout over time.
- 2 Research on several of the reviewed strategies is lacking. Moreover, there is no consensus on the utilized instruments. Therefore, the results are difficult to compare and the paper only organized the scattered evidence on specific strategies into categories of strategies rather than reported on the effectiveness of each strategy. As Verdon *et al.* [61] found that there was a discrepancy between the factors felt to be important by individuals and those statistically related to the burnout, conclusions about effectiveness are difficult to make.
- 3 As the literature review is not exhaustive and systematic, there is a high risk of selection bias of the included studies. Moreover, there might be other strategies that individuals use to prevent or deal with burnout. Therefore, future research is urgently needed.

Future research directions

The strategies discussed here should not be viewed as replacing top-down, organizational approaches (e.g. job redesign, optimization of workflow, reduction of work hazards) that aim to optimize the work environment and working conditions such that the risk of burnout is minimized. Rather, they should be viewed as strategies that occur simultaneously with organizational approaches and are generally spontaneous, unattended and not under the control of the organization. Therefore, it is essential to gain insight into the effectiveness of the different individual strategies such that the more effective strategies are implemented and stimulated.

To this end, more research is necessary to uncover several unresolved issues, like to uncover all possible strategies that individuals may use to avoid burnout or minimize its effects. Additionally:

- 1 We still do not know how long the effects of these strategies last. Considering the fluctuating character of the utilized strategies as well as the insight that the effectiveness of the applied strategy seems to depend on the situation, it is suggested that diary research that follows individuals daily during several measurement moments close to the natural context in which they operate [62] might be a useful way to study individual strategies.

- 2 Whether the combined use of the strategies is more effective than the employment of a single strategy is still unknown. Similar to the suggestion by Karanika-Murray and colleagues [63], considering the multivariate impacts of job characteristics on work-related health is informative, as this can potentially convey a more accurate view of effects than by focusing on each variable in isolation [64] (synergistic or inhibitory effects).
- 3 It is essential to know how individuals can be helped to develop or learn the effective strategies by means of intervention studies. Such studies have shown that individuals can develop effective coping strategies (in terms of stimulating support-seeking behaviour), to reduce their burnout symptoms [65], to recover from job stress [66] or to learn to craft their jobs by setting small job crafting assignments for themselves [67]. However, the effectiveness of such interventions to minimize the risk to burnout is still not known.

Conclusion

This position paper applied a rather positive focus and aimed to uncover strategies, that is methods or plans that people choose to minimize burnout and its unfavourable effects. Knowledge on the specific strategies that are used by individuals may be useful to complement the top-down interventions that organizations introduce to reduce the risk of burnout. Organizations, through human resources practices and supervisors, should inform individuals about the importance of such strategies such that they make more effective choices. Moreover, they should motivate them to use the effective strategies for their current and future health and well-being and show how to do so by providing training possibilities and resources facilitating the use of such strategies (e.g. autonomy). Focusing on individual, next to organizational, approaches seems to be a promising means of dealing with burnout and to stimulate more healthy workforces.

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