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## BURNOUT SYNDROME FROM PAST TO PRESENT

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**ABSTRACT** — The burnout syndrome has represented a subject of great interest for both medicine professionals, and those in the sphere of psychology. For years, scientists have carried out researches meant to reveal the main causes and characteristics of this *modern ailment*, but many of the issues arisen remain unresolved. At present, work has become a segment taking up more than half a day. Most times, pressed by their superiors, people grow mentally and physically exhausted, the permanent stress giving birth to various medical conditions that are hard to combat. Unfortunately, the recommendations given by specialists are frequently ignored. Because of this, the symptoms of the *burnout syndrome* affect increasingly more people, regardless of the age range they belong to or their profession. Even if the human resource is finite, it should be exploited very gently. The era we live in, demands that we are productive, while health-related aspects (rest, sport and so on) are deemed less important. The numerous researches have shown that there are certain categories especially affected, as permanent pressure and long work spans are among the main causes for exhaustion. However, there are also certain professions that, despite not requiring an intense physical or mental effort, are predisposed to creating an environment favourable for exhaustion.

**KEYWORDS** — burnout syndrome, depression, workplace, pandemic.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the legacies left by François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, renowned Enlightenment philosopher, is the following teaching: „Work saves us from three great evils: boredom, vice and need”. (Hosy & Bourion, 2017) At present, the economic sphere consumes a finite resource, people, employers demanding results that bring as many financial benefits as possible, man's health being scarcely put first. This is why, throughout the years, the standard of living has enjoyed an important ascension, but what is really the price we are unwittingly paying?

The burnout syndrome has started receiving a special attention along with the evolution of the modern era (Barbu, 2017; Fesun et al., 2020; Novyk &

Mazur, 2021; Tohochynskyi et al., 2020), but certain researchers argue that this issue dates back to Roman times. Given its high incidence, the World Health Organization has included the *disease* in the International Classification of Diseases since 2019, in the section entitled „Problems related to employment and unemployment”, without it being part of the sphere of clinical sufferings.

In literature, the syndrome represented a subject of great interest, its definitions being varied. While certain authors put forth a simple explanation, such as a psychological phase of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficiency at work, others have delved deeper in researching the substance of the problem, analysing its components (Luca et al., 2020b). As such, it has been argued in doctrine that an individual, throughout several weeks, may notice in his own person strong feelings of exhaustion, displaying a considerable decrease in performance, experiencing feelings of alienation from his activity, from colleagues, as well as from the institution (Fengler, 2016).

The burnout syndrome was first described in year 1974, being first mentioned by two researchers: Herbert Freudenberger and Sigismund Ginsburg (cited in Holtz, 2016). Herbert Freudenberger, born in year 1926, was an American psychologist who in year 1980 published a paper entitled *Burn Out: The High Cost of High Achievement*. What it is and how to survive it, in which he defined the syndrome as a state of work-induced exhaustion, due to overworking and the psyche's inability to cope (Lewis, 1981).

In addition to certain consequences that affect the psyche of the afflicted person (impulsivity, frustration, excessive self-confidence, depression, cynicism, decrease of their professional performance, and so on), their body may also suffer from symptoms such as exhaustion, insomnia, permanent fatigue, frequent headaches, gastrointestinal problems and even breathing difficulties, in the most serious cases. (Mikolajczak et al., 2020; Radulescu et al., 2020)

According to the renowned Herbert Freudenberger, the category most affected by this *disease* is represented by people who are very dedicated to their workplace, as well as those whose jobs require a high emotional involvement and level of empathy.

In addition to describing the syndrome, Freudenberger also recommended a series of prophylactic methods, their target being not necessarily an indi-

vidual person, but even the whole organisations they worked in. Thus, the renowned psychologist proposed as methods of combating the burnout syndrome the reduction of the work schedule, the permanent rotation of the individuals working, as well as the use of training techniques meant to prevent the exhaustion of employees. In order to measure the level of exhaustion a person experiences, in year 1980, Christina Maslach created, based on the three phases of the burnout syndrome: exhaustion, cynicism and inefficiency, a questionnaire which included 22 items that covered 3 dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal dissatisfaction (Maslach et al., 1997).

Studies carried out on different professional categories revealed that the burnout syndrome may affect a person regardless of their age or health. Thus, for example, in year 1983, a study was carried out with the purpose of researching the impact of exhaustion among librarians. The first phase of research focused on questions regarding the job description, its characteristics, the number of employees working in the said institution, the rest leave enjoyed by the persons working in that environment, as well as the concern of the library management with the personal development of the people working there (Wood et al., 2020).

The second phase focused on getting to know the library's employees, namely their hobbies, whether or not they had pets, their medical history, while the last part of the study included a series of personal questions addressed to the workers, namely civil status, education, their seniority. What was the conclusion of this study? Only a small part of those questioned had actually experienced the state of exhaustion analysed. Most of the questionnaire's respondents proved that they did their job out of passion, expressing their desire to maintain their jobs (Smith & Nelson, 1983). It was, however, proven that practicing a hobby doesn't necessarily ensure the absence of the burnout syndrome; as it affects individuals that are very dedicated to their workplace, perfectionists, there is a high risk for them to allow their passion to lead to exhaustion.

Another study, carried out in Australia, which focused on nurses, revealed a series of interesting results (Patrick & Lavery, 2007). Firstly, it was established that the staff that had received the right to practice by following the courses of a college or university experienced a higher burnout rate than the individuals trained in hospitals. The study also analysed another aspect: the issue of additional hours, which resulted in inner stress, which led to exhaustion (the fact that working extra hours, without additional payment, may represent a discouraging factor for employees was well-known).

Another research, carried out in our country, focused on a sample of doctors specialized in oncology, and employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1997) measurement system. The most common symptoms experienced by the medical staff were states of boredom combined with those of indifference, malaise, permanent fatigue, and a feeling of total ignorance.

Looking back to our own times, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemics on the medical systems and hospital staff is overwhelming. Considering the large number of deaths recorded since the beginning of the pandemics until now, health specialists drew attention to the need of supporting and adequately monitoring the manner in which the medical system operates, and its impact on its employees (Luca et al., 2020a, Grigoras & Ciubara, 2021). Many studies have identified factors favouring the increase of physical and mental fatigue, anxiety, stress, and exhaustion. These factors are represented by: the limited resources of hospitals, the exposure to the new virus, whose nature is still unclear, as an additional occupational risk, the lack of sufficient communication and updated information, neglect of personal and family needs, due to the increase of the work volume (Dick, 2020).

One of the researches studying this issue is Occupational burnout syndrome and post-traumatic stress among healthcare professionals during the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, published in September 2020 (Raudenská et al., 2020). Healthcare workers are a high-risk segment, considering the demanding nature of their profession and work environment, therefore the prevalence of the burnout syndrome is steadily rising (Luca et al., 2020c). This study correlates the post-traumatic stress disorder with anxiety, depression, low satisfaction and quality of care, and high suicide rates among the population. The results of the study show an increased prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder and an increase in the occurrence of mental health disorders during the pandemic, both at the level of the general population and that of health practitioners.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research analysed a series of reference publications in the field of *the burnout syndrome*, publications which brought to light different results interpreted by each author separately. The technique used within this research was based on a retrospective study, the researchers consulting both international databases (PubMed, Google Scholar) including scientific articles published between years 1981–2020, as well as books on the topic *the burnout syndrome*.

## RESULTS

The results of the study show the importance of the burnout syndrome, its devastating effect, identified since ancient times, and the aggravation of the phenomenon in recent years. Regardless of their work field, people suffer from exhaustion more and more often, but the most aggravating effects were felt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## DISCUSSION

The burnout syndrome exists since the beginning of humankind. Although it may seem like a *modern ailment*, people were exhausted ever since Antiquity, the best example being the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, architectural miracles that were built with the payment of an expensive human tribute. Every organization is obliged to adopt strategies that prevent the burnout of their employees, turn to the help of specialists, and ensure all necessary conditions to prevent the occurrence of this syndrome.

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