

Burnout and Wellness— Awareness and Action



Presented by Gregory Nawalanic, Psy.D., LP HFMA Greater Heartland Fall Conference, Kansas City October 20, 2023

Learning Objectives



- Define Burnout
- Identify Impacts and Warning Signs of Burnout
- Explore Adaptive vs. Maladaptive Means of Coping

What is burnout?

- Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced accomplishment in day-to-day work.
- Per The World Health Organization: "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed"





Burnout and the Pandemic



- Rate of burnout in women disproportionately increased during pandemic
 - Women are more likely than men to feel burned out at work, 34% vs.
 26% in 2021
 - In 2019 30% vs 27% and expanded to a 12-point gap in 2020**
 - Women in non-leadership positions are especially affected

Consequences of Burnout





Impacts

- Failure of interpersonal relationships
- Increased errors
- Increased risk of malpractice
- Reduced customer satisfaction
- Reduction in overall work quality and outcomes
 - Each of these factors, in a vicious cycle, serve to exacerbate the sense of burnout





More Impacts

- Payments of negligence, or error-based lawsuits
- Staff are 23% more likely to visit the emergency room
- 63% more likely to take sick days
- 2.6 times more likely to leave their position
- Untimely departure from a position that directly impacts budget of facilities who will spend money recruiting and training a replacement
 - In the interim, the quality and quantity of work output is compromised

Team Health

 The impacts of burnout can be broken down into two primary categories: Physical and Psychological

Physical Effects

- Feeling tired, exhausted, irritable
- Reduced engagement in self-care activities

- Weight gain, reduced immune response, poor follow-up for external care (medical and dental)
- Increased risk of motor vehicle accidents and near-miss events

Psychological Effects

- Increased stress and mood disorders, particularly depression
- Increased substance use and/or abuse
- Significantly higher risk of suicidal ideation compared to general population

Factors Contributing to Burnout

Systemic Factors

- Some view burnout as a symptom of an unwell system where human factors fall subordinate to revenue generation.
- Generation and implementation of quotas
- Reduced autonomy
- Emphasis on extensive and cumbersome documentation
 - Billing and liability concerns emphasized over quality or personal factors

Personal Factors

- Interpersonal strain
 - A spouse outside of the medical field increased likelihood of burnout by 21%
 - Having a child under the age of 21 increased likelihood of burnout by 54% for medical providers
- Individuals high in self-reliance are unwilling to acknowledge shortcomings
 - The "I've got this" mentality
- Resistance/inability to reach out for help
 - Too tired or too proud to burden others
 - Too busy to take the time to engage in therapy
- Failing to notice the signs and symptoms before it is too late.
 - Frogs in boiling water
- Neurotic personality types are at increased risk whereas extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious are less likely to display signs of burnout

Potential Solutions

Maladaptive vs. Adaptive Coping

- Maladaptive Coping
 - Distracts
 - Delays the inevitable
 - Decreases effectiveness
 - Deleterious consequences over time
 - Drinking, Drugs, Denial
- Adaptive Coping
 - Acknowledge actual problem
 - Allows for options
 - Accesses personal strengths
 - Add effective coping skills

What does effective coping look like and what makes it effective?

- Acknowledge Feelings/Shift in Focus
- Deep Breathing
- Exercise
- Healthy Diet
- Restful Sleep

HPA Axis...What is it?

- Hypothalamus-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) Axis
- Responsible for the fight or flight response
- Dates back to our days as grunting cave people
- Highly effective in avoiding saber-toothed tigers
- Highly effective in hunting for food
- Highly effective in maintaining us in the absence of our next secure meal
- Less effective in the era of email and text messaging
- Far less effective in the era of the 24-hour news cycle

HPA Axis...what does it do? (oversimplification)

- Triggers the release of the neurochemicals of Cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine
- These chemicals produce the following:
 - Heart rate increases
 - Blood pressure increases
 - Breathing becomes rapid
 - Facilitates fast-twitch muscle responses
 - Sight, hearing and other senses become sharper
 - Vision becomes more focused, but in a smaller area
 - Decreases prefrontal cortical activity and increases mid-brain limbic activity
 - Emotion-driven and reactive
- These are all highly adaptive responses when hunting food by hand or fleeing a hungry predator

Modern day problems

- The HPA Axis does not know the difference between an email/text from your boss, a pandemic, or a saber-toothed tiger
- The HPA Axis can become habituated
 - This has the effect of an engine idling too high
 - Can lead to chronic high blood pressure, artery-clogging deposits, and obesity
 - Can cause changes in the brain that can contribute anxiety, depression and addiction
 - Can suppress the immune system

Deep Breathing as an Ancient Solution

- Interrupts the HPA Axis response
- Down-regulates the central nervous system
- If practiced and utilized consistently, over time, it can reverse the habituated activation of the HPA Axis
- Facilitates the mindful space necessary for meditative practice
 - We'll come back to this...

Exercise

- Discharges tension from the body
- Releases endorphins (the "feel good" chemicals in the brain)
- Immediate sense of accomplishment
- Boosts self-esteem
- Produces feelings of fatigue later in the day that make sleep more likely and can increase desire to eat healthier

Healthy Diet

- Stress can trigger another cave person mechanism
 - Reaching for fatty, fried, sugary foods

- This is the body trying to prepare for an inherent food shortage, which is one of the potential explanations for the ongoing river of cortisol in your blood stream—the brain is adept at making connections, not necessarily as adept at evaluating the accuracy of said connections.
- Stay hydrated by drinking eight 8-ounce glasses of water per day (2 liters or a half gallon)
- Fish, oils, nuts, beans, fruits and vegetables have been shown linked to decreased levels of depression and risk of depression
- Poor nutrition has a complex relationship with poorer mental health
 - Body image
 - Communication to self
 - Socioeconomic impact
 - Depressive confirmation

Restful Sleep

- Restful sleep is essential for neurogenerative processes in the brain
- Fosters mental and emotional resilience
- Sleep disruptions can enhance negative thinking, depression, and anxiety
- Helps someone function at their optimal level mentally and physically
- Refrain from screen time of any kind at least an hour prior to bedtime
- Only use your bed for sleep and sexual activity
- Try meditating for ten minutes somewhere in the half hour before you intend to sleep
- Avoid eating within the hour before going to bed
- Read a book or talk to someone in your home before bed-time

Actions

- Establish professional boundaries
 - Set clear parameters that ensure space and time for yourself
 - Utilize your Paid Time Off (PTO) and take vacations, even "staycations" help
- Engage supports
 - Family, friends, professional organizations
- Utilize existing resources
 - Use your Employee Assistance Program (staff can access free support)
 - Health plans frequently provide for a certain number of free mental health visits/year, USE THEM!
- Take an advocacy role within your institution or industry
 - Push for environments that provide increased control over workplace issues
 - Push leadership to respect work-life balance by demonstrating the long-term costs associated with not doing so

In closing...

- As indicated, ignoring signs of burnout can have numerous deleterious effects including damaged relationships, depression and anxiety, and increased risk of suicide
- Listen to the FAA and put your oxygen mask on first BEFORE trying to assist others
- It's ok to not be ok...but PLEASE do something about it!
- Be willing and able to recognize the difference between adaptive and maladaptive coping!!
- Give yourself grace.

Questions?

