

Burnout – a looming crisis?

(Richard Maddocks, October 2019)

The Past

Most people in the world are finally in agreement that global climate change is a reality. It's happening and if we don't make structural changes in multiple areas, it will lead to devastating effects.

The process of realization was slow, with many people being in denial for a long time. They needed proof again and again, confirmed facts about consistently rising temperatures and sea-water levels, before being convinced.

I believe there are a lot of similarities between the process of acceptance of climate change and burnout issues.

There is now so much evidence that work-related stress and burnout is rapidly on the increase, both in terms of the number of people being affected and the widening age range of these individuals. And this process has been going on for a long time.

I remember back in the early 1980's, when I was a young manager working for an IT company in the Netherlands, there were a number of colleagues who started to suffer from something termed 'overspannen'. Translated into English, this means 'over-stretched, over-stressed'.

I and fellow Brits with whom I used to hang out unkindly called this 'the Dutch disease' ... because it seemed to be spreading like an epidemic across the country. People who felt over-stressed were told by their doctors to stay at home and take a rest from work for 3-6 weeks ... this was meant to be the remedy.

The person would return to work after a few weeks, easing slowly back into their role, and everything seemed fine. However, I estimate that 70% - 80% of these people experienced another episode of being 'overspannen' within a period of 6-24 months. Just taking a break from work was clearly not the solution.

In those days, there was a stigma associated with admitting you were over-stressed and couldn't cope with the pressures of life. Managers and colleagues would often think that people who complained of this were just looking for an excuse to skive off work. It was seen as a weakness, a blemish on your character, and usually resulted in being a limiting factor for one's future career potential.

The Now

A lot has changed during the last 40 years. There is now a significantly increased understanding of work-related stress issues, and much more acceptance of people 'coming out' and admitting they are experiencing a burnout. In general, they are no longer ridiculed or stigmatized by their colleagues, although the person's strength of character is still often questioned.

HR professionals have a higher level of knowledge of the circumstances that can bring employees into potential burnout situations. However, this awareness has not yet been translated into changes in the approach towards managing the pressures of work, and to truly understanding why this happens to some people and not to others.

And although the treatment of burnout has for sure progressed, it is still hugely lacking ... mainly addressing symptoms rather than causes, focusing primarily on the working environment as opposed to the whole picture.

Let's look at the dictionary definition of burnout:

'A state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands.'

Quite simply put, burnout happens when you have depleted your personal energy levels to such a degree that you can no longer function normally. You have consistently burned-up your energy resources and have been unable to recharge them.

Work-related stress is of course not the only contributing factor to burnout ... although the work environment is often the 'straw that breaks the camel's back'. When trying to understand the underlying reasons, it is essential to look at what is happening in all parts of a person's life, not just their work.

When somebody has a busy, demanding job (who doesn't, these days!), and simultaneously has challenging issues in their personal life, they are implicitly going to be potential burnout candidates.

A Burnout Case Example

My daughter Samantha is 35 years old. She has been blessed with high levels of analytical, creative and social intelligences. After obtaining a degree in psychology, she started work for a health-related insurance company in a role that demanded a high-quality productive performance. With her driven character and passion to deliver quality results, she excelled in this job.

In addition to her 'day job', she was also building a side-line career in music. As a recognized talented singer-songwriter, she created a number of music albums and frequently performed on stage. She still managed to find the time and energy to maintain a wide social circle of family and friends.

All was going well ... until major changes happened in her personal life. Her first child was born, after which she quickly returned to work. A couple of years' later, she was in an 'amicable' but stressful divorce situation.

And then the proverbial 's@#t' hit the fan ... she could no longer cope with all of the demands on her energy. She had to stop working for a while, went into 'burnout therapy' which included sessions with a psychologist and the recommendation to do lots of physical exercise, which she did. After 4 months, she returned to work, building back to full time.

It came as no surprise to me that within 18 months, she was again in a burnout situation ... the root causes hadn't been addressed.

A Way Forward

I wanted to share Samantha's experience to highlight some of the key issues and to suggest a different approach to dealing with burnout.

As I've already mentioned, it is essential for the individual and anybody on their support team to take a 'holistic' view of the person's situation, looking at all aspects of their life.

It is also hugely important to understand the fundamentals of how personal energy works.

Dictionary definitions of personal energy are often expressed as 'the strength and vitality required for sustained physical or mental activity'. And this is probably what most people think about when they consider such questions as "how much energy do I have?", "how can I increase or manage my energy better?"

This definition is for sure a good starting point. However, when looking at personal energy levels, there are actually four types of energy that are essential to review: Physical, Emotional, Mental, Purpose.

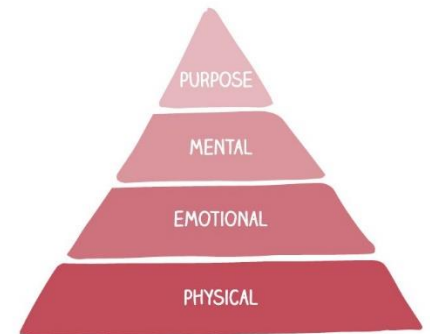
Physical is related to the **quantity** of energy you feel

Emotional determines the **quality** of your energy

Mental is concerned with how well you can **focus** your energy

Purpose is the key factor affecting the **power** of your energy

Each type of energy is equally important when considering how to manage personal energy, and how to identify ways to recharge the levels to assist the recovery process when in a burnout. And there is a strong interrelation between these four types of energy, each one has an impact on the others.



It is always best to build your energies from the bottom of the pyramid upwards. It's easier to increase your Emotional Energy when your Physical Energy is high; you can strengthen your Mental Energy more effectively when your Emotional Energy is in good shape, and so on.

So when helping people recover from burnout-type situations, it is a good idea to initially focus on increasing their Physical energy, preferably with a personal fitness trainer. The four key elements are Exercise, Nutrition, Relaxation, Sleep.

Once this has been initiated, then work can start on the other three types of energy. There are many exercises that can be introduced to provide simple tools that the person can slowly integrate into their daily life, all geared towards increasing their energy levels.

It is important though that the professionals involved in the recovery process interact and coordinate with each other ... for example, the psychologist and personal fitness trainer.

Most psychologists are good at covering the emotional and mental aspects of energy. However, purpose energy is often not appropriately addressed. And this is an area that definitely requires more attention. In my opinion, it is critical that the person obtains more insights into what matters most to them in their personal and work life, which things give them a sense of meaning and purpose in all parts of their life.

The Future

Without doubt, everybody's lives have been hugely impacted by the 24/7 style of interaction and communication through social media and email, in both their personal and working time. Also, many organizations seem to implicitly (and sometimes explicitly!) demand that employees are available and 'online' virtually all of the time ... evenings, weekends, even while on vacation.

This continues to introduce more challenges and pressure for individuals, which is exacerbated by the greater employee freedom and flexible working conditions being promoted by companies. There is an expectation from management that employees are able to look after themselves, a sort of self-service attitude to many aspects at work.

I firmly believe that it is time to take a step back and strongly reflect upon what is currently happening in the working environment. The role of HR professionals in (re-)defining workplace health strategies is of paramount importance ... to assist employees who

unfortunately land in a burnout, and find ways to stop the inevitable increase in work-related stress before it's too late. Prevention is always better than cure!

Prevention Tips for HR professionals to implement

- Create a culture in which managers set a role-model example, and don't eg send emails and other messages outside of working hours
- Make it obligatory for employees to have email-free evenings, weekends and vacations
- Provide employees with subsidized membership to a fitness gym
- Encourage employees to take a 5-15 minutes break from work every 90 minutes
- Invest in helping employees to define their purpose at work, and to understand what gives them work-energy and what depletes it
- Provide clear expectations for all employees and obtain confirmation that they understand these expectations
- Implement a Continuous Performance Management approach with frequent feedback and check-in meetings instead of annual or 6-monthly appraisal meetings