



Burnout Levels Amongst University Students

Insights report by Lyuboslav Ivanov

Introduction



Humans possess many traits that distinguish them from any other animal, for example, their brain is the most advanced on planet Earth and they are on top of the food chain which classifies them as the superior species. As such, they carry features which have helped in their advancement in the area of communication, intelligence, ingenuity, art and more. For example, the human larynx is exceedingly developed when you compare it to those of mammals. Similarly, the human hand is the most adapted limb for manipulation and usage of tools that there is. Another example to support this claim is that the human brain is capable of processing huge quantity of data and has the ability to apply mathematical reasoning in order to solve problems or find answers about the world we live in, with the intent to adapt and evolve. Emotions and feelings are also significant elements which exist in most creatures, yet they are more intensely experienced in a human. They are building one's character and according to Verywell Mind (The 6 Types of Basic Emotions and Their Effect on Human Behavior, 2020): "Emotions play a critical role in how we live our lives, from influencing how we engage with others in our day to day lives to affecting the decisions we make".



Emotions are key to when meeting new people, having a conversation, socializing with people of different characters at home, school or at the workplace. When going through emotions in different places and scenarios, we build up our character. Depending on the person, one could have really affectionate reactions or the opposite - they could be hard-hearted and disaffected. Experiencing a lot of emotions could lead to mental and physical exhaustion, because our brain uses twenty-five percent of our energy every day (Unveiled, What's So Special About Human Beings?, 2019). Therefore, this could negatively alter the way we behave, especially in an environment around friends, family, classmates, colleagues and people in general. This is also known as Burnout Syndrome.



The term was first coined by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in 1974 and he used it to define the consequences of severe stress and high ideals within “helping professions” (Informed-Health, 2020) such as, doctors, nurses, pharmacists or medical teachers in higher education. In the modern world, the term is used not only in the field of helping professions but also in “stressed-out career-driven people and celebrities to overworked employees and homemakers” (InformedHealth, 2020). This term describes the emotional, mental and physical exhaustion directly related to the occupational environment observed in healthy people (Maslach et al., 2001). Cristina Maslach, an American professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, USA, deepened her research on the problem and developed and validated the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to distinguish occupational burnout from other mental illnesses.

According to the MBI, symptoms are classified according to three scales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment (performance) (Mariya Ivanova, Burnout Syndrome in Bulgarian Pharmacists – Pilot Study, 2020). Lack of energy, chronic fatigue, insomnia, depression, increased irritability and frequent negative and affective reactions are the characteristics which tie into emotional exhaustion. Depersonalization could appear as insensitive and inhumane attitude towards other people or the feeling of apathy towards work. This is believed to take a toll on the personal accomplishments or performance of a person who might feel as their achievements are of low value and do not contribute to their cause. Personality factors plus the combined effects of organizational and occupational stressors often lead to Burnout Syndrome. Literature sources indicate that there is link between the demographic factors of gender and age, as well as with work experience when it comes to burnout. It is widely believed that occupational burnout is higher in women, especially in those who have children aged 1-12 years (Mariya Ivanova, Burnout Syndrome in Bulgarian Pharmacists – Pilot Study, 2020).



Objectives



Read and review online articles about Burnout Syndrome in order to understand what it is and how to deal with it.



Speak to mental health professionals about Burnout Syndrome.



Gather insight through surveys targeted at university students about how they feel towards the university experience.

Aims



The aim of this insights report is to find out if the symptoms of Burnout Syndrome can be experienced amongst students in University. This will serve as research material to answer the question "How might graphic communication be used to help students who are already experiencing burnout and how to prevent them from going into one".

Methodology

Surveys - Primary Research

A survey was conducted online to students who are currently studying and students who have already graduated in Cardiff, Wales. This method of collecting information was used to gain quantitative analysis of the mental health of the targeted audience and to confirm or deny if there were any evidence of burnout.

Interview - Primary Research

A couple of interviews were conducted with mental health professional Mriya Ivanova who is also a pharmacist and one of the authors of an article on Burnout Syndrome – Burnout Syndrome in Bulgarian Pharmacists – Pilot Study, which was published on March 18-20, 2020, Prague, Czech Republic on International Conference on Innovations in Science and Education. The reasoning behind speaking to a professional was to obtain information on the topic of burnout, what are the statistics of people burnt out from work and how that might be retailored to students in university. This would count as a qualitative method of gathering research in this insights report.

Literature - Secondary Research

Collecting data in support of this study through literature enabled me to reach to a higher number of both quantitative and qualitative answers. This was of great use when it came to uncovering how is burnout inherited in a work environment and to gather stories of individuals who have experienced the condition.



Interview Findings

In my desire to find a professional to speak to about Burnout Syndrome I turned towards my parents. To me, this was a good strategy as they have worked closely with clients and customers and communication was a key element in their jobs. Through these connections, I was betting on them to direct me to someone who is a mental health expert or a psychologist. Luckily, there was such a person – assistant social pharmacist Mariya Ivanova, who is currently obtaining a doctoral degree and also has PhD in Psychology. After reaching out to her she agreed to share with me her knowledge on the topic of burnout and also redirected me to one of her articles which she wrote specifically about Burnout Syndrome in Bulgarian Pharmacists and her Master's thesis which also covers the subject but in greater detail.

I was privileged to discuss the topic with her face to face as I managed to borrow her precious time in one of her days off. In our conversation, she was asked a few broad and opening questions which would open the doors to more narrowed questions. Mariya claimed that: "According to my studies, it is perceived as a "twenty-first century disease", however according to the WHO it is not classified as a medical condition but as a syndrome conceptualized from constant stress at work" (Mariya Ivanova, 2021). Despite the fact that the term "burnout" is becoming more and more popular, there is still not enough evidence or data collected in order for experts to classify it in a specific category. This is unfortunate as the less data there is on a particular subject, the harder it is to make an advancement in that area.

Considering this, how does then one person recognize when they are burnt out? Mariya stated that: "There are three main symptoms which are considered to be indicators of burnout – exhaustion, alienation from activities and reduced performance. In order to decide if one is experiencing those emotions and can be diagnosed with Burnout Syndrome, they can self-assess by using the "Maslach Burnout Inventory" (MBI) questionnaire, however, these tests are not always accurate as the signs of exhaustion, such as insomnia, lack of energy, increased irritability are also present in other psychosomatic illnesses like depression, chronic fatigue or anxiety disorder" (Mariya Ivanova, 2021). In general, it turns out that it is hard to classify someone being burnt out due to the similarities in symptoms with other mental conditions and it is very important not to diagnose someone with the wrong condition as this will lead to the usage of a wrong treatment, most likely resulting in a bad turn of events.

Finding out how complicated the matter at hand is, it became evident that diagnosing someone with Burnout Syndrome is not as easy as it was thought and there should be extra caution when doing it in order to prevent further harm. In spite of that, what about the people who are sure they experienced a burnout? Can they develop a coping mechanism to combat their condition and if they can, how? Mariya Ivanova specified that there are three treatment methods used for treating a burnout. "Usually, people who tend to go into a burnout state are always more ambitious, more emotional and in order to resolve their predicament they should seek professional help from a psychologist. In those sessions, the aim is to look at the individual's inner struggles and fix problems within themselves. Those could be self-evaluations and goals which exceed the limits of the individual, therefore new and realistic ambitions should be determined. The second approach is to find something else which brings a

person joy and happiness outside of work. This could be a new hobby, spending more time with the family, spending more time on yourself. It is said that turning to your creative side is one the best antidotes for burnout. The third technique is to reorganize the work organization so that stress levels are lowered.

This method includes three sub-categories:

- Talk to the leader – Speak to the leader of the group if you are noticing they are not feeling okay lately.
- Talk to the personnel – Make sure that the working environment is stimulating and positive in the direction of achieving success.
- Not enough tasks – In this case people are not motivated to do their job due to the low number of tasks that is required from them or the minuscule significance of the task they were assigned. This leads to them believing that it is of no difference whether they achieve the goals or not, because even if they do, their advancement is unimportant. In order to combat this, either more tasks should be distributed or objectives which hold higher value should assigned" (Mariya Ivanova, 2021).

Literature Findings

Next, I continued researching by reviewing Mariya's pilot study on Burnout Syndrome in Bulgarian Pharmacists and her Master's thesis. It was of great value to use these documents as an insight to burnout levels in a working environment related to the "helping professions" sector. Pharmacists are at risk of professional burnout due to the nature of their line of work, which involves patient counselling on a disease prevention, patient diagnose and recommending a plan for therapy, ensuring drug safety and other. The methodology which was used in her research was an anonymous questionnaire which targeted 142 pharmacists in Varna, Bulgaria who work in various pharmaceutical sectors. This questionnaire included the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) created by Cristina Maslach.

From the gathered information, the majority of the respondents were female (74%) which concurs with the growing trend for increasing feminization of the healthcare professions. With almost similar numbers in percentage, most of the people were up to thirty years old and between forty-one and fifty with more than half of them having a length of service for over more than ten years. According to the report, this was a solid ground for good expertise on the matter at hand. However, the results from the questionnaire contradicted a belief shared in the literature around Burnout Syndrome. It appeared that male respondents demonstrated higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization than female. In addition to that, the professional achievement indicated almost similar values between the two genders. The study also reveals that people in the age between thirty-one and forty were the ones that were being the most affected. In this age group, the levels of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion were the

lowest (Mariya Ivanova, Burnout Syndrome in Bulgarian Pharmacists – Pilot Study, 2020). The participants in the research who were fifty years old or more had lower burnout levels. This study group perceived themselves as successful and had built useful habits for dealing with stress. However, from the article's point of view, this might indicate that there is a lack of emotional attachment to work and apathy towards the performing of personal duties.

To summarize, in the field of pharmacists, males in the age group of thirty-one to forty are with the highest numbers in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and with lowest rates of professional achievement. This probably relates to the assumption that in the early stages of a career there is excitement and enthusiasm to be successful and do well in your job. In addition, a person who is in the late stage of their career is more likely to be relaxed at the work place in relation to having more experience and knowledge on how to deal with stress.

Survey Findings

Now understanding how pharmacists feel towards their occupation, an insight was needed in order to determine if this was recurring in university students. According to the WHO: "Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life." (WHO, 2019). In spite of this, stress is also present in education amongst students. For example, having deadlines means that there is a need of adequate time management. Another example is the volume of work that is being given. A poor strategy for breakdown of workload might result in fear of being required to study ceaselessly. Someone who is not particularly good at time managing could struggle with meeting deadlines which would lead to staying up late at night to finish a project. This model of working and studying is inefficient because of the disrupted patterns of sleep which result in insomnia and low energy and motivation to be productive. Moreover, as a result of rushing, the end piece or work of a student would most probably not be what they envisioned in their mind at first. Hence, this could lead to dissatisfaction of the achieved work which could precede sadness, anxiety, depression, irritability and lack of stimulus. These are all symptoms of Burnout Syndrome which if prevented at an early stage such as university, might prepare a person for when they experience similar emotions in the occupational sector. Based on this reflection, a survey was conducted between thirty-five university students in Cardiff, Wales, to uncover the how they feel and compare it to burnout in the working field. The questions used were extracted from the Burnout Syndrome in Bulgarian Pharmacists – Pilot Study, 2020 by Mariya Ivanova, and rephrased to fit the targeted demographic.

Respondents' statistics according to their demographic characteristics and course year is presented in table 1.

Gender	n	%
Female	28	80
Male	6	14
Non-binary male	1	6
Age	n	%
Up to 20 years	8	23
21-23 years	22	63
Above 23 years	5	14
Course	n	%
First Year BD	1	3
Second Year BD	6	17
Third Year BD	20	57
Fourth Year BD	1	3
MD	4	11
PhD	2	6
Post Graduate	1	3

The majority of participants who answered were female and most of the students were between 21 and 23. The greater part of respondents (57%) are in their third year of education. Respondents are in various courses ranging from Graphic Communication, English Language, Primary Education, German and Economic, German, International Relations, Occupational Therapy, Mathematics and Music, PhD Mathematics, PhD Physics, Masters in Sustainable Planning & Environmental Policy, Masters in International Journalism and Post Graduate. This will produce a good knowledge on the levels of burnout across multiple university studies and not a specific course.

Discussion

Looking at the figures which were collected from the survey, it seems that there are both negative and positive findings when it comes to burnout in university students.

At one hand, the majority of participants stated that they believe university is stressful and that in their period of studying, they have experienced lack of energy, chronic fatigue, insomnia, depression, increased irritability and frequent negative and affective reactions. In addition, there is a slight trend towards feeling emotional exhaustion and apathy towards work. This is alarming and could lead an individual to search for a coping mechanism with the caused stress. It is important for such people to not find consolation in self-destructive actions, such as narcotics or opiates because adjusting to such habits could be disastrous for a young individual with a bright future ahead of themselves. Instead, what should be encouraged is to seek ways of breaking the mundane routine of everyday work and introduce an activity such as doing exercise, practicing a favourite hobby or unlocking their creative side (Mariya Ivanova, 2021). If this then fails to lower the symptoms of a burnout a good alternative is to seek professional help to combat the negative emotions at an early stage. On the other hand, the study indicates that the degree of depersonalization is relatively flat and in the norm and that students are happy with their personal achievements and are looking optimistically at the future for the most part. This could be a result of the nature of education and more precisely the amount of time it requires. To expand, in most cases studying for a career requires a lot shorter timeframe than the timeframe needed to build a career. This results in higher reserve of excitement and motivation levels in students, whereas with people from the occupational sector, those levels are probably significantly decreased as a result of the dynamics and everyday obstacles that are encountered

After all the acquired information, it seems like a new approach needs to be considered regarding the problem that is trying to be solved. This is due to the differences in the nature of burnout amongst workers and students. All the gathered intel suggests that most students do experience a mild form of a burnout but cannot be fully diagnosed as suffering from it with exceptions. In relation to this the question has

now changed to: **“How might graphic communication prevent university students from burning out at a later stage in life?”**

Conclusion

Burnout levels in the working field and the educational field have their differences but also have a few things in common. At the core of both natures there is stress. A lot of the symptoms experienced amidst students are similar to those of Burnout Syndrome typical for professionals servicing customers in the helping sector. However, those characteristics are in lower values when compared to data from workers experiencing a burnout at their occupation. The main conclusion for this is that the amount of time spent studying in a university is shorter than the amount of time a person spends while building a career. Another point to support this claim is that the world of industry is much more dynamic and unpredictable, which leads to more complex scenarios to deal with. In the end, this insights report will serve as a building foundation to help answer the question "How might graphic communication prevent university students from burning out at a later stage in life?".