

## ...recognize signs of burnout?



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Burnout is a state resulting from chronic workplace stress that cannot be managed by the individual with the physical and mental resources available to them. We often look at it from an individual perspective but it is also important to recognize that (German) Academia is a work context that has many characteristics that promote burnout: What do you enjoy about your work? What kind of tasks are you looking forward to?

- There is always more to do than anyone can manage
- No culture of appreciation
- Expectation of individual competitiveness
- Successes are few and far between
- A highly conflictive culture, sometimes also mobbing
- High acceptance of unhealthy work conditions
- Social isolation (especially for internationals)
- Financial insecurity

Also, there are some individual predispositions that make a burnout more likely, e.g. difficulty to say “no”, unrealistic expectations, idealism and perfectionism.

Scince 2012 Scienza offers 1:1- and team coaching, organizational development, conflict mediation as well as workshops. The workshop topics and areas of expertise include amongst others career development in research, leadership, diversity, self-care and conflict management.

In performance-oriented contexts sometimes being close to a burnout is worn like a badge of honor, as it is seen as a sign of willingness to perform and to make sacrifices. Getting the diagnosis, however, is a sign of individual failure. Neither makes a lot of sense. Having a burnout is to be taken seriously as it can lead to depression and other mental illnesses. Therefore, it is important for organizations, supervisors, group leaders, and professors to critically assess the workplace conditions they are offering. Here, however, we will look at how you can recognize signs of burnout individually:

### **The early signs**

The early signs might feel familiar to most of us working in Academia: we feel that we have to prove ourselves and to do that we have to work harder and harder. We start to neglect our own needs. In this stage it is not always easy to figure out whether this is a short-term strategy to deal with an upcoming deadline or a seasonal peak in workload or the onset of a burnout. One important difference is whether your behavior is linked to a specific goal and you experience other phases in your work or whether it is your “normal” work behavior. If the latter is the case, it is time to take responsibility for your well-being and see what you can do. Ideally, you should have a chat with your PI and see what support you can get from them in this matter. Group leaders and PIs have an obligation to look after your well-being. Sadly, this is not always taken seriously by your supervisor and then it is only up to you to find solutions for your situation. With a few

adjustments you can still remedy the situation: Focus on your priorities, on what you enjoy about your work, and start reducing your workload as well as making sure that you get enough rest and pay attention to other things important in your life.

### **When it becomes a pressing matter**

Later in the development of burnout some of the signs become also recognizable for others: we become very irritable, even with people that we like and usually get on with quite easily, we ignore conflicts and postpone them indefinitely or explode in the wrong place. Internally, we start justifying behavior that is against our values, and we deny our problems. This often ends in a withdrawal. If you recognize this in yourself, a co-worker or in one of your employees, please take it seriously and try to do something about this. But note that these symptoms are unspecific (they could also be a reaction to e.g. a highly escalated conflict or a difficult situation at home), so the best way to address this is by describing the change in behavior and see whether the other person opens up. As a superior you have an obligation to take care: get in contact with a professional (e.g. the psychological counselling in your organization) to develop a strategy on how to address the issue with your employee.

### **The late stages**

Three symptoms are seen as core symptoms of burnout: depersonalization, emotional fatigue and perceived failure. If you suffer from depersonalization, you distance yourself from your work, you are indifferent towards tasks you used to enjoy and often you become very cynical. Signs of emotional fatigue comprise irritability, anxiety and mental as well as physical exhaustion. Often also you have difficulties concentrating and/or difficulties sleeping. You perceive your performance as a constant string of failure, you doubt the effectiveness of what you do, there is no meaning in what you do. Sometimes you react with untargeted hyperactivity. These symptoms might lead into

depression. You need the help of a professional to sort out what is going on. Often the hardest thing to accept is that you might not be able to get out of this on your own. But a mental issue is in this not different to a broken arm where you usually accept that the help of a doctor could be useful for your health.

If you are a PI a sign in this stage could be increased absences due to illnesses.

A lot of these symptoms can also be signs of other medical conditions such as e.g. long Covid, and chronic fatigue syndrome. So, a good diagnosis is needed to find the right therapy for your specific situation.

### **Last but not least...**

It is not always too much work that is critical, but it can also be that we are constantly working below our capabilities and have a lack of either adequate quality or quantity in our work in regard to our competencies. We might then suffer from boreout. The newest member of work-related mental issues is the burnon-syndrome, which describes a chronic state of work-related overload. If we

suffer from it, we never collapse but keep functioning. However, we feel constantly exhausted and stressed. A hyper focus on work is typical, neglecting everything else in our life. Interestingly enough, especially people that enjoy their work and are highly identified with it (scientists?!?), often suffer from burnon-syndrome...

The good news is: if you take your own well-being seriously early on there is a lot that you can do to avoid ending up in a burned out state! And a relaxed and well-ordered mind might be actually beneficial to solve complex scientific problems.

*A German translation of this article (translated by jGfV) was published in the jUNITE newsletter 03/2024. Please see the link on page 2.*

If you have topics for the „how to“ section we have not yet touched, please email to [jGfV@Gf-V.org](mailto:jGfV@Gf-V.org).