

THE BURN-OUT SYNDROME AND MENTAL IMMUNITY IN THE WORK PROCESS

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Abstract: *The report presents a comprehensive viewpoint on the burn-out syndrome and mental immunity in the work process. In the present, these terms are more and more frequently discussed. They are connected to stress which is labeled as a disease of civilization bringing about a number of mentally demanding situations. The main aim of the research was to detect, investigate and evaluate the burn-out syndrome level and life orientation in connection to mental immunity. We tried to find the gender differences in life orientation and the burn-out syndrome level. We also assumed statistically significant differences in the burn-out syndrome level and life orientation as related to education, the work area and the position within an organization. It may be claimed that the results of the research confirmed almost all our assumptions.*

Key Words: *burn-out syndrome, mental immunity, life orientation*

JEL Classification: *M12, M14, M54*

1. BURN-OUT SYNDROME

In accordance with the ICD (International Classification of Diseases by the World Health Organization [WHO]), the burn-out syndrome is classified as a complementary diagnosis. According to Stock (2010) it means that the difficulties caused by exhaustion or burn-out are not considered to be a disease. It is a phenomenon of the old-new era influenced by the effect of changes in the work areas and globalization. This is also the cause of the competitive nature of the contemporary society which influences many people in their desire to gain not only good but perfect results.

The burn-out syndrome may be, according to Szarková (2009) defined as a subjectively perceived state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion which arises from the long-term stress in the social sphere and which causes people suffering from it to lose their will to keep going and persevere. The cause of the syndrome is the so-called social-psychological vacuum which is characterized by the succession of certain events connected to the little amount of feedback between managers and employees, broken micro-relationships in the work group, absence of actual compliance with the general and intracorporational norms and rules, and also one's purpose and lifestyle, and therefore it does not deliver the results expected by the particular individual. Such environment may be created in a corporation with wrong management, absence of corporate culture, managerial positions assigned to mentally immature and professionally incompetent pseudomanagers and the like, which causes a devastating loss not only at the personal but also organizational or corporational level also because of the fact that it usually affects the most important persons of the business in their productive age.

In accordance with Dobříková (2007) and Křivohlavý (1998), the symptoms of the burn-out syndrome appear in a person who puts high demands on themselves, works above the level of own capacity, competence, abilities, skills, is a so-called workaholic and regards their job as a drug, understands non-success as a personal failure, is unable to get enough rest, relax, regenerate, gain new energy, lives in the long-term interpersonal conflicts, has a low level of asser-

tiveness, is unable to say no, gives more than takes, lives constantly in a hurry, keeps long-term personal connection with people such as doctors, teachers, officers, managers, leading workers and the like.

To the factors causing unsatisfactory, insufficient degree of performance in the work process Paulík (2010) adds, for example, work environment which endangers health, bad relationships among people in the workplace, work with an excessive or insufficient amount and quality of stimuli, time pressure, high likelihood of errors in decisions and performances connected to the risk of major damage, internal control significantly minimizing the independence of decision-making and possibility of choice or preventing personal development and utilization of abilities, high demands for performance primarily when related to the limited options for its achievement, lack of information necessary for decision-making and solving urgent problems, high responsibility for own work and for others, feeling of inadequate evaluation of work, lack of support, low probability of promotion and personal growth, feeling of insecurity and fear of loss of employment.

Stock (2010) claims that currently, there are researches in which the existence of this syndrome was detected among various professions. This may explain various phenomena such as bad feeling in the workplace, internal resignation, or passiveness of workers. Customers and clients are perceived as a burden, supervisors as a source of threat and co-workers as „abusive insects“. The process resulting in the burn-out syndrome does not last or develop a while but several months or years. Mlčoch (2003) adds it takes place in these basic phases, each of which has a different length:

1. enthusiasm – one has high ideals, tries to participate in all possible areas, is loaded with an excessive amount of work for a long time;
2. stagnation – one is unable to put the given ideals into effect and thus gives them up and the requirements of others start being an annoyance;
3. frustration – one perceives the customers and clients negatively and the work brings only disappointment and exhaustion;

4. apathy – the relationships with clients and customers bring hostility and one tries to avoid all debates and activities with colleagues;
5. burn-out syndrome – the final stage when one feels absolutely exhausted, loses the overall sense of work, life, becomes cynical and withers.

2. MENTAL IMMUNITY AND LIFE ORIENTATION OF A PERSON

Mental immunity is the basic precondition for success (Zibrínová, 2011). A person who is not mentally immune may never face greater success. According to Moorhouse, Jones (2010), immunity of psyche does not manifest itself as a mental and emotional hardness, masculine behaviour, ruthlessness, defiance, stubbornness, mindlessness, disregard for others, extremes of human efforts, overloading oneself or carrying excessive burdens. Mentally immune person is not a reckless, ruthless, stubborn and relentless boss but, contrarily, an open, fair, caring, polite individual who acts rationally and constructively. This individual is aware of themselves and is able to direct their thoughts, emotions, feelings and behaviour in a way which enables them to succeed in various situations.

These manifestations are connected to the role of a manager and his/her abilities as related to various levels of management. If managers keep mentally immune and have an adequate life orientation, they can help their subordinates overcome the undesirable tension. Sternberg (2004) adds to these qualities of the described type of a manager also the ability to knead a cohesive team, to manage without exaggeration and excessive ambition, support the subordinates and know how much to ask for, to keep less emotional and be not insensitive, cold or arrogant, to keep strong relationships with the personnel and show no mental disorders in their behaviour.

In order to reach these qualities it is important to focus one's attention to the forms of adaptive or immune dealing of managers in demanding situations of various kinds. It is possible to identify them also as forms applied for the purpose of escaping from the influence of demanding situations. According to Hošek (2001), these are self-improvement, increasing the potential, harmonization of the personality etc. Moorhouse, Jones (2010) divide the management of mental symptoms into two broad areas. The first one includes activities with the basic task to divert the attention from the perceived pressure. The second one includes more formal, relaxation activities. In behavioural symptoms it is essential to learn how to perceive and understand what is reaction to pressure and what is not.

3. RESEARCH

3.1 Aim

The main aim of the presented research was to discover whether there are any differences in the factors of the burn-out syndrome and the life orientation of the respondents who work in the administration and education. We also tried to detect the existence of correlations between the presented factors and the age of respondents and the length of their work in the area and position within an organization.

3.2 Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: We assume statistically significant differences in the level of the burn-out syndrome and the life orientation from the viewpoint of the work area.

Hypothesis 2: We assume statistically significant correlations among the factors of the burn-out syndrome, the age of respondents and the length of their practice.

3.3 Research sample

The research included 148 respondents who work in the administration, education and production. There were 47 administration workers, 65 science and education workers and 36 production workers. Out of the overall number of the addressed people 50 were men and 98 were women, the age range being from 21 to 59 years. There were 49 managing workers and 99 efficient workers.

3.4 Research methodology

In order to detect the level of the burn-out syndrome of the respondents, their mental immunity and life orientation, the questionnaire method was used. According to Tholt (2010) and Inflow (2009), there are several tools with good statistical properties for measuring the burn-out syndrome but the MBI methodology (Maslach Burnout Inventory) is the most widely used one. This questionnaire consists of 22 items and investigates three factors. The first one is the factor of Emotional Exhaustion which includes 9 items. The second one is the factor of Personal Accomplishment with 8 items and the third one is the factor of Depersonalization consisting of 5 items. Each of these factors is evaluated on the scale of low, medium, and high degree in accordance with the scores from the questionnaire. The factor of Personal Accomplishment is evaluated by means of the opposite polarity. In assessing the 22 statements, the respondents may mark not only intensity (6-point scale: from „a few times a year“ to „every day“) but also frequency (7-point scale: from „not at all“ to „very often“) of perceiving the given feelings/states.

Mental immunity in the context of the life orientation was investigated by means of the Sense of Coherence questionnaire (SOC) which is, according to Račková (2009), Fecková (2009) and Briestenská (2011) used primarily for detection of the impact of stress on a person. Sense of Coherence detects perception and understanding of oneself, the world and life as a coherent reality. This self-evaluating 29-item scale measures the so-called coherence. It consists of three subscales or dimensions: Comprehensibility of situations (the range in which an individual perceives the world as organized, predictable and explicable), Manageability of the struggle (the range in which an individual is capable of coping with life events and challenges), and Meaningfulness of the task (the range in which an individual perceives their own life as important and events as worthy of commitment).

Statistical evaluation was carried out by means of the SPSS for Windows – program for statistics (version 18.0).

3.5 Results and interpretation

Hypothesis 1: We assume statistically significant differences in the level of the burn-out syndrome and the life orientation from the viewpoint of the work area.

Table 1 Statistical significance of the factors of the burn-out syndrome in the work area

| Factors of the burn-out syndrome | Work area | Mean | Std. Deviation | t | Sig (2-tailed) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|--------|----------------|
| factor of Emotional Exhaustion | education | 28.72 | 6.513 | -2.757 | 0.007 |
| | administration | 31.96 | 4.433 | | |
| factor of Depersonalization | education | 15.66 | 5.085 | -2.678 | 0.009 |
| | administration | 18.19 | 3.638 | | |
| factor of Personal Accomplishment | education | 23.03 | 8.058 | -4.237 | 0.000 |
| | administration | 30.30 | 5.856 | | |

Statistically significant differences in the factors of the burn-out syndrome were detected in the area of administration and education. The differences are presented in Table 1.

To compare the differences in the degree of the burn-out syndrome and the life orientation we applied the t-test method for independent groups and used it among the people working in the administration and education systems. We detected several statistically significant values in **the factors of the burn-out syndrome**. In the factor of Emotional Exhaustion the higher value was found in administration which means that the administration workers feel greater emotional exhaustion than the worker in education. It was similar in the factors of Personal Accomplishment and Depersonalization. It may be claimed that the respondents working in the administration are marked by the higher degree of burn-out in their performance than the respondents working in the education systems.

The results in life orientation will be described in greater detail. Statistically significant value was detected in the following questions:

„When you talk to people, do you feel that they do not understand you?“ (sig. = .003). The feeling of lack of understanding prevails among the administration workers rather than the education workers.

„When you had to do something in the past which required cooperation with others, did you feel that it would work out?“ - this feeling was dominant among the education workers (sig. = .041).

„Has it happened to you in the past that you were surprised by the behaviour of people whom you thought you knew well?“ - the results show that the answer „always“ was predominant among the respondents working in the administration rather than those working in education (sig. = .000).

„Has it happened to you that you were disappointed by the people you trusted and counted on?“ - the positive answer prevailed among the respondents from administration (sig. = .037).

The statement „Life is only a routine.“ was applied in the administration (sig. = .013).

The opinion that „Your life had by now a very clear sense and purpose.“ prevails more in the education than administration (sig. = .004).

„Do you feel that people treat you unfairly?“ - the answer „rarely“ or „never“ was predominant among the respondents from the education systems rather than the administration (sig. = .000).

„In the last ten years your life was always the same, full of conformity and contentment.“ - higher value was detect-

ed among the respondents working in the education systems (sig. = .004).

„Do you feel that you are in an unusual situation and you don't really know what to do?“ - the answer „rarely“ or „never“ was delivered mostly by the education workers (sig. = .003).

„What describes your perception of your own life the best?“ - the administration workers claim that there exists no solution for the difficult life situations (sig. = .037).

„When you think about your own life, do you often ask yourself why or what for you live it?“ - this was answered positively mostly in the administration (sig. = .014).

Also the statement „When you have to do ordinary things every day, is it a source of misery and boredom for you.“ was claimed predominantly in the administration (sig. = .004).

„When something unpleasant happened to you in the past, you tried to tell yourself ‘Yes, it happened, what is done is done, I have to live with it and go on.’“ - this is the way the respondents from the education perceive their bad experience more (sig. = .011).

„Do you have unclear ideas and mixed feelings?“ - higher value were detected in the area of education and the addressed respondents have these feelings and ideas rarely or never (sig. = .007).

„Does it happen to you that you have feeling you would rather not have?“ - this was answered „rarely“ or „never“ by the respondents from the education (sig. = .002).

„Do you expect that your future life will have a good sense, aim and purpose?“ - this kind of life is expected more by the respondents from the education than by the administration workers (sig. = .000).

„Do you believe that there always be people whom you will be able to trust in the future?“ - the answer „I doubt there will be such people here“ was provided by the administration workers (sig. = .014).

„Does it ever happen to you that you feel like you do not really know what will happen next?“ - the respondents from the education systems expressed that „it happens very rarely“ (sig. = .032).

„When something happened sometimes, you usually found out that you did not see things as they really were.“ - this statement is held true by the education workers (sig. = .026).

„When you think about the difficulties you encounter during the important periods of your life, you feel that you are unable to overcome these difficulties.“ - this feeling was detected among the administration workers (sig. = .006).

On the basis of the given analyses it may be claimed that **the Hypothesis 1 was confirmed**.

Hypothesis 2: We assume statistically significant correlations among the factors of the burn-out syndrome, the age of respondents and the length of their practice.

The given interrelations were analyzed by means of the Pearson's correlation coefficient. The burn-out syndrome factor of Personal Accomplishment negatively correlates with age ($r = -.475$, $p < 0.01$). It may be claimed that the higher the age, the lower the personal accomplishment of individuals. The length of work in the work area negatively correlates with the burn-out syndrome factor of Personal Accomplishment ($r = -.349$) also on the 1% level of significance. As the length of work in the work area increases, the performance of the worker decreases. The length of work in a position in an organization is connected to the negative correlation also with the factor of Personal Accomplishment ($r = -.200$, $p < 0.05$). It is possible to state that the bigger the length of work in a position within an organization, the lower the personal accomplishment.

Neither age, length of work in the area, nor the length of work in the position correlate with the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization.

3.6 Discussion and conclusion

In this research we focused on the burn-out syndrome and mental immunity in the context with the life orientation. The aim was on the basis of the selected sample of respondents to detect the life orientation of people and compare the level of the burn-out syndrome effect in the work process. Differences were detected in the work area of administration and education. In the administration, the burn-out syndrome factors which manifest themselves negatively were Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Accomplishment and Depersonalization. In the context of life orientation it is the feeling of incomprehension, surprise caused by the behaviour of familiar people, disappointment caused by the close ones, life as a routine, vision of an own life, reason to live own life, attitude towards unusual activities, possibility to rely on people in the future, the feeling of inability to overcome difficulties.

Respondents from the area of education in connection to the life orientation positively perceive the results in cooperation with other people, purpose and aim of life, unfair treatment, life in the past ten years, inability to act in unusual situations, unpleasant past experience, unclear ideas and mixed feelings, unwanted feelings, expectations of the

future life, not knowing what will happen next. From the given it may be stated that the administration displayed worse results. The second hypothesis also proved that the burn-out syndrome factor of Personal Accomplishment negatively correlates with age, length of work in the work area and the length of work in a work position. As the age of the employees and their length of work rise, their performance decreases.

Table 2 Correlations of the burn-out syndrome factors, age and the length of work

| | Age | Length of work in the area | Length of work in the position |
|-----------------------------------|---------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| factor of Emotional Exhaustion | | | |
| factor of Depersonalization | | | |
| factor of Personal Accomplishment | -.475** | -.349** | -.200* |

** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$

In general it may be claimed that coping with demanding life situations, stress and hardship is a dynamic process in which the method used by an individual to face their problems is of most importance. There are people who rely on themselves, their own possibilities, abilities and initiative with willingness to fight and manage own activities. They have at least one solid source for coping with difficulties and they trust their own abilities. The feeling that one has their own matters and life under control and is able to manage their behaviour and gain desired results is connected to the behaviour of an individual in the sense of a better, adaptive coping with their life difficulties. An individual actively faces the problems, unfavorable events and is able to cope with own emotional states better. For mental well-being of an individual it is important how this person perceives the difference between their own aspirations and life goals, the actual state of the life they live. The smaller the difference and the more is an individual able to utilize their resources for coping with demanding situations, the more prevailing is the feeling of subjective well-being and control over one's life.

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