

Burnout is caused by mismatch between unconscious needs and job demands

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New research shows that burnout is caused by a mismatch between a person's unconscious needs and the opportunities and demands at the workplace. These results have implications for the prevention of job burnout.

Imagine an accountant who is outgoing and seeks closeness in her social relationships, but whose job offers little scope for contact with colleagues or clients. Now imagine a manager, required to take responsibility for a team, but who does not enjoy taking center-stage or being in a leadership role. For both, there is a mismatch between their individual needs and the opportunities and demands at the workplace. A new study in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology* shows that such mismatches put employees at risk of burnout.

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion from work, which results in a lack of motivation, low efficiency, and a helpless feeling. Its health effects include anxiety, cardiovascular disease, immune disorders, insomnia, and depression. The financial burden from absenteeism, employee turnover, reduced productivity, and medical, legal, and insurance expenses due to burnout and general work-related stress is staggering: for example, the American Institute of Stress estimates the total cost to American enterprises at 300 billion US\$ per year, while a 2012 study commissioned by the Health Programme of the European Union estimates the annual cost to EU enterprises at 272 billion €.

In the new study, researchers from the Universities of Zurich and Leipzig show that the unconscious needs of employees - their so-called "implicit motives" - play an important role in the development of burnout. The researchers focus on two important motives: the power motive, that is, the need to take responsibility for others, maintain discipline, and engage in arguments or negotiation, in order to feel strong and self-efficacious; and the affiliation motive, the need for positive personal relations, in order to feel trust, warmth, and belonging. A mismatch between job characteristics and either implicit motive can cause burnout, the results show. Moreover, a mismatch in either direction is risky: employees can get burned out when they have too much or not enough scope for power or affiliation compared to their individual needs.

"We found that the frustration of unconscious affective needs, caused by a lack of opportunities for motive-driven behavior, is detrimental to psychological and physical well-being. The same is true for goal-striving that doesn't match a well-developed implicit motive for power or affiliation, because then excessive effort is necessary to achieve that goal. Both forms of mismatch act as 'hidden stressors' and can cause burnout," says the leading author, Veronika Brandstätter, Professor of Psychology at the University of Zurich, Switzerland.

Brandstätter and colleagues recruited 97 women and men between 22 and 62 through the Swiss Burnout website, an information resource and forum for Swiss people suffering from burnout. Participants completed questionnaires about their physical well-being, degree of burnout, and the characteristics of their job, including its opportunities and demands.

To assess implicit motives - whose strength varies from person to person, but which can't be measured directly through self-reports since they are mostly unconscious - Brandstätter et al. used an inventive method: they asked the participants to write imaginative short stories to describe five

pictures, which showed an architect, trapeze artists, women in a laboratory, a boxer, and a nightclub scene. Each story was analyzed by trained coders, who looked for sentences about positive personal relations between persons (thus expressing the affiliation motive) or about persons having impact or influence on others (expressing the power motive). Participants who used many such sentences in their story received a higher score for the corresponding implicit motive.

The greater the mismatch between someone's affiliation motive and the scope for personal relations at the job, the higher the risk of burnout, show the researchers. Likewise, adverse physical symptoms, such as headache, chest pain, faintness, and shortness of breath, became more common with increasing mismatch between an employee's power motive and the scope for power in his or her job.

Importantly, these results immediately suggest that interventions that prevent or repair such mismatches could increase well-being at work and reduce the risk of burnout.

"A starting point could be to select job applicants in such a way that their implicit motives match the characteristics of the open position. Another strategy could be so-called "job crafting", where employees proactively try to enrich their job in order to meet their individual needs. For example, an employee with a strong affiliation motive might handle her duties in a more collaborative way and try to find ways to do more teamwork," says Brandstätter.

"A motivated workforce is the key to success in today's globalized economy. Here, we need innovative approaches that go beyond providing attractive working conditions. Matching employees' motivational needs to their daily activities at work might be the way forward. This may also help to address growing concerns about employee mental health, since [burnout](#) is essentially an erosion of

motivation. To do so, we must increasingly take account of motivational patterns in the context of occupational stress research, and study person-environment-fit across entire organizations and industries," says Beate Schulze, a Senior Researcher at the Department of Social and Occupational Medicine of the University of Leipzig and Vice-President of the Swiss Expert Network on Burnout.

More information: Brandstätter V, Job V and Schulze B, Motivational Incongruence and Well-Being at the Workplace: Person-Job Fit, Job Burnout and Physical Symptoms , *Frontiers in Psychology*. DOI: [10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01153](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01153)

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