

March 2008 Edition

## Preventing burnout

We experience a certain amount of stress every day of our lives; it's natural. But when we don't deal with the things that are stressing us and the resulting tension becomes constant, we end up in a vulnerable position. Professional fatigue, otherwise known as burnout, can develop when a person is exposed to an elevated level of stress over a long period of time. Burnout can manifest itself through physical and emotional fatigue as well as through a range of other symptoms that affect a person's general behaviour. According to recent data compiled by Statistics Canada, there are nearly 800,000 Québécois suffering from professional fatigue, which makes it quite a widespread problem. So it is important to be informed about the issue, and to watch for signs in one's own behaviour and in the behaviour of others that could help in the detection and prevention of the problem.

### Watch for these early behavioural signs:

- ✓ Sleep no longer relieves fatigue
- ✓ Growing irritation with oneself or others, along with a cynical attitude
- ✓ A feeling of being unable to influence things or make choices: 'I feel trapped'
- ✓ Diminished efficiency that is often compensated by overwork, etc.

For some people, the first signs of a problem are physical: they feel tired and weak, and have less energy. For others, burnout is signalled by a change of attitude towards work, colleagues, and family members, etc.

The most important thing is to act and react; as soon as one sees any of these signs, one should take the time to find out what's wrong, and then find ways to fix it. Otherwise, the situation could get increasingly worse.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of burnout are different for everyone but generally, when a person does not react to the early signs, there are a number of secondary symptoms to watch for:

#### Emotional symptoms

- Dissatisfaction, frustration
- Tendency to blame, irritability, anger
- Loss of idealism, increase in criticism, cynicism
- Feelings of impotence, guilt
- Sense of emptiness, apathy, etc.

#### Cognitive symptoms

- Diminished ability to concentrate, pay attention, remember
- Feelings of confusion, difficulty making decisions

- Doubting one's judgment

### Physical symptoms

- State of general fatigue
- Trouble sleeping
- Gastro-intestinal, digestive problems
- Frequent headaches, nausea
- Numerous physical problems
- Muscular tension (back, shoulders...)
- Weight change
- Persistent colds, viral infections, etc.

### What are the stages of burnout?

Burnout does not simply appear one day; it is a process that happens in several stages:

- There is a gradual loss of satisfaction at work - the individual starts worrying
- Minor health problems begin to crop up
- The individual begins to question work, or have problems at work
- There is a loss of self-esteem, growing worries, chronic frustration and deterioration in performance
- General demoralization sets in: the person is worn out and becomes non-functional at work.

### What are the causes of burnout?

The main causes are twofold:

**Causes related to the individual (behaviour and attitude):** for example, the person is a hyper perfectionist, has low self esteem, is rigid in terms of certain beliefs, has unrealistic expectations of him or herself, etc.

**Causes related to the workplace environment:** burnout can be connected with among other things, a stressful job, overwork, lack of support, lack of resources needed to accomplish the job, harassment, poorly-defined instructions, etc.

### What's the best way to react?

#### *When you're experiencing burnout*

It is essential to talk about the situation, and to ask for help. Of course, confiding in family members or trusted colleagues is one idea. However, consulting a health and wellness professional is strongly recommended. By accepting professional help, the individual automatically gets the distance needed for personal understanding and awareness, and for avoiding the same old traps. Plus it will help the person to identify their needs and priorities, and to explore ways to change the situation. Consulting a psychologist will help the individual find a way to recover their personal and professional well being.

#### *When a colleague is experiencing burnout*

It is essential to establish or affirm a relationship of trust with the person before addressing the problem. Then, depending on their state at the time, you can help in a number of ways. For example, invite the person to open up about what they are going through then, over time, gradually lead them to an understanding of their actual state, and encourage them to seek professional help.

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