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## Burnout – Existential Meaning and Possibilities of Prevention

### ABSTRACT

Burnout can be understood as the symptom of a non-existential attitude adopted by a person towards his or her life and existence. The misrepresentation of existential reality is of such a degree that it manifests itself in symptoms of vital deficiency on the somatic and psychological level and can be understood as an internal protection against further harm. Prevention of burnout can be derived from this existential understanding. It has similarities to the prevention of addiction and extends from behavioural programs to the development of personality and to the central topic: analysis of existential attitudes.

This paper deals with existential attitudes in relation to experience and practice.

**Key words:** Burnout, Existential Analysis, Existential Meaning, Existential Vacuum

### 1. The Evolution of the Concept and the Definition of Burnout

Burnout can be described as a specific set of psychological symptoms that arise in the context of work. The symptoms of burnout were first identified and described by Freudenberger in 1974. In his study, Freudenberger observed a series of characteristic symptoms such as exhaustion, irritability and cynicism occurring in people who had volunteered to work for aid organisations. These volunteers had worked with great dedication and enthusiasm for several months prior to the onset of these symptoms. From his observations, Freudenberger described these people as "burned out" in contrast to their initial "glowing enthusiasm" (cf. FREUDENBERGER ET AL. 1992; SCHAAB ET AL. 1993, 45; KARAZMAN 1994).

MASLACH provides an important description of burnout (1982, 3):

*Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind.*

Other authors, however, do not agree that burnout is restricted to professions of social work. PINES and AARONSON (1988) for example, regard burnout as a symptom of extreme exhaustion and that this can be seen in any professional or non-professional (housework, for example) work.

The primary causes of burnout, according to MASLACH and JACKSON (1981 – cited after BROSCHE 1994, 156f.), are emotional exhaustion, “depersonalisation” and a diminishment of productivity (see table 1).

**1. emotional exhaustion:**

chronic fatigue (even at the thought of work), sleep disturbance, sleep disorders, diffused physical symptoms, being prone to illness;

**2. depersonalisation - dehumanisation**

negative, cynical attitudes towards colleagues, negative feelings towards the people who seek aid, feelings of guilt, retreat, avoiding behaviour and reduction of work, automatic and routine-like “functioning”;

**3. reduced efficiency and discontent with achievement**

subjective feelings of failure and impotency, lack of recognition, pre-dominant feelings of insufficiency and permanent overcharge.

**Tab. 1: The main symptoms of burnout after Maslach & Jackson (1981)**

SONNECK (1994) adds a further list of symptoms to Maslach and Jackson’s model of burnout. Sonneck introduces the term “vital instability” to describe symptoms of: depression, dysphoria, excitability, inhibition, anxiety, restlessness, despair and irritability. “In a certain way”, these symptoms are Sonneck suggests, “a development towards a presuicidal state” (ibid. 27).

Burnout is a specific health risk, particularly among medical doctors. When the symptoms of burnout are combined with depression, drug dependency and/or despair, it can lead to suicide, a rate which is about 50 percent higher among Austrian male doctors and about 250 percent higher among Austrian female doctors than the average population. Similar results were also found in BÄMAYR & FEUERLEIN (1984). It should be mentioned, however, that suicide rates in general are much higher among men than among women.

KARAZMAN (1994) found that the amount of hours a doctor worked per week had a direct effect on emotional exhaustion. How efficient a person was, however, did not appear to be significantly affected by the number of working hours. Similarly, there was no significant relation between the symptoms of depersonalisation and the total amount of working hours.

Rough estimates, with the help of the MBI (Maslach Burnout Inventory) in the U.S., have shown prevalent rates of burnout anywhere from 10 to 25 percent in the social professions (SCHAAB ET AL. 1993, 47).

The developmental stages of burnout are handled in different ways. FREUDENBERGER, for example, distinguished between two stages initially, one with and one without sensations (cf. BURISCH 1989, 19). In 1992, he expanded his description to include 12 stages. These stages

begin with a compulsion to prove oneself, continue with a reinforced effort accompanied by a neglect of one's own needs, a reinterpretation of values, negation of the resulting problems and lead finally to retreat, depersonalisation, an inner void and total exhaustion (FREUDENBERGER 1992, 122-156). MASLACH, by contrast, divides the phases of burnout into four parts (cf. also KARAZMAN 1994, BURISCH 1989, 19):

1. Idealism and overtaxing
2. Emotional and physical exhaustion
3. Dehumanisation as an antidote
4. Terminal phase: loathing syndrome (loathing of oneself, of others, finally a loathing of everything) and breakdown (professional resignation, illness).

SCHAAB ET AL. (1993, 46) provides an etiological description of burnout utilizing three complementary models:

The *individual*-psychological explanations underline the discrepancy between the exaggerated expectations in regard to work and everyday reality.

The *social*-psychological explanations see the taxations of social interplay as the main reason (e.g. Maslach).

The *organisational*-psychological explanations suggest that the main reason for burnout lies within the structures of an organisation (e.g. Cherniss 1980: not enough autonomy, role conflicts, little support and feedback from management, excessively high expectations in regard to the co-workers, etc.).

What follows is an attempt to describe burnout from the perspective of Existential Analysis. Existential Analysis is an individual-psychological model of interpretation. From this perspective, we will consider the dynamics of burnout. We will also describe the process wherein a person adopts a particular "existential attitude", an attitude that may lead to the symptoms and experience of burnout. Finally, a few considerations about the prevention of burnout will be made.

## 2. The Description of Burnout from an Existential-Analytical Point of View

We understand burnout as an *enduring state of exhaustion due to work*. This is the leading symptom and the general characteristic of burnout from which all the other symptoms can be derived. A state of exhaustion affects the general well-being of a person first. Burnout then influences subjective experience, which in turn affects a person's decisions, attitudes and actions. This type of exhaustion encompasses the three dimensions of human existence that FRANKL (1959) described in his anthropology:

*Somatic dimension*: physical *weakness*, functional disorders (e.g. loss of sleep) and even susceptibility to illnesses;

*Psychological dimension: listlessness, cheerlessness, emotional exhaustion, irritability;*

*Noetic dimension: retreat from demands and relationships, disparaging attitudes towards oneself and "the world".*

If the symptoms of burnout continue, it can lead to the formation of a "lens" that colours all further experience. A person's experience of themselves and the world is seen through this "lens" and is further characterized by a feeling of *emptiness* due to a persistent lack of somatic-psychological energy. This is accompanied by an increasing loss of orientation. As a consequence, feelings of emptiness will be accompanied by an overall feeling of meaninglessness that will expand into other aspects of life (from work to leisure and into the private sphere) and will finally consume a person's life in its totality.

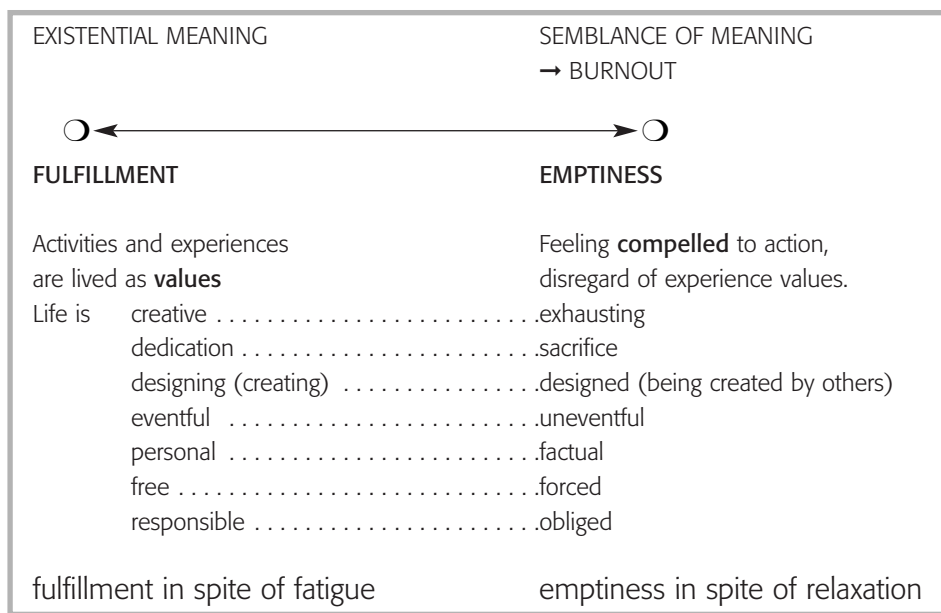
### 3. Burnout as a Special Form of Existential Vacuum

Frankl defined the term *existential vacuum* as a loss of interest (which could lead to boredom) and a lack of initiative (which could lead to apathy). As a consequence, such a loss of interest and initiative lead to a profound feeling of meaninglessness (FRANKL 1983, 10, 140 ff.). The predominant symptoms of burnout are similar to the two main symptoms of Frankl's "existential vacuum": feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness. Thus burnout could be understood within the framework of Logotherapy. It could be seen as a special form of the "existential vacuum" which also includes physical symptoms such as exhaustion. Although apathy and boredom are included in Frankl's definition of the existential vacuum, neither of these are primary symptoms of burnout but can occur as a consequence of other recurring symptoms.

These theoretical reflections on burnout are empirically backed by Karazman's study (1994) on 271 female and male doctors in Austria. The study showed that doctors with a sense of meaning in their private and professional lives exhibited only minor to medium susceptibility to burnout. But doctors who exhibited the manifestations of an existential vacuum, as described in the Maslach Inventory, displayed a high incidence of burnout with efficiency being only moderately affected. The existential vacuum goes hand in hand with a high degree of depersonalisation (distance towards patients) and a high degree of emotional exhaustion. These two symptoms in particular were found to remain high even when the subject's personal life was considered meaningful in contrast to their professional life.

What is the reason behind this exhaustion? What factors contribute to this exhaustion? Why are some people susceptible to burnout while others who work as much seem conversely to suffer from burnout? From a Logotherapeutic perspective, burnout can be explained as a *deficit in existential meaning*. Existential meaning is characterised by a sense of inner fulfilment. This experience will persist even in the face of fatigue and exhaustion if the relation to oneself, the experience of doing one's activities voluntarily and the sense of their value remain emotional-

ly present (FRANKL 1984, 28; LÄNGLE 1994). In contrast, a person whose life is dominated by a narcissistic pursuit of career or social acceptance is a life that lacks fulfilment and emotional reward (which contribute to existential meaning). A narcissistic pursuit demands energy and engenders stress. Instead of joy in one's achievements only pride will be felt. Pride is neither nourishing nor does it warm the soul. Even recreation and relaxation cannot fill the void of inner meaning and experience. These activities only replace the physical and psychological energy that is being lost or diminished. They do not replace the personal (subjective) and spiritual meaning inherent in these activities.



**Tab. 2: Confrontation of existential meaning and seeming meaning with their respective psychological effects.**

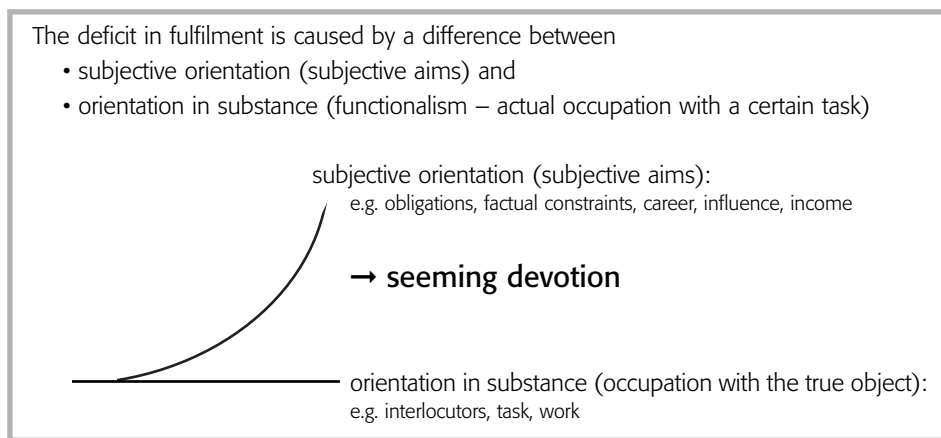
From a Logotherapeutic perspective, a person experiencing burnout lacks an existential meaning **towards the activities he or she is engaged in**. This means that personal fulfilment is not achieved. Thus, burnout can be described as a disorder of well-being, caused by a *deficit of fulfilment*. A sense of fulfilment is the result of a life dominated by the experience and realisation of personal values ("personal values" being understood as subjectively meaningful and attractive in contrast to more objective values such as cultural or social, for example).

To put it differently: *true fulfilment in work is the best protection against burnout*. If a person works with pleasure and interest on a project and experiences his or her life as meaningful and fulfilling, he or she is not in danger of sliding into burnout. These feelings or experiences must,

however, be differentiated from feelings of enthusiasm, of unfounded idealism, idealization and the hope (if not expectation) for happiness and success, for example.

#### 4. Motivational Theoretical Analysis

If we look further into the question of how such a massive and persistent deficit in fulfilment can come about, we find a motivational theoretical divergence between subjective intention and objective occupation.



**Tab. 3: The motivational theoretical analysis leads to a divergence between the subjective motive of action and the objective task.**

The orientation of people on the verge of burnout is not directed to the service of a project or a cause, but to *subjective* aims, such as career, influence, income, recognition, social acceptance, obligations or objective constraints (many of which one would like to be rid of). Even seemingly “selfless” motives, such as religious or humanitarian volunteering “for a good cause”, can result in a relational discrepancy with the project itself. A person who approaches a task with an orientation such as this is not motivated by the substance or value of the work, but by some external consideration. Therefore, providing aid or the specific work is not undertaken “because of this particular human being” or “because of this concrete task”, the people or the tasks are basically interchangeable. The true aim becomes the activity in and of itself and not the inherent value of the project. In these cases, a person’s dedication to the project is not genuine.

**Thesis 1:** Burnout is the result not of a motivation in substance, but only in *form* (= foreign to the project and lastly egoistical motives) and therefore leads to a mere semblance of dedication.

In addition, a person may feel less attracted rather than compelled to undertake a specific activity or project in which case the value of the experience is lost.

To be so strongly motivated "away from" values that are inherent in activities or projects, suggests that there could be an underlying deficit that is psychologically rooted. A formal analysis of motivations leads us to the second thesis:

**Thesis 2:** Dynamics of the genesis of burnout:  
actions are mostly undertaken because of

- **subjective needs**

and only secondarily because of

- **objective need**

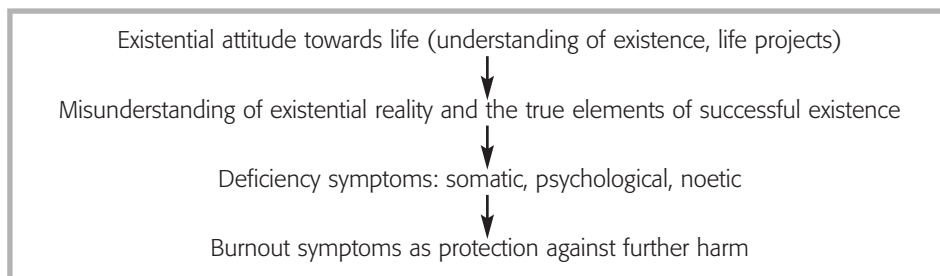
These subjective needs, in relation to burnout, can in fact be invisible for a long time, such as the idealistic aid worker that Maslach describes who devotes himself or herself to a project with great conviction and dedication. If a doctor develops symptoms of burnout during a flu epidemic, this need not be related to an initial state of neediness on his or her part, but rather to the limitless demands of the emergency. If the doctor dedicates himself or herself to the project with inner consent and conviction, he or she will be exhausted, but they will not show other typical symptoms of burnout such as cynicism, feelings of guilt, emptiness and suffering. Characteristically, burnout is not seen very often in times of calamity rather, it appears during daily work.

In general, for burnout to arise there must be an initial neediness, a non-existential attitude that is psychologically rooted which can lead to illness. There are also cases in which idealistic attitudes do not arise out of subjective deficits, but are adopted from others or derived from particular convictions, ideologies or religious beliefs. In either case, if a person is not able to compensate internally for the emotional loss generated by his or her efforts, the psychological manifestations are the same. This raises the question once again as to whether there may be in general psychological disorders or levels of internal neediness that reside underneath the symptoms of burnout.

## 5. Etiology from an Existential Perspective

Formally, the genesis of burnout was often explained by excessive stress or overwork. As a consequence, burnout was characterized by emotional exhaustion, it rendered relationships banal and functional, it was seen as causing a loss of self-confidence and productivity (KARAZMAN 1994). From an Existential Analytic perspective, we want to identify the specific *attitudes towards life* at the root of behaviour and motivation. We are interested in the degree to which

a person suffering from burnout is aware or unaware of these foundational attitudes. Whether a person is aware or unaware, these attitudes reflect a subjective understanding of what is thought, perceived and felt to be necessary and “what really counts in life”. The symptoms of burnout do not happen accidentally but flow from a personal and subjective understanding of one’s existence and what guides one’s actions. The existential attitude adopted in cases of burnout “misinterprets” the requirements and elements for successful human existence. This misinterpretation stems from a deficit in the somatic, psychological and noetic levels. Burnout in its final stage - diminished activity - can therefore be understood as an internal response in order to protect against further damage to the self. Existential Analysis views this final stage as a possible motivation, one that leads a person to reconsider their “attitude(s)” toward life.



**Tab. 4: The etiology of burnout from an existential--analytical point of view has its origin in a non-existential attitude (and idea of life “foreign to existence”) and thus leads to exhaustion.**

Let us re-examine the individual steps. A person experiences burnout when he or she is directed solely by a personal aim or motivation that is not linked to the task itself. In other words, the activity becomes merely a means to an end. Further, the attitude adopted toward the activity is prevalent prior to the onset of symptoms of burnout. Burnout starts with the person’s experience of alienation towards his or her work long before the symptoms appear. The work loses its unique worth and instead becomes merely of value for its use or usefulness (for example, its use as a stepping stone to get from one job to another). The person is oriented toward an aim or goal and not toward the unique value and meaning of the work. The first step reveals a person’s predominant attitude towards life. In this case, a person feels he or she needs a specific aim in order to have a valuable and worthwhile life. Paradoxically, such an attitude will inadvertently miss what is valuable and worthwhile. It will misconstrue the realities of the world and the requirements for a fulfilling existence. Such an attitude will not lead to a meaningful experience but only to the achievement of aims. These aims remain lifeless because they lack an inner consent or relation. Life then loses its capacity for quality. This can be expressed by the following two images: If the tasks and topics serve merely for one’s own aims, they are merely used as fuel – and life turns cold in their ashes, or “First the object is burned up and then oneself”



A misconception or misunderstanding in one's perception of the existential reality results in a disregard for:

- *the intrinsic worth* of other people, objects and tasks, which leads to a trivialisation of one's relations with the world; and
- *a disregard for the value of one's own life*, a person's body, emotions, needs and a sense of what is right are ignored and this leads to a loss of relation with oneself. As a consequence, a person will feel at odds, lifeless and discordant (cor = heart - one's heart is not in it).

A life that exhibits a disregard for the intrinsic value of others and of one's own life will produce *stress*. If we describe stress as an experience, we suggest that stress originates from a reduced contact with values; what a person is engaged in is not experienced as valuable or worthwhile. From an Existential Analytic perspective, stress can be described as a "lack of inner consent" with relation to the specific activity. The deepest root of stress from our perspective is doing something without truly wanting to or engaging in an activity without one's heart in it ("dis-cordant" life).

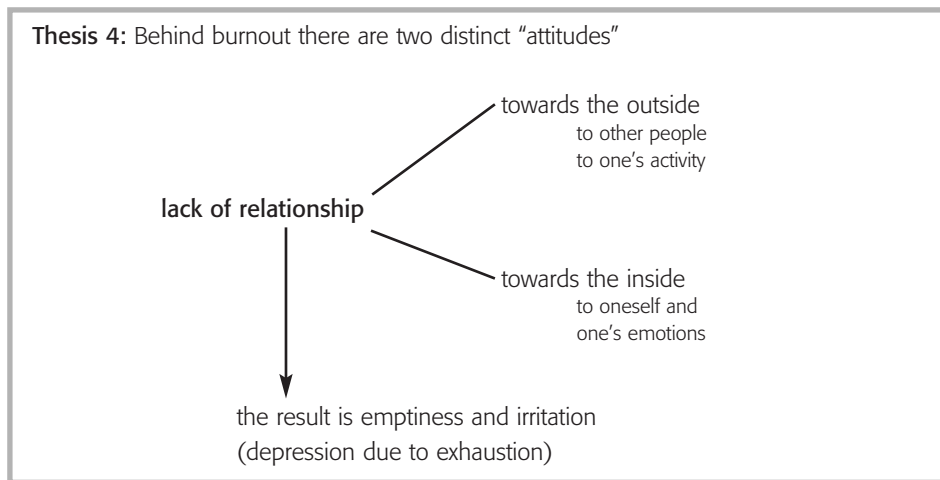
What follows is a summary of the problem of burnout from Existential Analytic, Logotherapeutic and Motivational-Theoretical perspectives. The experience of emptiness, a lack of fulfilment, psychological neediness and a reduced quality of life, all have the same origin. These experiences arise because a person lacks an *inner consent*.

**Thesis 3:** Burnout and stress originate in a life where the inner consent is missing from the contents of one's activity.

If a person pursues an activity or a profession over a prolonged period of time and uses his time without having an inner relationship to it, without seeing the intrinsic value of this task, without being able to consent to its content and without being able to really dedicate himself or herself to it, an inner emptiness will arise. This inner emptiness is a kind of "*pre-depression*" as there is no dialogical exchange, in which one gives, and also receives.

An attitude that is orientated toward aims rather than values, subordinates all activities under this orientation. This leads to a distancing between a person and his or her job. A person will not enter fully into relationships and will prohibit any openness by withholding his or her inner consent. This attitude and response to life leads to an emotional disengagement in which work becomes void of life. Work becomes a mere substitute for a lack of closeness and affect. Essentially the person becomes lifeless and empty. This *lack of relationship* contributes the most damage to a person and his or her life. Further, this damage is not without consequences.

As with many disorders, the lack of relationship that we have described here (corresponding to the 2<sup>nd</sup> existential fundamental motivation) tends to culminate with some form of depression. Burnout is a form of depression (depression due to exhaustion according to Kielholz – cf. Pöldinger 1994) that is brought about not by trauma or biological deviation, but by a loss of life values, of which nourishing commitment and devotedness to the object is key.



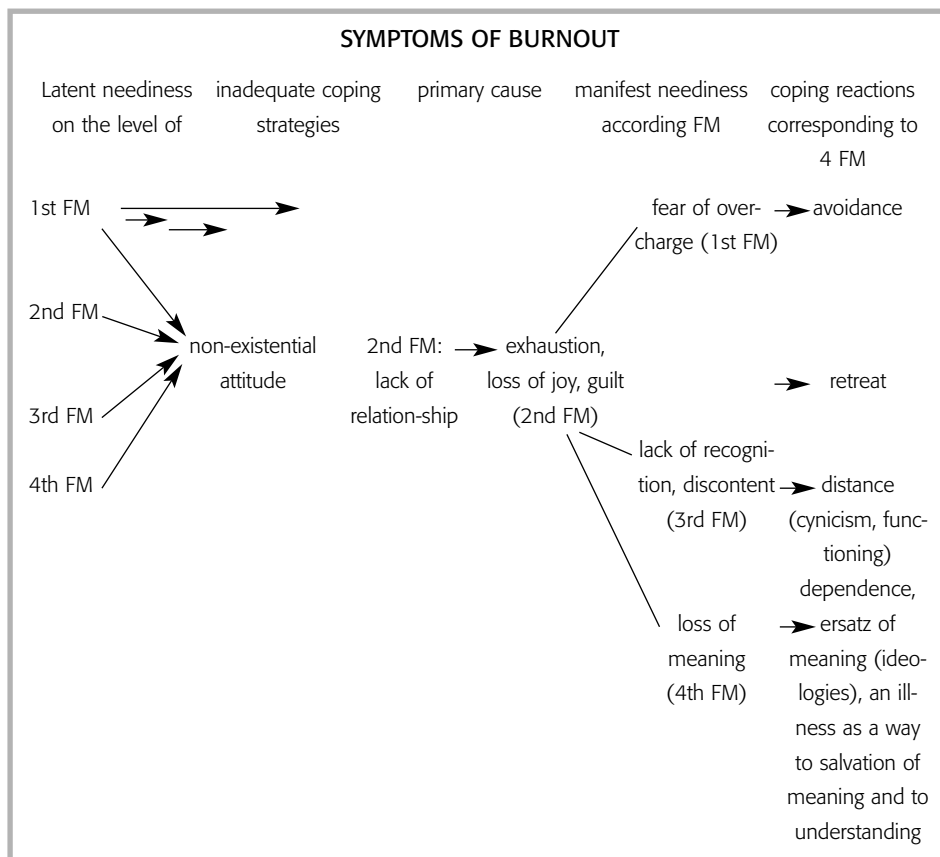
Burnout is therefore the result of several steps, the origin of which resides in a non-existential attitude towards life. By a non-existential attitude we mean a life that is merely oriented towards the aims or goals of life, that life is seen merely as a means to an end rather than an orientation towards the conditions of existence. Burnout from our perspective, begins with the symptoms of the existential vacuum, is compounded by external influences and/or subjective neediness and leads to a utilitarian attitude towards life. The result is what we term a lack of inner consent. This lack of inner consent in turn leads to a lack of relationship (towards others and toward oneself) and to a disorder on the level of the second existential fundamental motivation as set out in Existential Analysis. At its foundation, burnout is viewed from our perspective as a deficiency in the personal-existential fundamental motivations. In the next section, we will elaborate on this point.

## 6. The Origin of the Neediness and the Frustration of Personal-Existential Fundamental Motivations

A deficiency in *personal-existential fundamental motivations* makes inner consent impossible and gives rise to a psychological neediness. A life that is lived with great effort, but which lack relationships, leads to an inability to fully experience values and contributes to an increase in

emptiness and discontent (psychological frustration). This in turn will cause characteristic behaviours of aversion as a protective reaction (psychological coping-reaction). Burnout, therefore, can be linked with psychological neediness.

In conclusion, we will illustrate how existential life is impeded by burnout.



**Tab. 5: Analysis of the non-existential attitude leading to burnout. On the basis of latent and misunderstood needs attitudes towards life will be developed that do not fully correspond to the existential reality of man and lead primarily into a poverty in relationships, if it comes to a burnout. The consequence will be a manifest state of deficiency on the level of the 2<sup>nd</sup> fundamental motivation with the other fundamental motivations also touched upon (maybe in resonance with the original deficits?). A non-existential attitude can also be directly derived from the personal dimension, e.g. from religious convictions (see the final remark in chapter 4).**

According to existential analysis inner consent can only be given if the conditions for a full existence are met. A life without inner consent leads to psychological stress and disorders. In relatively sane people who have sufficient psychological perseverance and who are inspired on the personal level by an ideal or an aim in life, can however, lead a life that is poor in relationships which can create symptoms of burnout. An identical situation need not necessarily end in burnout, but may also result in a fixation of coping reactions (automatic strategies of handling difficult situations) that result in a *neurotic depression*. Finally, stress in work can also lead to *psychoses*.

Deficits can appear on the level of the *first fundamental motivation*, which deals with a person's need for security, protection, space and acceptance in the world. A life that lacks the experience of support leads to feelings of insecurity and danger. Such people are prone to rigidly ordered activities to which they stick because they provide support. These people will do everything in order to keep this "safe living space".

The *second fundamental motivation* deals with relationships and the value of life, with care and closeness, which give rise to emotional warmth. Disorders on this level, such as blocked emotions, fear of relationships or emotional stress lead to basic feelings of obligation toward others rather than relational openness. Such people are inclined toward the helping professions to compensate for their feelings of guilt, worthlessness and lack of relations. However, such people often do not escape their depressive feelings. Characteristically, these people live as if in a prison of their own neediness, which makes them sacrifice themselves for others. They struggle in order not to burden others; they put their own demands last and strive to be a "good" person.

The *third fundamental motivation* deals with the need for recognition, recognition of one's own individuality, of one's own worth and the justification of one's existence before oneself and before others. A person wants to be appreciated by others and wants to be able to appreciate himself or herself. Disorders on this level make a person prone to seek flattery and praise and to equate one's intrinsic value with a career or money. The neediness on this level points to a lack of self-worth and drives a person to become dependent on external recognition, validation and respect from others.

Finally, the *fourth fundamental motivation* deals with the meaning of existence. In this larger context, a person can come to understand themselves and his or her life. The three preceding fundamental motivations are prerequisites for this motivation. A person who does not have this existential motivation experiences only partial meaning, experiences mere semblances of meaning (fashions, socially approved aims, ideological explanations, for example) in contrast to a meaning that holds personal value, a meaning that is richer, more well grounded and rewarding.

## 7. Therapy and Prevention

Therapy and prevention of burnout, aim, of course, first at situational relief. Strategies that are considered are related to the person, the organisation and the institution (SONNECK 1994, 27). They include above all behavioural steps such as: the reduction of time pressure, delegation and division of responsibility, definition of realistic aims, discussion of normative opinions, dysfunctional beliefs and patterns of thinking and strategies for the improvement of work efficiency. Supervision and work on team conflicts have priority here (ibid.). Finally, treating a lack of autonomy and conflicts with authority are mentioned (SONNECK 1995, 9).

The *existential-analytical* treatment of burnout will initially proceed in the same way, but it will then treat burnout within the paradigm of the four fundamental motivations. Thus the attention is shifted from outer or external conditions to the attitude and meanings a person subjectively holds and expresses towards life. Discovering and elaborating on one's authentic existential attitudes in therapy represents a positive gain to be had from the experience of burnout.

In terms of prevention, ROTHBUCHER (1996) recommends the *existential meditation* as LÄNGLE (1988, 110-119) has described in the chapter entitled, "Anleitungen zu existenzanalytischen Fragen" and BÖSCHEMEYER (1988, 140-145) in the chapter, "Anstöße zum sokratischen Dialog". The existential situation can be examined by this means with possible pathologies and inconsistent areas detected early on.

The importance of relaxation techniques and recreation as a prophylactic is undisputed. In addition, Existential Analysis works specifically on *existential attitudes and situational decisions*. Only then will relaxation and recreation have a lasting effect. In prevention of burnout, Existential Analysis also goes into the development of personality. A few characteristic questions for prevention and treatment of burnout are compiled in table 6.

**Prevention of burnout** by questioning oneself:

- *Why* am I doing this?
- Do I *like* doing this? Do I experience that this is good and that therefore I like doing this?  
Do I get something out of this activity right now?
- Do I *want to live* for this – will I want to *have lived* for this?

**Tab. 6: A few essential existential-analytical questions for the prevention of burnout.**

Rothbucher and other authors precede their arguments by a poem by Eugen Roth, which runs about as follows:

A PERSON SAYS — AND PROUD IS HE:  
I LIVE FOR MY DUTIES!  
BUT SOON ENOUGH — AND LESS HAPPY,  
HE DROWNS IN HIS DUTIES.

The danger of burnout because of mere obligations can be prevented. A rule of thumb could be:

**Thesis 5:** If someone spends more than **half of his time** with things he/she does not like, in which his/her heart is not in it and that do not give him/her joy — sooner or later he/she will be susceptible to **burnout**.

Burnout is a fashionable term that describes a frequent phenomenon of our times. Our times can be characterized as hectic, demanding and achievement oriented. But our present day is also marked by a lack of relationship and a lack of commitment in the service of achievement. Burnout can therefore be understood as the bill that we are presented with for a life that is alienated and remote from our existential reality and that is determined by the demanding character and the spirit of consumption that marks our present times.

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