

# Burnout: when can we expect a formal recognition?

Although used in common parlance as a synonym for professional exhaustion, burnout still generally goes unrecognised as an occupational disease in Europe, with the exception of two countries. As the number of sufferers continues to grow year on year, when will this denial give way to allow for serious prevention?

**Alain Bloëdt**  
ETUI

In January 2022, Stromae made a guest appearance on the 8 p.m. news programme broadcast by French channel TF1, which has one of the largest audiences across Europe's TV schedules. In the middle of the interview and to the surprise of viewers, the Belgian singer gave an impromptu rendition of an as yet unreleased track from his new album, singing its haunting refrain:

'Sometimes I've had suicidal thoughts,  
And I'm not proud of it.  
Sometimes you feel it'd be the only way  
to silence them,  
All these thoughts putting me through  
hell.'  
(*J'ai parfois eu des pensées suicidaires  
Et j'en suis peu fier  
On croit parfois que c'est la seule  
manière de les faire taire  
Ces pensées qui me font vivre un enfer.*)

Like many other global stars, such as Kanye West, Britney Spears, Justin Bieber, Rihanna or Angelina Jolie, Stromae suffered from burnout. His song is a testimony of the devastating impact of this illness which, on a

daily basis, causes employees to be excluded from their place of work for entire weeks, months or even years at a time. This song also highlights the fact that no occupation is spared, with elite sportspersons the most recent to fall victim to this phenomenon. Their predecessors may have spoken of 'mental fatigue' or a 'lack of form or fitness', but today's champion athletes are no longer ashamed to talk about their poor mental wellbeing, including tennis player Naomi Osaka, swimmer Michael Phelps, and gymnast Simone Biles who, as hot favourite to win the prestigious all-around competition at the most recent Olympic Games in Tokyo, in a surprise move announced her decision to withdraw from the event. Sobbing one minute and smiling the next, she explained that she had to do what was right for her and focus on her mental health.

However, burnout is not the preserve of celebrities. Although there is a dearth of relevant data at European level, the problem can no longer be overlooked, as everyone knows or has known of someone suffering from burnout. To understand the scale of the problem, you need only look at the study

conducted by Bright Link, which is a spin-off from the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) specialising in the prevention of burnout. Carried out on some 5 000 employees, the study revealed that 18% of those subjects were at risk of exhaustion. The cause of this was attributed to conflicting instructions and an excessive workload, which are two psychosocial risk factors.

## The impact of stressors

If occupational risks are to be prevented, they must first be identified. Although this is no easy task, especially when workers themselves are in denial about those risks, scientists have today reached a consensus on the burnout phenomenon. It is regarded as a state of extreme exhaustion, at once psychological, cognitive and physical, that is related to work and in particular the worker's level of commitment. After all, burnout is often the result of overinvestment in work. Companies and organisations know that they can rely on these stalwart workers because they will find it hard

---

*With the exception of Italy and Latvia, victims of burnout in Europe must prove the occupational origin of their illness if they are to claim compensation.*

to say no to the excessive workload, and they want to 'do the right thing'. Ultimately, when experiencing a feeling of worthlessness and that their professional integrity has been brought into question, they will endure burnout like an agonising 'badge of honour', as Sabine Bataille, founder of the RPBO (Network of Post-Burnout Experts) and author of the book *Se reconstruire après un burn-out (Rebuilding your Life after a Burnout)*, explains.

Given that it is the consequence of an imbalance between job demands and the resources needed to deal with them, it is only natural that burnout should be recognised as an occupational disease. This was, in any case, the general conclusion implied by the global media in late May 2019 when they ran with the headline 'WHO recognises burnout as a disease'. At its annual meeting in Geneva, where it defines its strategy, the World Health Organisation (WHO) included burnout on its International Classification of Diseases (ICD) list – a global benchmark for health diagnosis. However, highlighting the confusion prevailing around burnout and its challenges, the WHO published a clarification less than 24 hours later: 'Burnout is included [...] as an occupational phenomenon. It is not classified as a medical condition.' End of debate? Not entirely, because the WHO in fact defines burnout as 'a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace

stress that has not been successfully managed'. The study on stress as a physiological process reveals that the human body is capable of managing pressure in the short term but struggles when confronted with prolonged or repeated exposure to stressors. According to Pierre Bérastégui, researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), this highlights the importance of preventing psychosocial risks, since aspects of the work environment can act as stressors.

### **The burden of proof**

With the exception of Italy and Latvia, victims of burnout in Europe must prove the occupational origin of their illness if they are to claim compensation. In France, for example, burnout sufferers are required to appear before the Committee for the Recognition of Occupational Diseases and have to demonstrate a permanent partial incapacity (at least 25%) to work, as well as the causality link between the work carried out and the symptoms experienced. The burden of proof may therefore lie with the worker, but the organisation of work – which comes under the employer's remit – is considered the main source of the burnout. However, few dare to venture down that road, because a procedure of that nature, which is lengthy and stressful, embroils victims in a situation from which they may quickly wish to extricate themselves.

Moreover, it is commonplace to read and hear accounts maintaining that the origins of burnout lie not only in the work environment but also in the personality of the victim. Although some individual factors admittedly exert a modest influence, all burnout victims will explain that the work environment bears a major and decisive responsibility in the onset of their illness. 'It isn't a private matter of the individual,' confirms Evangelia Demerouti, Professor at Eindhoven University of Technology and a leading expert in the field internationally. 'A private matter can make you less proactive, for example, but that does not mean that you are no longer capable of fulfilling your occupational obligations.' Far from a mere dip in performance, burnout is often experienced as a breakdown, a sudden meltdown plunging the worker into a deep depression.

The issue of accountability lies at the heart of the challenges associated with occupational risks. In his publication *Les risques professionnels. Peut-on soigner le travail? [Occupational Risks: Can we foster caring and supportive work arrangements?]*, Professor Arnaud Mias explains that when certain arduous jobs come under scrutiny, the tendency is to develop an individual approach and look to the individual person's lifestyle (diet, alcoholism, tobacco dependency, etc.). With musculoskeletal disorders, the general tendency is to focus on a person's physiological constitution, and thus the individual's genetic makeup. Similarly, psychosocial risks are 'psychologised away' so as to place the blame squarely with the individual. Under the guise of care for their wellbeing, employers sideline these workers, meaning that, ultimately, the work environment or organisation will not be called into question, and the business in those circumstances will have missed out on an opportunity to improve working conditions.

---

*As a consequence of imbalance between job demands and resources, it is only natural that burnout should be recognised as an occupational disease.*

↳ By speaking openly about their burnout, Stromae and other celebrities are helping us to better understand the ravages of this disease.  
Photo: © Belga



## The influence of managers

So how can the burnout epidemic affecting our workplaces be eradicated? Danish MEP Marianne Vind, who presented her report on health and safety at work to the European Parliament to the overwhelming approval of her colleagues across the political spectrum of the Strasbourg plenary, addressed that very question. Her argument is that, 'If you want to be a commercial diver, you need a licence. However, as regards managing teams and overseeing their well-being at work, no specific qualification is required. If we want to see off burnout for good, we need to train the managers.' Evangelia Demerouti is on the same page; she feels that 'promotion to a managerial position must automatically be accompanied by leadership training'.

Sociologist and author Sabine Bataille maintains that managers are now receiving training in her country, France, and even predicts that the victims of burnout in the future will be the managers. 'Suffering is happening at every level, not just at the lower levels but also among middle-level staff, among the managers.' She questions the role of the boardroom directors: 'As long

as they're making money, everything's fine, but whenever we see the growing individualism of careers, the 'quiet quitting', the lack of skills owing to the failure to anticipate technological development, we start to wonder what companies are waiting for with regard to taking better care of their employees... Especially when we know that one euro invested in preventing psychosocial risks would provide a return of four euros in the form of improved health and increased work productivity.'

## Gaining momentum towards recognition

According to a study conducted by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), nine out of ten European employers cite legislative compliance as the main reason for taking care of occupational health and safety.<sup>1</sup> In the short and medium term, recognition of burnout as an occupational disease therefore seems to be the sole measure capable of protecting workers, strengthening prevention mechanisms in workplaces and bringing an end to an incredible waste in terms of skills and commitment.

This decision could take the form of a European directive on psychosocial risks.<sup>2</sup> In early September, in her lengthy State of

the Union address, European Commission President Ursula van der Leyen announced an initiative on mental health for 2023, stating that she had been significantly inspired by the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe. 'I don't know whether she [the Commission President] is seeking a solution, but it's good at least to be talking about it!' commented Marianne Vind with a hint of caution. Two weeks later on 28 September 2022, two of the largest international organisations, the WHO and the International Labour Organization (ILO), stated their respective positions on this very subject. 'It is time to focus on the harmful effect that work can have on our mental health,' stated WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, seated alongside ILO Director-General Guy Ryder. This realisation may be late in coming, but Evangelia Demerouti also recognises it in company bosses who are struggling to recruit new talent. 'This ought to make employers take better care of their employees,' states the renowned expert. 'Especially as we all understand the impact that positive discussion and regular feedback have on commitment, performance and creativity. It is up to us scientists, politicians and trade unionists, to be clear in our solutions and adopt a positive narrative with a view to creating a protective social environment that will allow employees to excel and stay healthy.' ●

1. Irastorza X. (2019) *Third European survey of enterprises on new and emergent risks (ESENER-3)*, European Agency for Health and Safety at Work. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/third-european-survey-enterprises-new-and-emerging-risks-esener-3/view>

2. See Bethany Staunton's interview in this edition, p. 18.