What is the difference between depression and burnout? 
An ongoing debate

Burnout is a syndrome thought to develop in response to chronically poor and uncontrollable working conditions. Burnout is thought to comprise emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Historically, however, burnout has been difficult to separate from depression. Indeed, the symptoms of burnout coincide with symptoms of depression. Evidence for the discriminant validity of burnout with regard to depression has been weak, both at an empirical and a theoretical level. Emotional exhaustion, the core of burnout, itself reflects a combination of depressed mood and fatigue/loss of energy and correlates very highly with other depressive symptoms. Work-related risk factors for burnout are also predictors of depression. Individual risk factors for depression (e.g., past depressive episodes) are also predictors of burnout. Overall, burnout is likely to reflect a “classical” depressive process unfolding in reaction to unresolvable stress.

KEY WORDS: depression, burnout, stress.

SUMMARY. Burnout has been viewed as a syndrome developing in response to chronically adverse working conditions. Burnout is thought to comprise emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Historically, however, burnout has been difficult to separate from depression. Indeed, the symptoms of burnout coincide with symptoms of depression. Evidence for the discriminant validity of burnout with regard to depression has been weak, both at an empirical and a theoretical level. Emotional exhaustion, the core of burnout, itself reflects a combination of depressed mood and fatigue/loss of energy and correlates very highly with other depressive symptoms. Work-related risk factors for burnout are also predictors of depression. Individual risk factors for depression (e.g., past depressive episodes) are also predictors of burnout. Overall, burnout is likely to reflect a “classical” depressive process unfolding in reaction to unresolvable stress.

KEY WORDS: depression, burnout, stress.

RIASSUNTO. Il burnout è concepito come una sindrome che si sviluppa in risposta a condizioni di lavoro cronicamente avverse. Si ritiene che il burnout comporti esaurimento emotivo, depersonalizzazione e riduzione della realizzazione personale. Storicamente, tuttavia, il burnout è stato difficile da separare dalla depressione. In effetti, i sintomi del burnout coincidono con i sintomi della depressione. L’evidenza della validità discriminante del burnout nei confronti della depressione è debole, sia a livello empirico sia a livello teorico. L’esaurimento emotivo, il nucleo del burnout, riflette una combinazione di umore depresso e affaticamento/ perdita di energia e si correla molto bene con altri sintomi depressivi. I fattori di rischio correlati con il lavoro per il burnout sono i medesimi fattori predittivi della depressione. I fattori individuali di rischio per la depressione (per es., episodi depressivi pregressi) sono gli stessi del burnout. Nel complesso, è probabile che il burnout rifletta un processo depressivo “classico” che si manifesta in reazione a uno stress irresolubile.

PAROLE CHIAVE: depressione, burnout, stress.
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We refer to the original paper for a detailed discussion. In short, the ongoing debate between a categorical/diagnostic approach and a dimensional approach to burnout and depression further muddies the debate. The evidence suggests that what is labeled “burnout” is a depressive condition. We recommend that organizations, including the clinical settings in which psychiatrists work, take steps to minimize depressogenic working conditions, such as threats of violence, unreasonably high workloads, and unsupportive managers.

Conflict of interests: the authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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Riv Psichiatr 2018; 53(4): 218-219