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

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 unresolved stress.

KEY WORDS: depression, burnout, stress.
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Manna and Dicuonzo identified risk factors for burnout in psychiatrists and other professionals. These risk factors include lack of equity at work, high workload, lack of support and other work-related resources, violence exposure, and problems influencing workplace decisions. These are the very same risk factors that predict depressive symptoms and disorders in individuals across many different types of employment. Although Manna and Dicuonzo mention individual risk factors along with situational factors, the authors did not emphasize individual risk factors in their paper. Individual risk factors closely link burnout with depression. A series of studies links current burnout to a history of depressive disorders as well as to current intake of antidepressant medication.

Much of what Manna and Dicuonzo report raises another problem that must be addressed. Their discussion underplays the distinction between a categorical/diagnostic approach and a dimensional approach to burnout and depression. Both burnout (and its central constituent emotional exhaustion) and depression can be treated as continua. Manna and Dicuonzo wrote that depression is a mental disorder; however, recent research on psychopathology suggests that depression is better conceptualized on a continuum. Nonetheless, the lack of attention to the distinction between categorical and continuous approaches to burnout and depression further muddies the debate.

In conclusion, we think that Manna and Dicuonzo’s argument that burnout and depression are “distinct” is misleading. 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.

REFERENCES

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