

ABSTRACT

Burnout syndrome is a state of total exhaustion related to work conditions and prolonged stress. While initial phases of burnout resemble stress symptoms, final phases of burnout are characterized by feelings of hopelessness, loss of meaning and desperation that have similar qualities as depression as well as existential vacuum described by Frankl in his logotherapy. In addition, the burnout syndrome involves stages in which people detach from their emotions and feelings as a defense mechanism against stress and have decreased ability to experience their own feelings and emotional states. Burnout usually begins with feelings of enthusiasm and idealized visualizations and it is in contrast with subsequent disillusionment, disappointment experienced later.

After decades of burnout research, there is still a need for better definition of this condition including more precise diagnostic criteria and internationally recognized measurement tools, especially within health care system where the risks of unrecognized and untreated burnout are high. This study is focused on examination of potential causes of burnout and relationships of burnout symptoms with certain personality traits, defense mechanisms and coping reactions including Kernberg's concept of splitting, depression, traumatic stress symptoms, alexithymia on one hand, and with existential life fulfilment and capabilities to experience existential meaning on the other.

We have assessed these phenomena in health care professionals associated in Czech Diabetes Society utilizing psychometric measures Burnout Measure (BM), Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey for Medical Personnel (MBI-HSSMP), Splitting index (SI), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II), Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), Traumatic Symptoms Checklist (TSC-40) and Existence Scale (ES).

Overall study results indicate significant Spearman correlations between burnout syndrome (BM, MBI-HSSMP) and depression (BDI-II), splitting (SI), traumatic stress (TSC-40), alexithymia (TAS-20) (all above $r=.50$, $p<0.01$) and significant negative correlations with existential personal capabilities (ES) of self-distance, self-transcendence, freedom and responsibility. In addition, we calculated the multiple linear regression describing burnout symptoms measured by BM as a function of three variables TSC-40, BDI-II and TAS-20, $BM=F(BDI-II, TSC-40, TAS-20)$ with multiple $R=0.69$, $p<0.01$.

The current study findings provide implications the defensive mechanisms of splitting, traumatic stress symptoms, alexithymia and person's capabilities to seek and find existential meaning and life fulfilment may allow for the prediction of burnout symptoms. Such findings may be used in the potential detection, prevention and treatment of burnout.

Key words: Burnout syndrome; Splitting; Depression; Traumatic Stress; Alexithymia; Logotherapy; Existential vacuum; Existential Meaning; Life fulfilment