

Stress vs. Burnout: Treat Them the Same at Your Own Peril

By Dr. Steven Berglas

In today's economy, with threats of downsizings and layoffs looming like so many swords of Damocles over the heads of corporate employees, people are glad to be drawing paychecks and willing to work longer and harder than they ever expected to.

In a world-gone-mad like ours, it is an absolute certainty that the incidence and prevalence of stress disorders and psychological burnout will skyrocket. If caught early, these maladies can be controlled in fairly simple, straightforward ways. The key to successful treatment, however, isn't the complexity or cutting-edge quality of treatment interventions chosen to address these work-induced disorders. What matters most is not assuming that "stress" and "burnout" are one-and-the same. They are not, and knowing the difference might just save a person's career. Once you can differentiate stress from burnout (and vice versa), coping with the illnesses is relatively straight forward.

Good Stress/Bad Stress.

Stress is a word that is constantly misused, particularly when employed by the popular press. In fact, engineers are the only professionals (other than shrinks) that use the term "stress" correctly most of the time.

In engineering stress refers to an external force applied to a structure. For example, a bridge or a

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material such as concrete is stressed when forces are applied that cause changes the integrity of the material. Based on this mechanical definition of stress people have come to assume that the same sort of external forces causes psychological stress: something lurking outside us; an agent that has a uniformly adverse impact on anyone who is contacted by it.

Not so. Psychological stress is not caused by external forces, nor is there any single force that is a "universal stressor." Actually, psychological stress is a disorder that exists solely because of a person's perceptions - a 100% eye-of-the- beholder phenomenon.

In functional terms, people experience stress if they view something as posing a threat to harm them in a physical or psychological way. The most common job-related "stressor" these days is being yoked to a

job that forces people to work like a rented mule with fewer resources than are adequate to achieve success.

But stress can also be born in paradoxical ways. In the USA, skiing is a billion-dollar industry. Throw-in what people pay to get to ski slopes and stay there –eating and drinking as they prepare to ski or recover from a run down the slopes— and that figure doubles. For me, however, the prospect of standing atop an icy mountaintop on two slats of fiberglass while my wife and children urge me to follow them down a slope is a threat and a huge source of stress.

The distinction between my experience of, say, a Deer Valley ski slope, and what my family experiences when skiing, represents the biggest void in the stress literature. To be 100% accurate, the feeling skiers (like my family) enjoy when navigating a slope is what psychologists' call *eustress*— the "good" stress derived from confronting and overcoming challenges. My experience when fearing for my life on a ski slope is not actually stress, it is *distress*. In bottom line terms, as I tell all my clients, the only way to understand how one man's threat can be another man's *eustress* is to recall what the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus said: "Men are disturbed not by things but by the views they take of them."

As brilliant as Epictetus was, he failed to complete the analysis of stress. What he didn't tell us is that our sense of how much control we have over "things" modifies the views we take of them. Psychologists call this feeling "perceived control". Having perceived control over "things" minimizes the likelihood that they will be threatening, while not having it makes suffering distress more likely. To render something "un-stressful," all someone needs to do is believe that they are in control of it and bada-bing, it's a piece of cake.

The Etiology of Burnout.

Executives are very vulnerable to stress. An infinite number of events over which they have no control (e.g. tax increases vs. tax cuts), can make or break their ability to deliver as expected. Owing to this lack of control a stressed executive might, prior to seeking treatment, suffer a number of symptoms (from hair loss to impotence). Typically, however, stressed executives simply become highly irritable, unable to concentrate, and generally miserable.

Contrast this disorder with what is known about burnout. While a "loss" is at the core of burnout just as loss of control precipitates distress, the loss leading to burnout is different. *It is a loss of connection to one's career, a loss of commitment to what one does, and a loss of meaning from delivering as promised.* Typically, this loss (and, ultimately, the resulting experience of burnout), occurs when our careers cause us to feel cynical, detached from work and increasingly ineffective. In a word- meaningless.

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Unlike the person experiencing distress, the person suffering burnout is not anxious but, rather, detached - from work, and from his or her colleagues. When people are suffering burnout everyone

around them knows it because they are simply "going through the motions". My burned-out clients, all C-level executives, tell me: "I'm in it only for the money." The other signs of burnout are watching the clock, being passive-aggressive to higher authorities, or fantasizing an escape from work.

Supernova Burnout.

In addition to the generic form of burnout familiar to most mental health professionals, many C-level executives suffer emotional distress born of knowing that, for the foreseeable future, "job mobility" no longer exists. A decade ago, talented executives could put 5 years in at a firm, garner stellar reviews, and leave for greener pastures. Not today. As a result, folks who have high needs to achieve are generally challenge-deprived; stuck in jobs that pay them, but afford no psychic rewards.

If someone is an achiever, the pain of being stuck in a "challengeless" job can be tantamount to torture. Repeating tasks –like Sisyphus condemned to push a boulder up a mountain over and over— is living hell. The burnout born of this type of career is a condition I have dubbed *Supernova Burnout*. Strange as it sounds to those working themselves to exhaustion, doing nothing - at least nothing intellectually challenging - can be far more disruptive to a person's mental health than working 14 hours a day like a rented mule.

Doctor's Orders.

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If you fail to accurately differentiate between stress, burnout, and *Supernova Burnout*, you are in grave risk of pouring gas on emotional fires by using the wrong intervention to allay emotional pain. Many interventions ideal for "alleviating stress" (rest, relaxation, social support) paradoxically exacerbate the symptoms of *Supernova Burnout*. For example, if you are bored witless in an executive role, you need new challenges, not a vacation "soaking in the sun" at a resort. Sandy beaches can work wonders for those suffering stress, but two weeks of downtime imposed on a challenge-deprived executive robs him of what he needs: something new to conquer. Send your exhausted executives to Cabo San Luca, but give your over-achievers the opportunity to find new mountains to climb.

What You Can Do Right Now.

1. Stress.

If you, or a person you employ, are beginning to suffer stress-related symptoms, the only way to alleviate them is by increasing the amount of control they have over their work life. This is no mean feat in a down economy, but one can start by attacking the amount of self-imposed pressure (and resultant loss of control) they experience. Worrying or viewing things in a negative manner is the single biggest source of stress. I am not urging a Pollyanna-driven view of work, but waiting for the next shoe to drop

(in a firm besieged by layoffs and budget cuts), or wondering if the economy will worsen before it improves, is just plain useless. My friend Marshall Goldsmith uses a catch phrase that has guided, and undoubtedly helped, his life and his career: *Life Is Good*. If you avoid being envious of others, you believe have it better than you do, and appreciate whatever goodness your life affords, you will be amazed how the distress in your life will be reduced or eliminated.

2. Burnout.

To inoculate someone against *Supernova Burnout*, break their role into component parts and find a role that will afford them room to grow (without breaking your budget). Any challenging project that enables those at risk for *Supernova Burnout* to awake each morning eager to tackle an achievable goal (how about designing a peer mentoring program to boost performance?) will do the trick. Or, just have them mentor someone. There is no C-level executive alive who cannot pass on some wisdom to less experienced colleagues. Even the simple act of helping others weather the economic depression we are in is a gesture guaranteed to add meaning to their work and reduce the likelihood that they will suffer *Supernova Burnout*.

Finally, until you are certain that what plagues someone is stress or burnout (not both!), the best generic medicine I can prescribe for enhancing mental health is a self-directed program of abandoning efforts to control everything. Don't get me wrong; control works wonders when it comes to feeling good. But an obsession with having control or, worse yet, exercising it over things or others, is a one-way ticket to a psychological disorder.

When people are able to admit that they really do not have all the control they desire, they often find, to their surprise, that good things will occur. For example, when the former McKinsey & Company superstar Lou Gerstner, Jr. left RJR Nabisco to, quite literally, save IBM, he didn't enter the company with the attitude, "I just arrived from Mt. Olympus with this roadmap for your recovery." Quite the contrary. Rather than claiming Zeus-like prowess, Gerstner greeted the company by saying, "Forgive me, but I know nothing about IT. I know how to manage a business, so why don't you help me learn something about your area of expertise, and I'll give you mine. Together we'll regain IBM's vaunted stature." Which is just what came to pass.

In today's business environment it is impossible to meet all the demands foisted on people. To cope with the reality of the workplace, help people seek challenges (to overcome burnout) or lower expectations (to overcome stress). Or simply remind them of what Epictetus advised, and help them adjust their view of things.

Dr. Steven Berglas, a former Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, is an executive coach and consultant based outside of Los Angeles. His book, *Reclaiming the Fire: How Successful People Overcome Burnout*, can answer any questions you have about stress and/or burnout that were not covered above. You can contract Dr. Berglas at drb@egodoc.com.