

# **BURNOUT AMONG HUMAN SERVICES PROVIDERS IN NIGERIA**

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## ***Abstract***

*Those engaged in human services work come up with various complaints ranging from work stress to strain and mild depression. Beyond stress and strain lies another disorder, burnout, which the DSM has not recognized, but is recognized in the ICD–10. This paper examines the evolution of burnout and its application to human service providers, especially priests and causes of burnout in some related literature. Recommendations for prevention and cure were suggested.*

## **Introduction**

Burnout is not an official term or diagnosis in the field of mental illness. It is a term that was originally used to refer to a sense of fatigue and an inability to function normally in workplace as a result of excessive demands on the individual. Today, there is no agreement among researchers as to how burnout should be defined. Some see it as an exclusively work-related phenomenon, while others see it more broadly. In the general population, the term burnout is like any other popular notion. It continuously evolves and overtime, can almost take on a different meaning for each individual. Some people, for example, use the term burnout when they are feeling bored with their employment and want to seek new challenges. Others may use the term to describe a major depression. They may do so because depression still carries a powerful stigma. For most part, though, the term burnout is used when referring to the inability to handle the pressures related to work. It is observed that those engaged in human

services work, like teachers, priests, nurses, and doctors, fall victim of this disease and illness. This article focuses on the literature review on the impact of burnout on priests.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The current popularity of the concept “burnout” is a major barrier to defining it. It has become an appealing label for many different phenomena. According to Webster’s New International Dictionary, burnout can refer to the burning out of the interior or contents of something, such as building. Second, it can be used in the field of electricity to refer to the breakdown of a circuit owing to combustion caused by high temperatures. Third, it can be used in forestry to refer to a forest fire that has been so severe that the vital humus on the forest floor has been destroyed leaving the forest denuded.

Moreover, the American Heritage Dictionary (1985) defines burnout as “... to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources”. This definition suggests that burnout is the state of emotional exhaustion related to overload. Defined this way, burnout appears to be a disease of over-commitment. It is, however, of some interest that the dictionary does not use the word with reference to humans. To use the word “burnout” to refer to human condition is new because it refers to a recent social and psychological phenomenon.

So, the word “burnout” is drawn from the imagery of fire, and fire is a form and symbol of energy. In its broadest term, the problem of burnout is a problem of energy. As both Freud and Jung have theorized, each individual has a certain quantity of libido or psychic energy at his disposal and it is this energy that enlivens consciousness and makes effective living possible. This energy can be used up, but more psychic energy can also be generated.

The concept of burnout started as a grass-root description of prolonged occupational stress among human service workers, where former engaged employees gradually get overwhelmed of emotional exhaustion, loss of energy, and withdrawal from work. This

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description was introduced in the mid-1970s by two American researchers, Herbert Freudenberger and Christina Maslach, who independently described the phenomenon.

Freudenberger (1974) used the term “burnout” for the first time to describe a state of general fatigue recognized by mental health professionals in their own workplace. He described burnout in the following way: collapse, exhaustion or extreme fatigue resulting from an excessive demand of energy, strength or resources. He further explains that:

*An individual becomes rigid, stubborn and intransigent. He blocks any progress and constructive change because the change requires more efforts to adapt. The individual becomes cynical of their work and feels plunged into depression.*

He suggested that the individuals most likely to experience burnout are those who felt internal pressure to devote body and soul to their work in helping others while also feeling external pressure to give of themselves.

The original concept of burnout included only those individuals whose positions required a heightened level of empathy as in case of nurses, doctors and teachers. Other researchers went beyond Freudenberger’s definition by suggesting that burnout arose from the progressive loss of idealism, energy and sense of achievement in individuals working primarily in service-intensive professions.

In 1975, Freudenberger described three types of workers particularly vulnerable to burnout: 1) the dedicated worker who accepts too heavy a workload; 2) the over-determined worker whose life outside work becomes unsatisfactory; and 3) the authoritative worker who believes nobody other than him can work as effectively (perfectionist).

In 1976 Maslach provided a more complete definition of burnout by including physical and mental exhaustion observed in all

professionals whose work requires continuous contact with others. Maslach (1976) suggested that the syndrome does not appear overnight, but is caused by long-term stress beyond the workers control. She described burnout as “a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion marked by physical depletion and chronic fatigue, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and by developing a negative self-concept and negative attitudes towards work, life and other people”.

She offers the following symptoms of burnout: 1) decreased energy – keeping up the speed becomes increasingly difficult; 2) feeling of failure in vocation; 3) reduced sense of reward in return for pouring so much of self into the job or project; 4) a sense of helplessness and inability to see a way out of problems; and 5) cynicism and negativism about self, others, work, and the world generally. She further included personality and attitudinal factors which have propensity to increase burnout. Examples include the pressure to succeed; an authoritarian personality, who may come across insensitivity or a too sensitive person feeling with others’ hurts, but is vulnerable to criticism; inner directed rage, under-assertiveness (feeling victimized), carrying too much guilt about our humanness (an occupational hazard for clergy, so we develop facades for various occasions); inflexibility; and many more. Furthermore, Maslach and Leiter (1997) defined the antithesis of burnout as “engagement”. Engagement is characterized by energy involvement and efficacy, the opposite of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy.

Moreover, Sanford (1982) used burnout to describe a person who has become exhausted with his or her profession or major life activity, and opined burnout has become a major problem attracting the attention of the behavioral scientists. Some scientists have identified certain typical symptoms of the condition (Sanford, 1982: 1):

*Difficulty in sleeping; somatic complaints such as weight loss, lack of interest in food, and headaches and gastro-intestinal disturbances, a chronic tenderness of*

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*the sort that is not repaired by sleep or ordinary rest and only temporarily alleviated by vacations; low grade, persistent depression and a nagging boredom.*

Hart (1984) defines burnout as emotional exhaustion or 'compassion fatigue'. He maintains that burnout symptoms may include a) demoralization (belief of being no longer effective), b) detachment (treating self and others impersonally and/or withdrawing from responsibilities, c) distancing (avoidance of social and interpersonal contacts), and d) defeatism (a feeling of being beaten).

The essence of the problem, however, is the clash between expectations and reality. The clergy are often put on a pedestal by others and by selves. Many of the expectations just cannot be met. They try to please, but may either become too goal-oriented for people, or else too accommodating to their spiritual slackness. Strongly goal-oriented priests will almost inevitably experience more frustration than process-oriented ones.

Cherniss (1980a) defined burnout as psychological withdrawal from work in response to excessive stress or dissatisfaction. Burnout is used to refer to the situation in which what was formerly a "calling" becomes merely a job. One no longer lives to work, but works only to live. In other words, the term refers to the loss of enthusiasm, excitement and a sense of mission in one's work.

Still others have used the term as synonymous with "alienation". For example, Berkeley Panning Associates (1977) defined burnout as the extent to which a worker has become separated or withdrawn from the original meaning or purpose of his work.

Taken together these definitions of burnout suggest that we are dealing with a transactional process. More specifically, burnout appears to be a process consisting of three stages. The first stage involves an imbalance between resources and demands (stress). The second stage is the immediate, short term emotional response to this imbalance characterized by feelings of anxiety, tension, fatigue, and exhaustion (strain which is any deviation from normal responses in the

person (Caplan, 1975). The third stage consists of a number of changes in attitude and behavior, such as a tendency to treat clients on a detached and mechanical fashion or a cynical preoccupation with gratification of one's own needs (defensive coping).

Burnout thus refers to a transactional process, a process consisting of job-stress, worker-strain, and psychological accommodation. Specifically, burnout can now be defined as "a process in which a previously committed professional disengages from his/her work in response to stress and strain experienced in the job" (Cherniss 1980: 18). This definition of burnout is appealing for at least two reasons. First, it subsumes all of the most common definitions that have been used in the literature. Second, it provides a framework for thinking about causes and solutions to the problem. Some of the basic sources of burnout in human services could be represented in the following diagram.

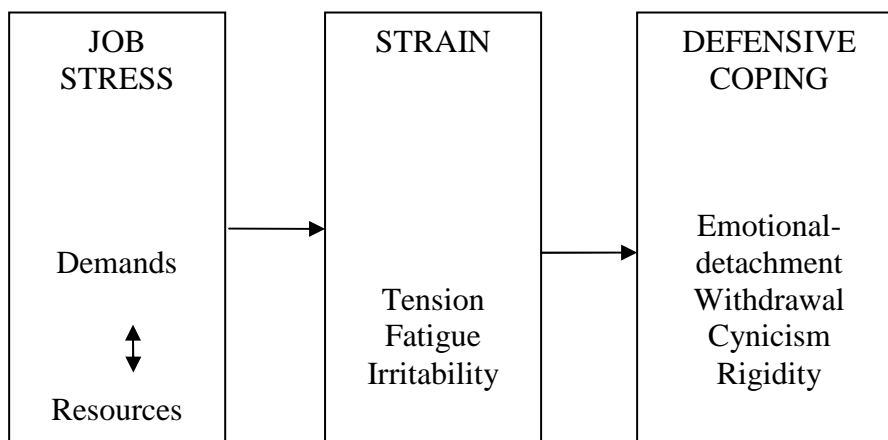


Figure 1.1: *Transactional definition of burnout*

Thus, it could be concluded that burnout concept was developed from field observations and not from theory. Since the 1970s, more than 5,500 studies and books on burnout have been published (Hallsten,

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Bellaagh, Gustavsson and Ubbranning, 2002, and Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1980). In a comprehensive review from 1998, Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998: 3) conclude that “burnout is not a new phenomenon – it has its root in the past. However, because of a unique constellation of several factors it was “discovered” in the early 1970s as a particular type of prolonged occupational stress that seemed to occur most prominently among human services professionals”.

Olsen and Grosch (1991) theorized that burnout among the clergy due to demands of visitation, pastoral counseling, administration, preaching, teaching, facilitating church growth, as well as being expected to be an expert in crisis intervention leaves many clergy feeling inadequate, exhausted, frustrated and frequently questioning their call to ministry. Furthermore, there are more underlying systematic issues that produce burnout which are far more complex. These include organizational design, intra-psychic issues of the congregation and minister’s family of origin. Therefore, burnout among priests can be understood as the consequence of four factors namely, organizational design, a particular clergy personality style that craves admiring appreciation, the demands and pressures of congregational life, and the developmental needs of the clergy’s own family. Olsen and Grosch (1991) based their assumption on self-psychology and systems theory of Kohut (1971).

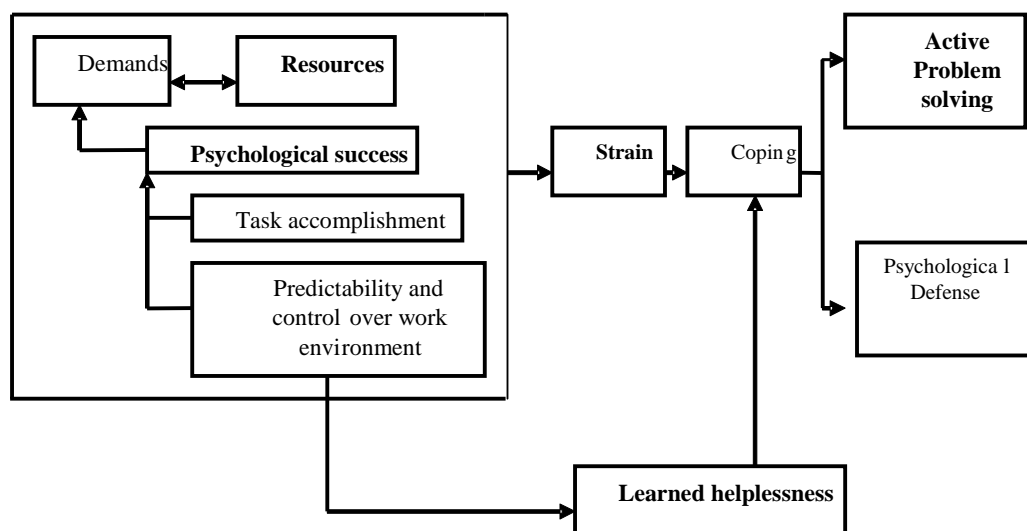


Figure 1.2: *Basic sources of burnout in human services programme*

Historically, burnout concept emerged in human services. Human service work or emotional work requires face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public to produce emotional state in another person as Hochschild (1983); Morris & Feldman (1996; Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini & Isic (1999); Grandey (2001) and Hasenfeld (1983) noted. Morris and Feldman (1996) distinguish between four characteristics of emotional work: 1) frequency of emotional display (number of people attended to per time); 2) attentiveness of emotional display (short or long-time contacts) and intensity of emotional display (surface and deep-acting-more involvement); 3) variety of emotion to be expressed (greater the emotional labor) and 4) emotional dissonance (emotion felt is not allowed to be displayed).

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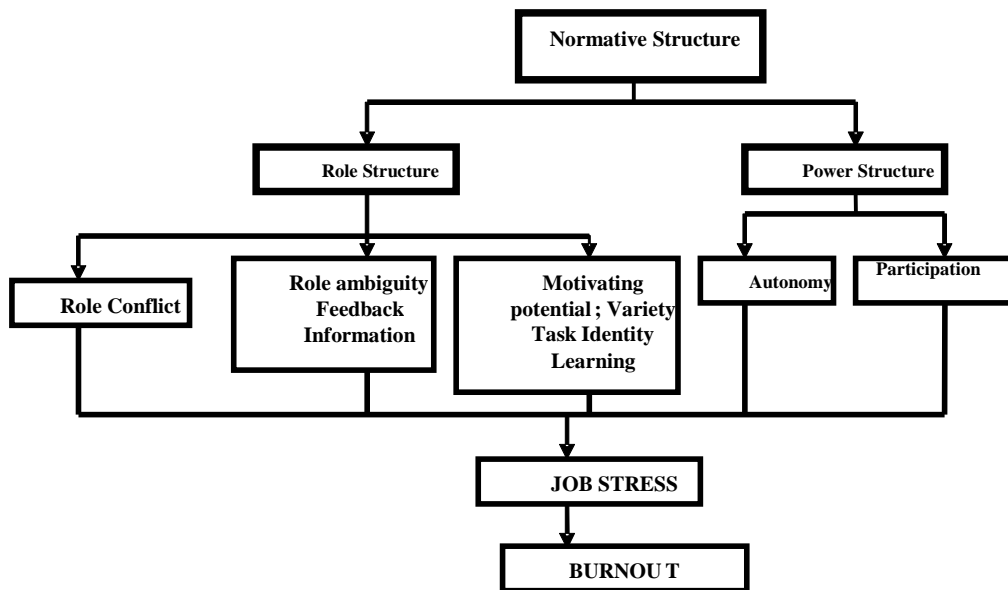


Figure 1.3: *Impact of organizational design on burnout in human service work*

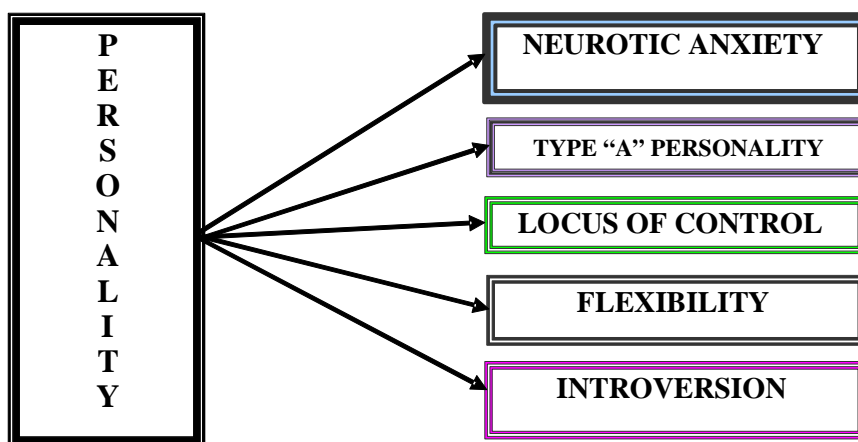


Figure 1.4: *Personality types that can easily lead to burnout*

Table 1.1: *Physical, emotional and behavioural signs and symptoms of burnout*

<i>Physical Signs &amp; Symptoms</i>	<i>Emotional Signs &amp; Symptoms</i>	<i>Behavioral Signs &amp; Symptoms</i>
1. Feeling tired and drained most of the time.	1. Sense of failure and self-doubt, Frustration	1. Withdrawing from responsibility.
2. Lower immunity feeling and sick a lot	2. Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated.	2. Isolating self from others.
3. Frequent headaches, back pains, muscle aches.	3. Detachment, feeling alone in the world.	3. Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done.
4. Change in appetite or sleep habits.	4. Loss of motivation	4. Using food, drugs or alcohol to cope.
5. Decreased energy.	5. Increasing cynical and negative outlook	5. Taking out your frustration on others.
	6. Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment.	6. Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early.
	7. Feeling of failure in vocation, cynicism and negativism about self, others, work and the world generally (Maslach, 1982).	

## **Recommendations: Prevention and Cure for Burnout**

1. **Find fresh spiritual disciplines.** There are many hundreds of ways to pray. Find about three or four and “shut the door”, as Jesus said. Turn your phone in vibration or switch off completely, and learn the art of relaxing, contemplative prayer. Then, as the New Testament suggests, do not be surprised when trials come your way. Jesus promised us trouble.
2. **Take regular time off.** You are not called to work harder than your creator. Develop a way of being “through the day” (at least most days). “Repose is as needful to the mind as sleep to the body. If we do not rest, we shall break down. Even the earth must lie fallow, and have her Sabbaths, and so must we” (Spurgeon). Jesus said, “Come apart and rest awhile.”
3. **Get proper exercise and sleep.** Exercise fairly vigorously three to four times a week. Walk, swim, play tennis, perspire and regularly breathe deeply. Allow adequate time for sleep. Hart (1982) asserts “Adrenal arousal reduces our need for sleep – but this is a trap; we ultimately pay the penalty. Most adults need eight to nine hours a night.”
4. **Relax.** The relaxation response is the opposite of the fight/flight response. Just 20 minutes a day when we are free from tyranny of “things present” is enough to counteract the harmful effects of stress.
5. **Join a small support/prayer groups.** Have a study leave.
6. **Cognitive restructuring (i.e. changing one’s thinking).** Take a personal audit. Reassess your goals. Like your clothes, change them sometimes. Improve your attitudes. Learn a healthy assertiveness. Know your gifts, and your limits. Face your fears; do not avoid them by pretence or bury them in an addiction. Above all, avoid states of helplessness. Learn not to make catastrophes out of ordinary events (increasing paranoia –

“they are out to get me” is a sign of burnout). Freudenberger (1982) suggests: “Discard outmoded notions; do not wear points of view just because you need to; Like old-fashioned clothes, they may become ill-fitting and ridiculous as time goes on”.

7. **Have fun.** To belong to the kingdom, you have to be like little children. They are not bothered about piles of correspondence or running the world. They are absorbed in even forgetting to run their own lives. So develop a few “interesting interests”; build something; audit a course, etc. But be doing something! And, laugh sometimes. “Do not take life too seriously; you will never get out of it alive.”

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