

FAT IS IN THE FIRE

Thoughts on the alarming signs of burnout threat of Hungarian law enforcement officers K. Solymosi

Solymosi Krisztina

Hungarian Riot Police, Human Services Department, Budapest

*Correspondence: Krisztina Solymosi, Készenléti Rendőrség, Humán Szolgálat, 1101 Budapest, Kerepesi út 47-49., Hungary

E- mail: solymosik@kr.police.hu

Abstract:

An alarming phenomenon is that recently an increasing proportion of young, talented and physically well-shaped law-enforcement officers show one or more symptoms of burnout. It is therefore necessary to improve – within the framework of regular psychological and physiological screening – current assessment tools and introduces more effective screening methods for coping functions as well as for physical and psychological predictors of burnout-threat. Research says that, in many cases, these indicators can predict future decline in performance. Prevention, or more specifically trainings and forming supportive relationships in the workplace are also very important.

Keywords: burnout, police, prevention

I deal with management training of Hungarian law enforcement officers since 2006. Over the last seven years, I have met more than five hundred persons during different sessions of very variegated length (1-30 days). These officers have arrived from almost all types of law enforcement organizations and nearly all management levels. Training is an interactive method where the instructor/trainer gets the opportunity to get to know participants and this way one can get an insight to their daily life, experiences, reactions, motivations and attitudes. During the reviews and discussions following tasks, participants share not only their current challenges, pleasures and success stories, but also those problems that make their daily work operation or even private life more complicated. This article is inspired by the alarming fact that, in the past years, there is an increasing proportion of young, talented and physically well-developed officers showing one or more symptoms of burnout: they are showing low energy levels, fatigue, extremely low levels of motivation, cynicism and desperateness.

The phenomenon is not unique: many European colleagues at a recent conference pointed out burnout of policing staff as the leading risk factor and mentioned that their countries plan or are already working on complex action plans for burnout prevention. In Hungary I do not know of such plans, however evidence shows that there would be a huge need for it. Despite the fact that understanding stress symptoms, mental and physical consequences of stress and coping with stress are all part of leadership training schedules at law enforcement institutions and that there is increased public media coverage of the topic, there is still a great lack of information in this area. Few people are aware of how much stress can jeopardize them both mentally and physically, and that after a while, there is no turning back, since the damages are permanent¹.

In one of our previous articles², we argued that a watchful recruitment/selection process of potential employees as well as a regular monitoring of the staff's aptitude, mental and physical health are essential conditions for development and meeting the rising

¹ Selye, 1978.

² Papp et al, 2010.

expectations. Currently health, mental and physical aptitude testing is regulated by the decree 21/2000³ jointly issued by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice and a Minister without Portfolio. Aptitude testing is first carried out prior to entering law enforcement education and/or starting regular service. Examinations entail medical-health tests and assessments of one's physical condition as well as general mental functions. There are four different types of psychological aptitude testing:

- preliminary psychological aptitude assessment (before starting regular service);
- regular psychological aptitude assessment (for those in regular service);
- special aptitude assessments (e.g. for applicants to special positions);
- emergency aptitude assessment (in case of certain problems).

These assessments entail personality tests, sensory-motor performance tests and perceptual performance tests for example, but specialised testing of coping functions and measurement of physical and psychological precursors of burnout are missing, however these indicators may predict future decline in performance.

In the absence of effective coping techniques, stress associated with everyday work tasks has a negative effect on both psychological and physical health (and certainly on the quality of work as well) in the long run. A Hungarian military study also confirms that sub-chronic physical and psychological stress make performance decline in a very special way:

- it deteriorates information storage and retrieval capability;
- performance in well-practiced, automatic sensory-motor tasks declines and
- some mental factors playing an important role in task execution such as mood or emotional stability change⁴.

The same study states that accumulated stress increases the possibility of emotional, affective and mood-directed responses, whereas the number and accuracy of experience- or knowledge-based, professional responses also decline. This would again result in incorrect task execution and poor performance.

One cannot stress it enough that there are psychological and physiological precursors that could be detected by appropriate assessment tools – even as part of the regular assessments. (E.g. detecting the sources regulating stress management and coping mechanisms or detecting inadequate psychological operations). This can be an important aspect in a system, where we constantly suffer from staff shortage and replacement of missing skilled, experienced personell is rather difficult and time-consuming.

What does burnout mean?

H. Freudenberger's (1974) classic definition is still valid today. In his view burnout syndrome is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by chronic, emotional burden (stress). This state is characterized by feelings of hopelessness and incompetence as well as losing goals and ideals. The person in this state has dominantly negative attitudes towards himself, his work and frequently others around him.

The phenomenon itself is not a novelty, but scientific research in the subject started only a few decades ago. The first studies of burnout were all focusing on professional workers dealing with people (e.g. nurses, physicians, social workers etc.). However it may occur in any profession, in which direct communication with clients, citizens, students etc. plays a major role. Most studies written in this topic addresses police officers and other law enforcement officials as a vulnerable group.

Over the past thirty-fourty years, many approaches and definitions were constructed for the concept of burnout. Static definitions focus on symptoms and the context of their emergence. Such a static definition is the most frequently cited definition by Maslach and Jackson (1981, 1984). They say that burnout can be characterized by symptoms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, and most frequently it

³ VIII. 23.

⁴ Hullám, 2005.

can be observed in persons working in „people-related” jobs. Dynamic approaches refer to the process itself. An example could be a definition from Cherniss (1980). He believes that burnout is a process in which the professional attitudes and behavior of the individual change in a negative way as a consequence of workplace overload. Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998), after reviewing previous research, proposed a synthesizing or integrative definition: in their opinion burnout is a state of mind that can be observed in normal, healthy individuals. This lasting, negative and work-related state of mind is characterized by distress-related fatigue, decreased performance and/or motivation, as well as development of dysfunctional working attitudes and behaviors. The authors focused on the role of coping in developing either ‘positive gain’ or ‘negative loss spirals’.

The Handbook of Work and Health Psychology published in 2003 dedicated an entire section to the burnout phenomenon⁵. After an overview of relevant research, they found that burnout correlates with

- demographic characteristics: those having a higher education and those under the age of 30 are more vulnerable than others, but there are examples to the fact that older, more experienced persons are more affected by this phenomenon⁶. Another interesting demographic issue is the fact that those living alone are more often vulnerable to burnout than those living in a steady relationship⁷.
- personality features: people having an external control attitude are more vulnerable⁸ compared to those having an internal control attitude, whereas those having an active-confrontative coping strategy are less affected compared to those having a passive-defensive coping strategy⁹. It is interesting to note that all three dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment) are negatively correlated with self-esteem, self-appraisal and with the competence motif¹⁰.

Burnout at the same time has several physiological implications, and several researchers dealt with this aspect during the past decade. Here are a few examples:

- Grossi et al. (2003) found that burnout accelerates metabolism and initiates oxidative stress reactions in women.
- De Vente et al. (2003) reported that post-awakening cortisol levels and resting heart rate of burnout syndrome test subjects are elevated as compared to a healthy control group.
- Armon et al. (2008) concluded that burnout and insomnia are risk factors of one another, i.e. existence or formation of one indicates that the other one will develop.
- Honkonen et al. (2006) believes that burnout in males’ causes’ mainly musculoskeletal problems while affected females rather suffer from cardiovascular diseases. These disorders interestingly correlated with all three burnout dimensions.

Literature thus provides numerous data for physiological changes occurring besides the well-defined psychological symptoms. Some of these – such as cortisol levels and change in heart rate – can be measured relatively easily while others require more complex intervention. It would be useful to examine which of these changes could have a predictive value at an early stage of burnout. These could then be added to the regular aptitude testing procedures. This would be important because traditional, questionnaire-based testing does not always show accurate results. Participants could try to make their answers more appealing, in order to avoid inappropriateness or the inconvenience of going to suggested treatments.

Concerning the organizational correlates of burnout, Maslach and Leiter identified six key domains: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. Let’s see these in a nutshell (based on Leiter and Maslach (2006)):

⁵ Schabraeq et al. eds. 2003; pp. 383-425

⁶ Schaufeli and Van Dierendonck, 2000; referred to by Schabraeq et al. eds. 2003

⁷ Maslach and Jackson, 1985

⁸ Glass and McKnight, 1996

⁹ Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998

¹⁰ Pfennig and Hüsich, 1994

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- The most commonly discussed source of burnout is workload, that is when job demands exceed human limits. Increasing workload has a strong relationship with burnout, especially with the exhaustion factor.
- The control area includes employees' perceived capacity to influence decisions that affect their work, to exercise autonomy, and to gain access to the resources necessary to do an effective job. Control problems occur when workers have insufficient authority over their work-related tasks or are unable to shape the work environment to be consistent with their values.
- The reward area of worklife deals with the extent to which rewards – monetary, social, and intrinsic – are consistent with expectations. Lack of recognition from others (e.g. service recipients, colleagues, leaders etc.) devalues both the work and the workers, and is closely associated with feelings of inefficacy.
- Community means the overall quality of social interaction at work, including issues of conflict, mutual support, closeness, and the capacity to work as a team. Sadly enough, some jobs isolate people from each other, or make social contact impersonal, but most destructive is chronic and unresolved conflict with others on the job. Such conflict produces constant frustration and hostility, and reduces the likelihood of social support.
- Fairness is another important element. Unfairness can occur when there is inequity of workload or payments, or when there is cheating, or when evaluations and promotions are handled inappropriately.
- A values conflict can undermine people's engagement with work. Value means for example the motivations that originally attracted staff to the job. The greater the gap between individual and organizational values, the more often staff members find themselves making a trade-off between work they want to do and work they have to do.

There is significant agreement in recent articles about the symptoms of burnout, however for example the above mentioned organizational correlates and other causal factors depend largely on culture – maybe this is why some findings of contemporary studies are quite contradictory.

Burnout was first studied in helping professions, but numerous researchers examined law enforcement fields, too. These studies – e.g. Alexander et al. (1993); Biggam et al. (1997); Brown, Campbell (1990, 1994); Evans, Coman (1993); Ellison (2004); Golembiewski, Kim (1990); Golembiewski et al. (1995), Burke (1993, 1997); Fishkin (1987) – generally emphasize two large groups of stressors affecting policemen. One group is stressors generated by the nature of police work (physical dangers, violence, insecurity etc.), the other is organizational stressors (leadership style, poor communication, lack of support, labor shortage, etc.). The above mentioned studies all conclude that the latter group is considered more important. Erika Szabó had arrived at a similar conclusion in her 2009 PhD thesis when she examined the characteristics of subjectively perceived workplace stress-load at the Hungarian Police. She found that stressors related to working conditions (e.g. financial recognition, lack of workplace comfort) are more burdensome than stressors related to actual work tasks¹¹. Interestingly, a large proportion of law enforcement research uses the Maslach's Burnout Inventory.

Possible solutions

Job burnout is a cluster of psychological and physiological symptoms that develop as a reaction to workplace stress. This condition however is not a static, one-time phenomenon, but rather a process that is repeated periodically. Individual features are responsible for the development of burnout on one hand, and characteristics of the work organization on the other. Therefore solutions could also be twofold: both prevention and intervention could appear on a personal as well as on an organizational level.

¹¹ Szabó, 2009

Probably the most effective prevention method is developing the frustration-tolerance capacities and the individual sources supporting it within the personality. Developing self-knowledge and assistance in acquiring certain coping and stress-release techniques could also be very effective. Clarifying personal motivations and attitudes is another important aspect. This means that trainings and all forms of education play an essential role in the prevention process. This is the personal level. On an organizational level team buildings of all kinds, developing a network of supporting working relationships, clarification of roles and responsibilities, shared values, goals and priorities as well as leadership development could help.

An organizational culture in which a person may sense his own importance, where employees feel that they are useful members of the community and are supported by each other is less likely to „produce” burned out employees. Workplace discussions, collegial consultations and systems introduced for decreasing work overload are all reducing the risk of job burnout.

Hungarian Police faces several problems or challenges nowadays:

- an overwhelming and uneven workload due to continuous headcount shortage;
- financial cutbacks (sometimes even endangering daily operation);
- continuous restructuring, changes in positions and adjustments and reforms in the legal environment;
- lack of shared goals, values and poor communication;
- the often rather hostile attitude of media and the public;
- the ever-shortening deadlines and high expectations, etc.

Conclusion

These problems put an extra burden on officers today, who unfortunately have little institutional opportunity to release these tensions. In order to protect the physical and psychological health of the law enforcement population, it would be essential to introduce new screening methods to indicate early stages of job burnout in addition to regular annual physical and psychological assessments.

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