

# TRAINER BURNOUT: THE SYNDROME EXPLORED

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## ABSTRACT

This study serves as an initial exploration into the burnout syndrome among training professionals. The findings indicate that, as in other human service occupations, burnout is a prevalent problem in the training field. Correlating the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES) subscales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment with a measure of the trainers' perceptions of the degree that the training function is valued by their respective organization revealed a statistically significant relationship with emotional exhaustion. The motives among trainers for entering the profession are also explored.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) published the results of a survey asking members to respond to the question "Are you burned-out?" as well as questions relating to the nature of stress levels experienced by the trainers in the workplace (ASTD, 1995). Forty-three percent of the respondents stated that they were burned-out, and another 25% felt that they were "in danger" of burning out. The overwhelming majority of the respondents (86%) indicated that their stress levels, due to work conditions, were increasing. And, increases in workload (83%) and demands from management (63%) were the most cited causes of stress.

Although the survey was conducted unscientifically, these results suggest that job-related stress and burnout are experienced by large percentage of training professionals, which is a cause for concern. Research on burnout among those individuals working in teaching professions has shown that the potential effects of burnout for the individual and for the organization are serious. Burnout has been linked to personal dysfunction such as diminished mental and physical health (Belcastro, 1982; Belcastro & Hays, 1984; Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Pierce & Molloy, 1990; Seidman & Zager, 1991), and increased use of alcohol and drugs (Farber & Miller, 1981; Lowenstein, 1991; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Costs to the organization include absenteeism, turnover, low morale, and impaired professional performance (Farber, 1991; Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991; Kierstead, 1983; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977; Litt & Turk, 1985; Needle, Griffin, Svendsen & Berney, 1980).

Freudenberger (1974) was the first to characterize burnout, stating it as feelings of failure and being worn out. Since then, an abundance of books, journal articles, and dissertations have been written on the subject. Over the years, however, the definitions and characterizations of burnout have varied. For example, Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) characterize burnout as a progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose. Pines and Aronson (1988) define burnout as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Sarros and Densten (1989) define burnout as a maladaptive coping mechanism to working conditions that are stressful, demanding, or lacking sufficient challenge and recognition. But, arguably the most widely adopted definition comes from Maslach (1982) who defines burnout as “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (p. 3).

As indicated in Maslach’s (1982) definition, burnout has been shown to be most prevalent among professionals who do “people work”, as opposed to those whose work does not involve direct contact when serving people in need. Indeed, burnout has been found to be prevalent among human service professionals such as nurses (e.g., Pick & Leiter, 1991), teachers (e.g., Farber, 1991), social workers (e.g., Pines & Kafry, 1978), and mental health workers (e.g., Pines & Maslach, 1982).

Why is burnout so prevalent among human service professionals? Pines and Aronson (1988) explain that human service professionals are particularly susceptible to suffer from burnout because of their inherent need to derive a sense of existential significance from their work. Specifically, most individuals entering human service professions are motivated to do so by a desire to work with people and to make significant contributions to the lives of those they serve. Pines, Aronson and Kafry (1981) write:

Most human service professionals are essentially humanitarian. Their dominant approach is to help people in trouble. They tend to be oriented more toward people than toward things. . . . In almost every encounter we had with human service professionals, we asked participants to list their reasons for choosing their profession. With almost no exception, whatever their occupation, their lists included such items as “I like people”, “I am a people’s kind of person”, “All my life I wanted to work with people” (p. 52).

These human service professionals appear to initially hold an exuberant expectation that they will succeed in their efforts to help others, thereby giving meaning and purpose to their own work and lives. This initial expectation and exuberance, however, sets the stage for potential burnout if this expectation should go unfulfilled (Burke & Richardsen, 1996).

Maslach (1982) explains that burnout is a psychological process that begins when these initially exuberant human service professionals are overwhelmed with the unexpected stressful aspects of the job that frustrate their efforts to make a positive impact on others. For example, a teacher may encounter a daily barrage of discipline problems in the classroom, excessive paperwork, and a lack of administrative support that taxes their time and ability to teach effectively. Indeed, prolonged exposure to these and other similar stress inducing conditions have been identified as antecedents of burnout among teachers (e.g., Cacha, 1981; Farber & Miller, 1981; Landsman, 1978; Paine, 1981).

According to Maslach (1982), continued frustrating events may lead these professionals to feel emotionally exhausted, lacking the energy to face another day. To cope, they may detach themselves psychologically and emotionally, "depersonalizing" those they serve as a means of distancing themselves from further stress-laden situations. Over time, these professionals may begin to harbor an attitude of cold indifference to the needs of others, which may ultimately lead to a sense of reduced personal accomplishment, defined as feelings of incompetence and a sense of being unsuccessful in work-related achievement.

In addition to work-related stress, burned-out professionals often experience a lack of positive feedback that, unfortunately, typifies the human service field. Pines, Aronson and Kafry (1981) found that employees are able to withstand great amounts of work stress if they feel that their work is valued and appreciated by others. But, in the absence of feedback affirming that the work they do is valued and significant, the stressors experienced day-to-day can overwhelm the human service professional. Maslach (1982) writes, "For those whose major motivation in entering a helping or teaching profession was to work with people, making their lives better, the lack of positive feedback or strokes from them is a particularly bitter pill to swallow" (p. 21). Thus, the human service professionals' inherent need to derive a sense of existential significance from their work coupled with prolonged exposure to stressful conditions and a lack of affirming feedback that their work is meaningful is a recipe for burnout.

### **PROBLEM AND PURPOSE**

Included in the realm of human service occupations are trainers. Like teachers, nurses, and social workers, the work conducted by trainers is directed toward improving the functioning of individuals. To this end, trainers devote considerable time and activity delivering training.

However, whether the burnout syndrome, as described by Maslach (1982), is evident in the training profession is unknown. A comprehensive computerized literature search found no empirical research investigating the antecedents and prevalence of burnout among trainers. What does exist is only anecdotal evidence that trainer burnout is commonplace. For example, Dana Gaines Robinson writes in *Training* (1984):

Trainers spend most of their time in the classroom delivering programs; accountability focuses on activity - the number of programs conducted, the number of participants, and so on; the training function is valued for the same things for which the department is held accountable - the number and variety of its programs, having a large course catalog becomes a real barometer of success. Those characteristics are common among training departments. It also is common for trainers in such departments to "burn out" from all the stand-up training and begin to wonder about the value of their efforts (p. 42).

Recently, a small group of experienced trainers employed by a variety of organizations were asked during a round table discussion to share with us what it is like to be a trainer today, and the levels and sources of the stress they may feel. The majority of trainers said that they have, indeed, experienced an increase in the workload. Statements such as "more work than time", "the hectic pace", and "lack of time to conduct follow-up training" were common responses among the trainers. Further, many of the trainers we spoke to reported that they did feel burned out. But, we learned from these trainers that perhaps it is too simplistic to blame

burnout on an increased workload. As one trainer told us, “Having a lot of work that needs to be done yesterday is the nature of the job”. According to the trainers, the real frustration and stress comes from working in an organization that fails to value the importance of training and the contribution trainers make to the organization’s functioning. Statements such as “trying to sell management on the benefits of training”, “convincing upper management that training is essential”, and “an inability to compel supervisors to follow the training plan” were cited most often by these trainers as stressful. In essence, these burned-out trainers felt unheard and that the work they provide is undervalued by their respective organizations.

The conversations we have had with these trainers prompted our further inquiry into trainer burnout. In this paper, the results of our research in the burnout syndrome are presented as an initial exploration of burnout among trainers. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the following research questions:

1. How do measures of burnout among trainers compare with those professionals in other human service occupations?
2. To what extent do trainers enter the training profession intrinsically motivated to help and improve the performance of workers?
3. What are the nature and strength of the relationship between trainer burnout and the trainers’ perceptions that their work is undervalued by their organization?

## METHODOLOGY

### MEASURES

*Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES).* To assess levels of burnout among the respondents, the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) was administered in a questionnaire. The MBI-ES is designed to measure an educator’s perceived levels of emotional exhaustion and fatigue, negative attitudes toward students, and feelings of personal accomplishment on the job. Specifically, the MBI-ES consists of 22 items that are divided into three subscales (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment) that reflect aspects of the burnout syndrome. Individuals are required to respond to each item by indicating the frequency in which they experience the feelings described in the items from a Likert-type scale ranging from zero (never) to six (every day).

The validity and reliability of the MBI-ES were substantiated in two studies. Both Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) and Gold (1984) found through factor analysis support for the three-factor structure of the MBI-ES. Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) report Cronbach alpha internal reliability estimates of .90 for emotional exhaustion, .76 for depersonalization, and .76 for personal accomplishment. Gold (1984) reports slightly lower estimates of .88, .74, and .72, respectively.

In its original form the MBI-ES, makes reference to “students” on several items. These referents were replaced with “training participants”, which is a term more suitable for those who receive training. Internal reliabilities for the burnout subscales with this population were 0.90 for emotional exhaustion, 0.74 for depersonalization and 0.66 for personal accomplishment.

*Motivation to Enter Training.* As discussed earlier, human service professionals appear to be most susceptible to burnout because they begin their careers exuberant and idealistic, motivated by an intrinsic desire to work with and help others. This finding prompted us to ask whether trainers are also more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated when they begin their careers. To ascertain the trainers' initial motives for entering the training field, respondents were asked to select from a field of options the reason(s) they chose to work in training. The options included three extrinsic (e.g., higher pay) and two intrinsic (e.g., help people) motives, as well as an "other" option allowing respondents to list motives not provided for selection.

*Perceived Value of Training Function.* To measure trainers' perceptions of the degree that the training function is valued by their organization, a scale was constructed consisting of 4 items. The items were based on statements made by the small group of experienced trainers that are indicative of an organization that values (2 items) or fails to value (2 items) the training function, with the latter being reverse coded. For example, an item characterizing an organization that values the training function was "My organization views training as an investment in its employees rather than an expense". Respondents were required to select an option for each item from a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The responses were summated for each respondent resulting in a scaled score with higher scores indicating perceptions that the organization values the training function. Cronbach's internal reliability for the scale was .82.

## POPULATION

Questionnaires were mailed to 176 in-house trainers identified from a membership list of an ASTD chapter located in a northeast metropolitan area. In-house trainers, as opposed to private consultants, served as the focus of the study because of the need for the trainers to be capable of identifying the perceived value given to training within their respective organizations. Of the 176 questionnaires mailed, 16 were returned due to an incorrect address. An additional 4 surveys were returned incomplete. Thus, the accessible population was 156. Forty usable questionnaires were obtained after two follow-up mailings, a response rate of 26%. While the response rate is low, it is not unusual. Alreck and Settle (1995) note that mailed surveys with response rates over 30% are rare. However, to control for non-response error, 10 of the non-respondents were randomly chosen, contacted by telephone, and asked to respond to one question from each subscale of the MBI-ES. Each individual's response to each of the three questions was then compared to the mean of the responses to these questions by the 40 respondents. Each comparison found that the response by those individuals contacted by telephone was within two standard deviations of the mean of the responses by the 40 respondents. Therefore, the burnout data collected from the non-respondents is consistent with the data collected from the respondents.

## DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSES

Demographic information collected from the respondents finds that 29 out of the 40 were female (72.5%). The ages of the respondents ranged from 29 to 62 years with a mean of 44.18 years. Two participants failed to disclose their age. The ethnic makeup of the respondents consisted of 35 Caucasians (87.5%), 4 African-Americans (10%), and 1 Asian. Slightly more than half (52.5%) hold a Master's degree or doctorate. The length of tenure as a trainer in their respective organization ranged from 2 months to 15.5 years, with an average tenure of 3.5 years. Most of the respondents (32.5%) indicated that they worked in an organization employing more than 5000 employees, followed closely by those working in an organization employing

101 to 500 employees (27.5%), those employing 1001 to 5000 (22.5%), and those employing 501 to 1000 employees (15%). Only one respondent (2.5%) indicated working in an organization that employed less than 100 people. All of the respondents identified the delivery of training as their primary job duty.

A series of initial analyses were conducted to determine if statistically significant relationships exist between the demographic variables and the burnout subscales. No statistically significant correlations were found.

## RESULTS

### PREVALENCE OF BURNOUT AMONG TRAINERS

Research question 1 asked, “How do measures of burnout among trainers compare with those professionals in other human service occupations?” Presently, no normative data of the MBI burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment exist for training and development professionals. Therefore, it is not possible to make direct comparisons of scores obtained from the population in this study with a representative norm group. Instead, a comparison of the present population to those in other human service populations was made. Table 1 provides the mean and standard deviation for each of the 3 dimensions of burnout for this population of trainers, along with those previously reported by Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1996) from normative data of other human service professions.

Table 1

*Means (Standard Deviations) of Professions on the 3 Dimensions of Burnout*

Profession	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
Study findings:			
Training (n = 40)	19.12 (10.80)	3.35 (3.58)	34.27 (9.11)
Normative data:			
Teaching (K-12) (n = 4,163)	21.25 (11.01)	11.00 (6.19)	33.54 (6.89)
Postsecondary Ed. (n = 635)	18.57 (11.95)	5.57 (6.63)	39.17 (7.92)
Social Services (n = 1,538)	21.35 (10.51)	7.46 (5.11)	32.75 (7.71)
Mental Health (n = 730)	16.89 (8.90)	5.72 (4.62)	30.87 (6.37)

As shown in Table 1, the mean burnout sub-scale scores of emotional exhaustion (19.12) and personal accomplishment (34.27) align closely with the normative data from other human service populations. However, the mean sub-scale score on the dimension of depersonalization (3.35) is somewhat lower than those of the other populations, indicating that, on average, the trainers in the present sample are detached psychologically and emotionally from others to a lesser degree than the comparison groups.

Among the professions in which normative data exists, postsecondary educators were deemed most closely aligned with workplace trainers in that both groups are involved in the transference of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to adults. Therefore, the trainers' scores on each of the three burnout dimensions were compared to the scoring rubric developed by Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1996) indicating low, moderate, and high levels of burnout established for postsecondary educators. Table 2 shows the proportion of trainers in the present sample that fall into each of these three categories.

Table 2

*Percentage (Number) of Trainers Scoring Low, Moderate and High on the MBI Subscales*

Subscale	Low	Moderate	High
<u>Emotional Exhaustion (EE)</u>	≤ 13	14 - 23	≥ 24
Trainers	30% (12)	32.5% (13)	37.5%(15)
<u>Depersonalization (DP)</u>	≤ 2	3 - 8	≥ 9
Trainers	52.5% (21)	37.5% (15)	10% (4)
<u>Personal Accomplishment(PA)<sup>a</sup></u>	≥ 43	42 - 36	≤ 35
Trainers	15% (6)	37.5% (15)	47.5% (19)

<sup>a</sup>Note. PA is scored in opposite direction from EE and DP. Subjects scoring in the low category have high feelings of PA while those scoring in the high category have low feelings of PA.

As shown in Table 2, the number of trainers falling within the “low”, “moderate” and “high” emotional exhaustion categories were relatively evenly distributed, with most (37.5%) in the “high” category. In the depersonalization dimension, only 10% were classified as “high” while most of the trainers fell in the “low” depersonalization category (52.5%). With regards to personal accomplishment, 47.5% were classified as “high”, indicating that almost half of the trainers in the present study feel “inadequate” in their ability to effect positive change in their training participants.

## MOTIVATIONS TO ENTER THE TRAINING PROFESSION

Research question 2 asked, “To what extent do trainers enter the training profession intrinsically motivated to help and improve the performance of workers?” Among the five options available for selection, the intrinsic desire to improve worker performance was selected most often (67.5%), followed closely by the desire to help people (65%). The more extrinsic motivators of promotion opportunities (37.5%), opportunities to travel (12.5%), and higher pay (9%) were selected with considerably less frequency. Eighteen percent of the participants selected the “other” option and supplied additional motives that were intrinsic in nature such as “to create a more vital workplace”, “opportunities to impact lives”, and “an interest and enjoyment in training”.

## TRAINER BURNOUT AND PERCEIVED VALUE OF TRAINING FUNCTION

Research question 3 asked, “What are the nature and strength of the relationship between trainer burnout and the trainers’ perceptions that their work is undervalued by their organization?” A Pearson product-moment correlation ( $r$ ) identified a statistically significant relationship between the perceived value of the training function and emotional exhaustion ( $r = -.51, p = .001$ ). A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, however, revealed that the distribution of data on the depersonalization and personal accomplishment subscales failed the required assumption for parametric tests that the data is normally distributed. Therefore, the non-parametric equivalent of the Pearson  $r$ , the Spearman rho ( $r_s$ ), was applied. The analysis to identify the nature and strength of the relationship between the perceived value of training and depersonalization found a correlation coefficient that was not statistically significant ( $r_s = -.31, p = .054$ ). Although in the hypothesized direction, the relationship between perceived value of the training function and personal accomplishment was also found not to be statistically significant ( $r_s = .27, p = .095$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study have several important implications. First, these results provide evidence supporting the existence of the burnout syndrome among trainers. The norm grouping scores for each subscale of burnout, shown in Table 2, reveal that more than a third of the trainers in this study experience feelings of emotional exhaustion almost every week; one out of ten of the trainers feel callused and detached from their training participants several times a year. Almost half of the trainers in this study feel a lack of personal accomplishment at least once a week. Thus, burnout is not an infrequent problem within the training profession.

The results also point to a probable explanation for the burnout. Like those in other human service professions, the majority of trainers in this study entered the training profession intrinsically motivated by the desire to improve the functioning of others. For trainers, improving the functioning of employees in the workplace is the primary goal of the training they provide. But, for those trainers working in organizations that fail to value and give meaning to the training function, emotional exhaustion and, to a somewhat lesser degree, depersonalization of the trainees become more likely.

The influence of the perceived value of the training function on personal accomplishment is less clear. Almost half of the trainers have low feelings of personal accomplishment. Still, as evidenced by the comparably weaker correlation, perceptions of the organizational value for training has less influence on these feelings of personal accomplishment than it does on the other subscales. One possible explanation for this finding is that the emotional exhaustion experienced by trainers is tied more directly than the other subscales to the frustration that arises

from continually trying to sell management on the benefits of training. It is conceivable that this emotional exhaustion sets in motion the depersonalizing of the trainees.

However, feeling a lack of personal accomplishment may have less to do with the frustrations born out of an unappreciative and unsupportive organization and likely has more to do with a lack of feedback validating that the trainer's work has significantly improved the work-related functioning of others. Supporting this notion is evidence presented by Newstrom (1986) that trainers do indeed perceive that their training efforts rarely produce recognizable and lasting improvements in the functioning of individuals or their organization because of factors that impede the transfer of training to the workplace - a source of frustration for trainers. But, this perception by trainers appears to be based more on subjective observations in the workplace rather than objective evidence drawn from a comprehensive training transfer evaluation of a training program (Foxon, 1997). According to a survey conducted by Van Buren (2001), less than 25% of organizations conduct evaluations to determine whether training transfer has occurred. In most organizations, then, feedback that would validate that the trainer's work has significantly improved the work-related functioning of others and the organization is non-existent. Research investigating the influence of positive feedback through training evaluation on feelings of personal accomplishment is recommended.

Future research is also needed to identify specific support characteristics that define an organization that values or fails to value the training function and its relationships to burnout. One avenue of inquiry that may prove particularly revealing is that of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986) and its relationship with trainer burnout. Specifically, perceived organizational support is characterized as the employees "global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1986, p. 501). According to Eisenberger, et. al. (1986), these beliefs are influenced by the frequency, extremity, and judged sincerity of praise and approval, as well as other rewards such as pay, rank, and job enrichment opportunities. Thus, this research may provide additional evidence supporting the relationship between trainer burnout and the extent that contributions made by trainers are perceived as being valued.

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