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The association between burnout and physical illness in the general population—results from the Finnish Health 2000 Study

Perhaps unsurprisingly the group of people who report feeling exhausted is more likely to include people with ill health. Causal direction and validity cannot be determined from this study but the study will inspire such investigations.

This was a cross-sectional study of 3,368 Finnish employees aged 30+. Burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory [burnout is a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism and ineffective work] and physical illness was assessed by physician examination.

There is no agreed conversion of inventory scores to degree of burnout; in the present study, burnout scores were categorized as follows: no burnout (scores 0–1.49), mild burnout (scores 1.50–3.49), and severe burnout (scores 3.50–6).

Health outcomes were from the following general groups: musculoskeletal disorders [The group of musculoskeletal disorders included a heterogeneous group of multi-aetiological disorders such as chronic low back syndrome, chronic neck syndrome, hip osteoarthritis, and knee osteoarthritis], cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and general group of diabetes, allergies etc.

Potential confounders were age, marital status, wealth, daily smoking, quantity of alcohol per month, recreational activity, BMI and depressive symptoms.

16% of the population had cardiovascular disease, 10% respiratory disorder and 30% a musculoskeletal disorder. 72% had no burnout, 25% mild burnout and 2.4% severe burnout.

With increasing burnout score were increased rates of diagnosis of musculoskeletal and cardiovascular illness in both men and women. In correcting for confounders, the link between heart disease and burnout disappeared for women. Odds ratios were of the order of 1.2 to 1.3 for these outcomes.

Comment

Is burnout work related? On present evidence it is not possible to determine whether the physical illness reduced the capacity to cope, or the burnout caused the physical illness, or burnout and physical illness are both the result of some other pathological mechanism.

The results are such that these possibilities are worthy of further investigation. Illness rates were surprisingly high in this study population.

