



# Empirical evidence for a relationship between narcissistic personality traits and job burnout



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The relationship between burnout and depression has been a major focus of burnout research, but personality factors might be equally important. Largely based on theoretical grounds, narcissism has repeatedly been proposed to contribute to burnout.

**Objective:** The aim of this study was to examine empirically the relationship between burnout and narcissism.

**Methods:** We investigated 723 consecutive in-patients, aged between 22 and 80 years (51.2% female), at a hospital specialized in the treatment of job stress-related disorders. Patients completed the 22-item Maslach Burnout Inventory and the 20-item Narcissism Inventory, the Beck Depression Inventory, the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index and the Perceived Stress Scale.

**Results:** After controlling for sociodemographic factors, depressive symptoms, sleep quality, and perceived stress, narcissism explained 3.5% of the total burnout score ( $p < .001$ ); regarding burnout dimensions, narcissism explained 7.3% of emotional exhaustion ( $p < .001$ ) and 3.6% of depersonalization ( $p < .001$ ), but was unrelated to lack of achievements ( $p = .45$ ). Depressive symptoms explained 3.6% of the total burnout score, 2.6% of emotional exhaustion, 2.0% of depersonalization, and 1.4% of lack of achievements (all  $p$ -values  $\leq .005$ ).

**Conclusions:** Personality factors, especially narcissism, may be equally important as depressive symptoms, and thus should regularly be considered in burnout research and therapy.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Theoretical background of burnout

There is an ongoing discussion among researchers and in the public about the conceptualization of and factors contributing to job burnout (Rössler, Hengartner, Ajdacic-Gross, & Angst, 2013; Thalhammer & Paulitsch, 2014). Freudenberger introduced the term burnout in 1974, focusing on assessment, prevention and treatment, whereas Maslach and her colleagues (Maslach, 1976, 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Pines & Maslach, 1978) developed a theoretical framework for research on burnout. In the past 40 years, burnout research has established the complexity of the construct,

with burnout being primarily associated with workplace factors; however, these studies also showed that people deal with the same working conditions differently, thus hinting at the role of personality in this disorder (Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009; Gündel & Dammann, 2012; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2002; Swider & Zimmermann, 2010). Despite this, there has been little research on the influence of personality factors on burnout (Alarcon et al., 2009; Maslach et al., 2001; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010).

It is generally accepted that job burnout is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by both job and individual characteristics (Karanikola & Kleanthous, 2011). There is no “gold standard” definition of this condition. Rook (1998)—listed 16 different definitions, and this number has been increasing steadily (Burisch, 2010; Hillert & Marwitz, 2006; Rösing, 2003). The International Classification of Diseases (ICD)-10 codes burnout under the additional section Z73.0 “Problems related to life management difficulty” (Dilling, Mombour, & Schmidt, 1991). The definition by Maslach

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and Jackson (1986) has most often been used in research; it characterizes burnout by three symptoms dimensions, namely emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP) and lack of accomplishment (LA) at work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) that are assessed with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The three-factor solution of the MBI is supported by empirical studies (Worley, Vassar, Wheeler, & Barnes, 2008).

### 1.2. *Overlap between burnout and depression*

Depression is one of the leading causes of work disability (Rössler, 2012). Work stress has significantly been associated with the risk of a major depressive episode (Wang, 2005). Depressive disorders are common in the workplace, negatively impact on performance and promote absenteeism. Furthermore, depression is highly prevalent in working individuals early in their careers, and persists over years (Patten et al., 2006). Burnout is often associated with depression (Ahola & Hakanen, 2007; Bianchi, Boffy, Hingray, Truchot, & Laurent, 2013; Campos & Maroco, 2012). Some authorities view depression and burnout as equivalent (Bianchi et al., 2013), emphasizing a substantial overlap between burnout and depressive symptoms (Ahola, Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Mutanen, 2014; Bianchi, Schonfeld, Laurent, 2015; Hintsa et al., 2014; Reime & Steiner, 2001). An increase in depressive symptoms was shown to predict an increase in burnout symptoms and vice versa (Toker & Biron, 2012). The risk of having a depressive disorder was greater when burnout was severe, compared to mild or no burnout (Ahola et al., 2005). In a Finnish study (Ahola & Hakanen, 2007), burnout was found to act as a mediator between job strain and depression.

In contrast, differences between burnout and depression have also been observed in empirical studies (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2002; Glass & McKnight, 1996). Correlation coefficients between burnout and depression have been reported to be around .6 (Glass & McKnight, 1996; Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012; Upton et al., 2012), although spanning a range between .22 (Zhong et al., 2009) and .90 (Waldman et al., 2009) for relations between the MBI total scores and Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) totals scores. A parsimonious interpretation of the current literature may be that burnout and depression share some commonalities, but neither of them is a redundant concept. To this end, we also tested the relationship between burnout and depression in our sample.

### 1.3. *Burnout and its possible relationship with narcissism*

Narcissism should be distinguished from narcissistic personality disorder (Emmons, 1984, 1987; Ritter & Lammers, 2007) as a normal but heterogeneously formed personality facet; it ranges from 'grandiosity-exhibitionism', which is related to extraversion and self-idealization, to 'vulnerability-sensitivity', which is associated with introversion, defensiveness, and anxiety (Wink, 1991). Overt narcissism (grandiosity-exhibitionism) can be distinguished from covert narcissism (vulnerability-sensitivity) (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Wink, 1991). Only when there is an extreme expression of narcissistic symptoms should a diagnosis of pathological narcissistic personality disorder be made (Ritter & Lammers, 2007; Ronningstam, Gunderson, & Lyons, 1995; Wink, 1991). According to Deneke and Hilgenstock (1989) who introduced the Narcissism Inventory, narcissism is a multidimensional construct with a self-regulatory character, consisting of both positive, narcissistically satisfying processes, and negative processes subjectively experienced as threatening, degrading and nagging.

Important to narcissistic individuals is the visibility of their accomplishments and being acknowledged (Kohut, 2013). There often is a discrepancy between self-awareness and the perception of others, with a trend towards self-aggrandizement (Tominschek & Zäuner, 2012), so that narcissistic individuals experience feel-

ings of being misunderstood and offended. Work can be important for the stabilization of their self-esteem, while private life is often unsatisfactory. There is evidence to suggest that self-esteem may play an important role in both burnout and narcissism. One previous study revealed an association between emotional exhaustion and diminished self-esteem in nurses (Tomás-Sábado et al., 2010). Indeed, self-esteem is a predictor and a consequence of burnout (Dahlin, Joneborg, & Runeson, 2007; Rosse, Boss, Johnson, & Crown, 1991), and narcissism has consistently been shown to relate to elevated self-esteem (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Emmons, 1984, 1987; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998). Fischer (1983) postulates that self-esteem is based on a narcissistic illusion. The combination of idealization of the job and the subsequent disillusionment caused by reality comes with two opportunities, namely either lowering ideals or quitting the unsatisfying job. Narcissistic workers would rather exhaust (i.e., "burn out") their resources before facing disillusionment at workplace.

Based both on clinical observations and theoretical concepts as described above, Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) described burnout as a narcissistic disorder (pp. 108–109). They pointed out that as early as 1979, Lasch (1979) described society—as being narcissistic with increasingly transient, unrewarding, and also combative nature of social relationships. Farber (1983, p. 11) described this trend as "a perfect recipe for burnout". As a result, the development of narcissistic, self-absorbed, manipulative individuals who demand immediate gratification of their desire but remain perpetually unsatisfied is fostered." (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; p. 13). Other unresolved narcissistic issues such as overextending oneself and conflicts between role demands and needs for personal gratification (Glickauf-Hughes & Mehlman, 1995) also might lead to burnout. One study found narcissistic personality type to be considerably frequent in dentists with burnout (Alemany Martínez, Berini Aytés, & Gay Escoda, 2008). However, to our knowledge, the relationship between burnout and narcissistic regulatory mechanisms has not previously been investigated empirically.

### 1.4. *The present study*

The above-mentioned literature is intriguing, as it may suggest that prevention and interventions for job burnout might be informed by targeting coping with narcissistic regulation mechanisms. Against this background, the primary aim of our study was to empirically explore the relationship between burnout and narcissism in a cohort of patients hospitalized for professional burnout. We hypothesized a direct relationship between narcissism and burnout independent of important covariates, including sociodemographic factors, depressive symptoms, perceived stress, and sleep problems. As described above, not only depression, but also stress and sleep problems are highly associated with burnout (Ahola & Hakanen, 2007; Sonnenschein, Sorbi, van Doornen, Schaufeli, & Maas, 2007) and, moreover, stress and depression are also associated with narcissism (Fukunishi, Moroji, & Okabe, 1995; Kealy, Tsai, & Ogrodniczuk, 2012). A secondary aim was to compare the variance explained in burnout symptoms by narcissism to that by depressive symptom severity.

## 2. *Methods*

### 2.1. *Study participants and recruitment*

This ongoing study was conducted with a consecutive sample of employees, referred for in-patient treatment to a hospital specialized in the treatment of job stress-related disorders, including burnout. In the present study, we analyzed 723 patients hospitalized in 2012 and 2013. In Switzerland, patients with burnout

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