Accepted Manuscript

Title: Hair cortisol as a biological marker for burnout

symptomatology

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PII: \$0306-4530(17)30377-3

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.psyneuen.2017.07.485

Reference: PNEC 3678

To appear in:

Received date: 18-4-2017 Revised date: 5-7-2017 Accepted date: 18-7-2017

Please cite this article as: Penz, Marlene, Stalder, Tobias, Miller, Robert, Ludwig, Vera M., Kanthak, Magdalena K., Kirschbaum, Clemens, Hair cortisol as a biological marker for burnout symptomatology. Psychoneuroendocrinology http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2017.07.485

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Marlene S. Penz

Hair cortisol as a biological marker for burnout symptomatology

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Research Highlights

Burnout symptoms are associated with glucocorticoid levels at a certain level of severity.

Depressivity does not significantly contribute to hair cortisol concentrations.

According to biomarkers, burnout and depression are distinct entities.

Dichotomization is advisable for assessing burnout symptoms.

Results support hair cortisol concentrations as a biomarker of burnout.

Abstract

Burnout is a syndrome with negative impact on cognitive performance and mood as a consequence of

long-term stress at work. It is further associated with increased risk for mental and physical diseases.

One potential pathway to mediate chronic work-stress and adverse health conditions in burnout is

through alterations in long-term glucocorticoid secretion. Here, we present cross-sectional data on hair

cortisol / cortisone (hairF / hairE) concentrations and burnout from a population-based sample of the

Dresden Burnout Study (DBS; N = 314 hair samples). Burnout symptoms (emotional exhaustion,

cynical attitudes toward work, and reduced efficacy) were assessed with the Maslach Burnout Inventory-

General Survey (MBI-GS). To control for potential confounds, depressivity was as well assessed using

the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) screening instrument for major depression. The present

findings indicate specific hypercortisolism in participants who suffer from burnout. No significant

associations were found between depressivity and hairF/hairE.

word count (abstract): 145

keywords: burnout; depression; glucocorticoids; hair cortisol; biomarkers

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