

EDITORIAL

Burnout or the emotional impact of working with special populations

Industrialization and globalization itself have led to a greater competence and the development of dynamics entailing a re-structuring of working processes that can originate adverse events among employees¹.

The work of correctional professionals is considered within the aforementioned reality. Their tasks are developed in a hostile environment, of utmost rigidity which allows for the foundation of violent and resistant behaviours, with a high psychological impact².

The emotional climate and the feelings resulting from the social interaction regarding collective traumatic events affect both direct and indirectly those in the nearby environment³. This allows offering an affective (or emotional) balance regarding the climate, identifying the relationship between positive and negative emotions which will associate psychological wellbeing, suicide, traumatic events, prison subculture, overcrowding, etc. -all of which can potentially lead to burnout.

The concept of burnout first came up in the mid-seventies of the 20th century. It defines the exhaustion of professionals from the service sector – the first investigations being those by Freudenberg and Maslach who defined this phenomenon as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal achievement among people who work with people⁴. The World Health Organization defines it as work-related condition causing physical and mental damage, a feeling of frustration, exhaustion and overload, which first constitutes emotional exhaustion due to negative feelings, frustration and apathy, then depersonalization with a lack of enthusiasm from professionals towards patients or users, with attitudes of numbness, insensitivity and negativity and last, the lack of personal achievement leading ultimately to an inability to perform a job effectively.

It is therefore confirmed that this reality affects both the psychological wellbeing and the quality and efficacy of work-performance, specifically within correctional facilities by means of daily contact with individuals with problematic situations: self-harm, presence of drug abuse, thefts and fights among

inmates, contagious diseases and external family and social issues that have an impact in the institution⁵. Likewise, correctional professionals know and admit fearing the consequences of this syndrome both at a personal and at a family level, which also tends to associate emotional exhaustion and depersonalization derived from the confirmation that rehabilitation is nothing but a fantasy throughout their professional experience. This is all regularly accompanied by work overload, interpersonal demands and a lack of resources which bring about a difficult to control stress situation among correctional professionals⁶. We can identify three stages in this situation: initial or enthusiastic, period of stagnation, of frustration and apathy and finally burnout.

Burnout is considered a syndrome present within the development of everyday tasks by correctional staff, which is not only troubling due to its impact on the motivation and effort needed to create a determining emotional climate and its maintenance, but also due to the wellbeing of employees themselves^{6,7}. Therefore, we should highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships inside and outside prison. On the other hand, we must consider that different working conditions are found among correctional facilities, with an impact on the development of burnout to a greater or a lesser extent.

In other words, working conditions associated to the participation of inmates in the facility's lifestyle, in therapeutic groups and programs generally offer a new emotional climate⁸. There are glimpses of change in the organization of correctional facilities, focused on the improved implementation of educational programs and the intervention adapted to the reality of inmates, as to modify both the expectations of inmates, with increasing control over their lives and the view and interpretation of correctional professionals. Such models⁹ will enable and have an impact on the development of their tasks, which would go from being controlling and sanctioning to educational and therapeutic. This does not necessarily imply that the issue of burnout can be ruled out, where the motivation and participation in the change of people can be

improved. This new emotional climate also originates new emotional exhaustion regarding personal achievement in the interaction with people³.

This new reality is defined by high demands and a high level of decision and control, which can not enable prison subculture nor a passive attitude of the correctional staff. The routine and stress are related to the physical and psychological health, leading to wellbeing. Working conditions are not the same as in traditional prisons and neither are the consequences for the staff. Certain degree of minor psychic exhaustion is derived from this, which allows an improved emotional climate associated to an enhanced personal achievement and thus, less deterioration of health.

The fact of counting on an alternative prison within a traditional prison should not demote the importance of the different features between professionals, such as seniority, direct contact with inmates, characteristics of the intervention with inmates, professional expectations or degree of job satisfaction. This can affect the job and attitude of professionals towards a certain emotional climate, with different dysfunctional health symptoms. We should not forget that achieving a positive emotional climate enhances the development of satisfactory interpersonal relationships based on respect and the development of a differentiated penitentiary activity. We should not forget either that further wear of work occurs when professionals empathetically contact with inmates as human beings, instead of considering them perpetrators or a crime. Perhaps it is a means of controlling the sense of vulnerability of being a victim, and being inside prison is a protection shield against it, where burnout is a response that we should face and avoid.

Facing this issue is a need where two parties intervene. On one hand, the institution which creates protection conditions for their employees and on the other, self-care of professionals in the development of their tasks. The later should do something to limit the impact derived from the assistance, either by means of self-analysis or by seeking consultation in a mental health provider to solve potential victimizations.

We should not forget that people working in prisons are key to achieve the social rehabilitation of inmates and the successful development of Article 25.2 of our Constitution.

Francisco Javier Rodríguez Díaz
Catedrático Acreditado de Diferencias individuales
y Psicología de la Violencia. Departamento
de Psicología. Universidad de Oviedo. Oviedo
E-mail: gallego@uniovi.es

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