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# THE EMOTIONAL BURNOUT SYNDROME AMONG MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** Mental health and well-being of a person are becoming a priority of the present day since they affect a lot of life aspects, including personal and professional. Burnout is a negative mental state of a person that occurs because of several factors. It is mainly committed to representatives of social professions, which include managers who constantly work with people. The paper aims to examine local students' experiences of burnout and the consequences of it for youngsters. First, the article briefly describes the nature of burnout and critically reviews the literature on the topic relevant to students. The qualitative research method was used in the form of semi-structured personal interviews with junior and senior Management students at Almaty Management University. The findings postulate about the level of burnout among students, the factors that trigger their burnout state, and the ways that students use to prevent it. The results of this study may be useful for further longitudinal studies and applied to preventing burnout among students of higher educational institutions in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

**Keywords:** emotional burnout syndrome, students, Management major, stress, university.

**Аңдатпа.** Адамның психикалық денсаулығы мен әл-ауқаты бүгінгі күнде маңызды тақырыптардың бірі, өйткені олар өмірдің көптеген аспектілеріне, соның ішінде жеке және кәсіби аспектілерге әсер етеді. Эмоционалды күйіп қалу - бұл бірнеше факторларға байланысты пайда болатын адамның жағымсыз психикалық жағдайы. Бұл негізінен адамдармен үнемі жұмыс істейтін менеджерлерді қамтитын әлеуметтік мамандықтардың өкілдеріне қатысты. Мақаланың мақсаты - жергілікті студенттердің эмоционалды күйзеліске байланысты тәжірибелерін және оның жастарға әсерін зерттеу. Біріншіден, мақалада эмоционалды күйіп қалудың табиғаты қысқаша сипатталған және студенттерге қатысты тақырып бойынша әдебиеттерге сыни шолу берілген. Зерттеудің сапалы әдісі Алматы Менеджмент Университетінің кіші және жоғары курс студенттерімен жартылай құрылымдалған жеке сұхбат түрінде қолданылды. Нәтижелер студенттер арасындағы күйіп қалу деңгейін, олардың күйіп қалу жағдайын тудыратын факторларды және студенттердің оны болдырмау үшін қолданатын жолдарын көрсетеді. Осы зерттеудің нәтижелері одан әрі лонгитюдтық зерттеулер үшін пайдалы болуы мүмкін және Қазақстан Республикасының жоғары оқу орындарының студенттері арасында эмоционалдық күйіп қалудың алдын алу үшін қолданылуы мүмкін.

**Түйінді сөздер:** эмоциялық күйіп қалу синдромы, студенттер, "Менеджмент" мамандығы, стресс, университет.

**Аннотация.** Психическое здоровье и самочувствие человека становятся приоритетом сегодняшнего дня, поскольку они влияют на многие аспекты жизни, в том числе личные и профессиональные. Эмоциональное выгорание — это негативное психическое состояние человека, которое возникает из-за нескольких факторов. В основном это касается представителей социальных профессий, к которым относятся менеджеры, постоянно работающие с людьми. Цель статьи - изучить опыт местных студентов, связанный с эмоциональным выгоранием, и последствия этого для молодежи. Во-первых, в статье кратко описывается природа эмоционального выгорания и дается критический обзор литературы по теме, актуальной для студентов. Качественный метод исследования был использован в форме полуструктурированных личных интервью со студентами младших и старших курсов Алматы Менеджмент Университета. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют об уровне эмоционального выгорания среди студентов, факторах, которые вызывают их состояние эмоционального выгорания, и способах, которые студенты используют для его предотвращения. Результаты этого исследования могут быть полезны для дальнейших лонгитюдных исследований и применены для профилактики эмоционального выгорания среди студентов высших учебных заведений Республики Казахстан.

**Ключевые слова:** синдром эмоционального выгорания, студенты, специальность "Менеджмент", стресс, университет.

## Introduction

Emotional burnout syndrome (EBS) is a relevant topic nowadays. Shortly, it's a negative psychological state with various symptoms like exhaustion, depersonalization, etc., which causes a lot of negative impacts everywhere. Earlier research discovered that burnout might lead to reduced performance in the workplace and withdrawal behavior: absenteeism and intentions to leave the job [1]. Particularly in the educational field burnout syndrome also takes place. Among research that already exists mostly, the focus was on students in the medical field. Some of the preceding studies also state that emotional burnout syndrome is a specific type of psychological disease of individuals who work with people [2, p.42].

People working in the «man-man» field and particularly those whose activities are associated with the manifestation of emotional empathy and increased responsibility (doctors, teachers, social workers, etc.) are the most prone to burnout. However, «burnout has been increasingly recorded in representatives of a variety of professions, students, and even the unemployed» [3]. The relevance of this research comes from a combination of the actuality of the EBS in general and from the lack of research among students of business majors in Kazakhstan on this topic, even though “factors, such as effects of psychological stress and burnout to students’ decision to drop out, or depression and alcoholism are prominent among those focusing their studies on business-related fields” [4, p.230].

## Literature review

Burnout is one of the urgent problems for students. In most cases, researchers studied university students with a major in medicine. In this field, the most prominent research on medical students in Kazakhstan was conducted by Bolatov et al. [5]. In the work of Munko, high-school students’ burnout state is analyzed [6]. Another profession that is considered in connection with burnout is firefighters, the research of Vinnikov et al. postulates on this topic in detail [7].

However, the topic of Management students’ EBS is worthy to be examined, since they are future managers who will face a high level of burnout in prospective workplaces. As Tkach stated in her research: “Not only the employee suffers from the consequences of burnout symptoms, but this brings tangible costs for the organization, and, as a result, the phenomenon of burnout becomes a serious social problem” [8]. This is a less explored topic, as reviewing the existing articles on it shows that this is a research gap that will be covered by this research.

The research of Bolatov et al. is dedicated to the adaptation and validation of the Russian version of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory Questionnaire for Kazakhstani students [9]. The research was conducted based on quantitative analysis using the Burnout Questionnaire (R-OLBI-S) adapted for students of Kazakhstan, which revealed the effectiveness of this method for assessing the percentage of burned-out students, but the research had no conclusions drawn about the causes and solutions to this problem.

In the theoretical basement of the topic, definitions of burnout syndrome vary, especially its components. For example, according to Freudenberg, the definition of BS is connected with 3 components: emotional depletion, depersonalization, and a sense of the futility of effort [10]. In comparison with this, according to Maslach the components of burnout, are provided slightly differently:

1. Emotional exhaustion (individual stress component of the syndrome).
2. Depersonalization (the interpersonal component of burnout).
3. Reduced work productivity is reflected in a decrease in the self-esteem of one's competence.

Social psychologist Maslac defined this condition as a syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion, including the development of negative self-esteem, a negative attitude towards work, and a loss of understanding and empathy towards clients (patients), underlines knowing that burnout is not a loss of creativity, not a reaction to boredom but rather an emotional exhaustion that occurs against a background of stress [11]. Glazachev provided detailed information about models and the emotional environment of students.

Rosales categorizes burnout's effects into three groups: psychosomatic, behavioral, and emotional. In the first group, the author includes symptoms such as a change in heart rate, extreme fatigue, or headaches. The second includes drug or alcohol abuse and absenteeism. Finally, in the third group, Rosales gave examples of the lack of motivation to study and the withdrawal from studies in the academic context [12].

Stress and burnout have been of particular concern to business educators for years. There was a notion: “Management students face a battle with stress on two fronts, as students themselves –

college freshmen now report the highest stress and lowest mental health levels in 25 years – and as the next generation of leaders” [4, p.231].

Consequently, stress is considered one of the reasons for EBS, and this topic is deeply connected with stress-cycle [11] and two categories of stress - eustress and distress [9]. Eustress is a positive stress that motivates an individual to continue to work. This good stress encourages and facilitates learning where an ideal level of stress can boost learning ability. On the other hand, distress is a negative stress which occurs when the good stress becomes too much to handle. This negative stress prevents and suppresses learning and must be stopped and avoided [9, p.2]. Also, factors of stress are described by Babanov [2].

## Methods

The research method was qualitative because qualitative methods are focused on understanding rather than testing and verification, particularly understanding things from the respondent’s point of view which is critical for the current research’s accuracy. After analysis of all needed factors, the method of the interview was chosen, with a choice of a semi-structured interview.

Management students at Almaty Management University became the interview participants. To answer the research questions the interview was mentally divided into 3 sections or subtopics: stress and burnout syndrome, the reasons why management students get burnout or are more prone to get burnout, and what are consequences of burnout and how do students deal with chronic stress and burnout. Some additional ones were asked during the flow of the interview.

The questions about why burnout syndrome can occur relate to reasons why students get chronic stress because it is considered one of the main reasons why people get burnout syndrome, according to the preceding research.

## Findings

All interview participants were Management students at Almaty Management University. The interview was conducted in Russian because it was the most convenient language for all respondents.

**Table 1 – Interviewee (Int.) profiles**

#	Gender	Language of study	Year of study	City of origin
1	Male	English	3	Almaty
2	Male	English	3	Almaty
3	Male	English	3	Semey
4	Female	Russian	2	Almaty
5	Female	Russian	2	Almaty
6	Male	Russian	3	Almaty
7	Female	Russian	3	Almaty
8	Female	Russian	3	Almaty
9	Female	Russian	3	Almaty
10	Female	English	3	Almaty
11	Female	English	3	Aktobe
12	Female	English	3	Almaty
13	Male	English	3	Almaty
14	Male	Russian	3	Almaty
15	Female	English	3	Almaty

Note – compiled by the authors based on the conducted research

In general, all the results obtained from the interview (as well as the structure of the interview) are classified under the categories shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Categories and related codes identified in the interview process.**

#	Category	Codes
1	Stress and burnout	Protective reaction against burnout Positive stress
2	Causes of burnout	The group in which the student is studying Combining work and study
3	The impact of burnout and how to deal with it	Switching attention Self-analysis
Note – compiled by the authors based on the conducted research		

Following Table 2, three main categories and six related to them codes were identified as the result of the interview content analysis and interpretation. All of them are explained in detail in the text below.

*Protective reaction against burnout*

Each person has a protective reaction that helps and ensures human safety. In this case, the interviewed students used to sleep as a protection against burnout, as the duration of sleep is from 10 to 12 hours. In addition to sleeping during breaks between study hours, which in total varies from 2 to 4 hours depending on the schedule, the students' daily sleep was about 12-16 hours, which showed that they subconsciously blocked all other interests in life, such as participating in clubs, walking with friends, any sports, lack of hobbies like reading books, chess and striving for development which together leads to a sluggish state of a person, which can be leveled to the state similar to hibernation of bears. The interviewed students were able to save themselves from burnout due to the heavy learning load thanks to the body's protective reaction in the form of sleep from 10 to 12 hours:

*As soon as the second semester began, I started to sleep more because I simply didn't have the strength. I don't get enough sleep on the weekends, and this energy is not enough for all activities, so I even sleep during breaks at the university.* (Int.15)

*Positive stress*

Most of the students surveyed associate stress with negative emotions and feelings, but some use priority to their advantage and intentionally drive themselves into this state to become more productive:

*You know, stress isn't that bad. This is 100% of the time in my active state. At this time, I have time for everything, and I finish the tasks I put off for later. A relaxed state leads to laziness, and then the deadlines are running out, the scholarship can fly off if I don't do it, and the like. On the one hand, excitement. Something like to be or not to be. It even amuses me.* (Int.13)

The interviewed students associate the occurrence of stress with the period of midterms and the examination session. Intermittent stress in this study is a manifestation of severe stress during border controls and exams.

*The group in which the student is studying*

Most respondents emphasized that the abundance of group work due to the curriculum of the specialty brought much stress, depending on the classmates: someone works more than others, the risk of conflicts, tension, and not a friendly atmosphere. The atmosphere in the groups is also formed from the cohesion of the group. In the groups themselves, students can be divided into mini groups and there are also formulated groups and out of groups and what affected their group work when they were distributed by faculty and mixed and, in this case, mixed groups feel uncomfortable. Someone does not perceive each other and this affects the effectiveness of the group where one or more people do the main job:

*The groupmates also play a role. You can survive moments with a bad schedule or workload if it is normal. But if they are toxic and everyone is arrogant, then it will be challenging. When there is teamwork, there are always people who don't work as a team. It makes me even more nervous.*



(Int.7)

Some interviewees noted that they put very high standards for themselves, which they were constantly going. Despite the high stability and willpower that these people have, they are perfectionists, and this negatively affects their psychological state.

#### *Combining work and study*

The students think about their earnings and try to combine work with studying. In pursuit of short-term results in the form of the salary they receive to meet their needs here and now. However, few people think about long-term prospects such as full dedication to reading the required textbooks, and after graduation, there will be work. Because of a tired state, obsessed thoughts that appear do not cause thoughts to leave the workplace. Most of the interviewees confirmed that the combination of work and study was one of the stressful combinations for them that brought some to the flesh all the way to reprimand. However, they are united by one common characteristic - fatigue due to which there is a defocus on studies which affects the general condition of a person:

*As a person who, besides studying, works, I feel tired. I think about my work for the whole week at the University and work - about my studies; I sleep off on the weekends. When you think about those two things simultaneously, it's a bit complicated. (Int.7)*

Most of the students now have no problems with the schedule and other organizational issues. Still, it is depressing that students have to study compulsory disciplines that are entirely uninteresting, and they feel that only some sentences are necessary for their specialty.

#### *Switching attention*

All respondents cope with a burnout on their own without contacting professionals in this field. Common ways were noted to help to respond students get out of the burnout state.

- Walks in the open air:

*Outside I feel calm when there is no fuss and noise around; you can be in your world and do not think about anything too much. (Int.15)*

Video games, movies (media):

*In video games and movies, you forget about the real world, you start to worry about the characters and get distracted from your problems; also, in games, there are specific goals that give achievements; it's easier to achieve there than in real life. (Int.13)*

#### *Self-analysis*

When burnout occurs, or its first symptoms begin, most students introspect and reconsider their priorities to reduce stress levels. Among the interviewed students were those who actively talked about their condition. There is a feeling and analysis of the situation and its causes that could contribute to burnout:

*Usually, under challenging situations, I analyze what causes stress, the importance of certain things, and my priorities. Many items are temporary. Remembering this makes things easier. Also, to deal with emotions so that negative ones do not affect vital decisions. (Int.11)*

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Among the respondents, it was unexpected to find that only a few reported experiencing burnouts, on the contrary to the authors' initial expectation of a higher prevalence among Management students. However, many respondents expressed fatigue, indicating that the underlying factors contributing to this state are still present and likely to persist in the long term. If these factors continue to exert pressure, students may eventually develop burnout.

One surprising finding was that many respondents perceived stress as a positive experience. This contradicts the conventional notion that stress is solely detrimental.

Considering that managers are social specialists who frequently engage with others, it was expected that their workload and the factors indirectly associated with the «helping» profession would contribute to a higher predisposition to burnout. The results support the assumption that team and group work are critical factors contributing to chronic stress among Management students. While many

interviewees acknowledged the importance of such collaborative work for professionals in their field, it is essential to recognize that it can also impose significant pressure and increase the likelihood of burnout.

Previous research suggests that excessive homework assignments, academic demands, and time constraints are sources of negative stress among students [13]. The present study is in line with the preceding research findings.

Interestingly, many of the stress and burnout coping strategies mentioned by the interviewees closely resemble techniques used to manage stress effectively. It indicates that individuals may already possess some knowledge and tools to break the stress cycle. However, it is essential to explore knowledge to cope with burnout easier. The present research defined that stress was not considered as only negative but was a physiologically needed process and natural reaction to external factors that supported the previous study [8].

The present study is limited to only one University and further study requires to examine students' experiences of other higher educational institutions. The obtained findings may be used by the University administration and faculty to reduce the factors causing stress and burnout among students as well as the students themselves for more effective coping with the syndromes of stress and burnout. As a theoretical contribution, this paper lays the ground for future studies as the first work on the topic among Management students.

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