Work Burnout Now Considered an Illness

The World Health Organization's handbook for medical providers lists the criteria needed for a burnout diagnosis.

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Many people face stress on the job. But certain symptoms of emotional strain, tension and apathy that are related to one's job can signal that an individual is suffering from burnout, which the World Health Organization (WHO) now recognizes as a legitimate medical illness, CNN reports.

According to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), WHO's handbook for guiding medical providers in diagnosing diseases, burnout is "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."

Burnout occurs when individuals experience the following symptoms specifically related to the work environment: feeling depleted of energy or exhaustion; increased mental distance from a job or feeling negative or cynical about one's career; and reduced professional efficacy.

In addition, the handbook advises doctors to consider adjustment disorder, anxiety or fear-related disorders, mood disorders and disorders specifically associated with stress before diagnosing an individual with burnout.

But why did it take so long for psychologists to designate this phenomenon as a medical condition? Authors who reviewed literature about burnout observed that despite hundreds of studies since the first scientific article on the subject appeared in 1974, scientists couldn't agree on a concrete definition. And although burnout was widely discussed as a mental health problem, it wasn't considered an actual mental disorder.

One reason for this, according to the authors of the literature review, is that a lot of researchers focused solely on causes and associated factors that led to burnout instead of developing specific diagnostic guidelines. This led to "vagueness and ambiguity" around the concept of burnout, they concluded.

An additional hurdle in classifying burnout as a disease, the reviewers noted, was whether scientists could distinguish between depression and the work-related condition.

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