

*BURNOUT IN POLISH, CROATIAN AND SLOVENIAN NGOs*

**EXPERT INTERVIEWS  
CONCLUSIONS**

**2020**



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# ***INTRODUCTION***

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2020, as part of the research activities in the Burnout Aid project, in addition to the interviews carried out in the NGOs, we conducted expert interviews on professional and activist burnout in the third sector. These interviews confirmed many conclusions we drew from the non-governmental organizations studies, f.e. the relationship between burnout and unstable financial situation, excessive bureaucracy in NGOs or too strong identification with values and mission of the organization. Experts confirm that there is indeed a problem of burnout in the third sector and that it should be addressed and dealt with urgently.

### **The interviewed experts included:**

- / in Poland: lawyer (labor law specialist, incorporating both legal and psychological aspects into their practice); representatives of a non-governmental organization effectively implementing anti-burnout policy; anti-discrimination and anti-burnout activist and educator; psychiatrist (PhD); trainer, psychologist and consultant running original training programs;
- / in Croatia: psychologist (PhD) professionally engaged in research on burnout and burnout prevention programs among helping professions; psychologist (PhD) – teachers' well-being specialist; medical doctor – occupational and sports medicine specialist; representative of the governmental office for cooperation with NGOs; trainer and consultant for organizational development and strategic planning;
- / in Slovenia: psychotherapist working with people affected by burnout syndrome; educator and trauma researcher; medical doctor and psychotherapist (author of a book on burnout); psychotherapist and supervisor; professor of psychology – burnout specialist.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted in three countries. Each of our interlocutors' professional activities are related to burnout in a different way, and they analyze the syndrome from different perspectives. They have had various relationships with NGOs in the past, some have worked in NGOs, others – with NGOs teams, some have only had singular contacts with the third sector activists. Finally, there are also these who have experienced burnout and it became a reason to pursue this topic professionally.



**SOURCES  
OF BURNOUT**

Some experts emphasize **the influence of early childhood experiences on the self-esteem building process** – as a result, an unconscious psychological mechanism can cause a person to work non-stop, despite the exhaustion. Their personal sense of worth becomes dependant on the subjective perception of their own achievements, according to the principle: “I am not good enough unless I work a lot and fast, unless I am perfect and do not make mistakes, unless I can adapt to others”. For such people, doing their job perfectly becomes more important than living a balanced life. Other surveyed respondents highlighted **the role of stress** – if it becomes chronic, it is no longer an “ally”, but a destructive force. First the adrenaline kicks in, and then the cortisol which causes problems with memory, concentration, prioritization, planning and execution of activities. Some experts perceive the source of stress in **ineffective team management and leaders’ inability to perform their role successfully** or – referring to the first research studies on burnout – in a **specific, intensive type of work for others**, especially in helping professions (doctors, nurses, social workers, NGO employees, teachers, policemen and policewomen). Regardless of where the emphasis is put in the perception of the sources of burnout, it is important to acknowledge that the syndrome occurs in relation to performing professional and social roles.

*A good working environment is able to adapt to the personality constraints of the employees. If I work in a sensitive environment, my boss knows what kind of burdens I will be able to accept. They [the leaders] will take into account the individual conditions of employees when distributing duties. They will not expose anyone to factors that can be burning out. In such situations, the working environment compensates for personality deficiencies. I am talking mainly about helping professions – doctors, nurses and psychologists. [psychiatrist (PhD), Poland]*

Some experts warned not to limit the analysis to the psychological sources and determinants of the burnout syndrome, as this may give the impression that a burned out individual is to blame, or solely responsible for their condition. **Burnout is a complex condition that must be considered in its entirety – incorporating the individual, organizational and socio-cultural levels.**

## What Favors Burnout?

### Individual factors:

- / excessive dedication to work (working overtime, feeling that you have to be available all the time),
- / lack of the resting habit or inability to rest,
- / not coping with stress,
- / low self-esteem,
- / high ambitions,
- / seeking confirmation of self-worth through professional achievements,
- / inadequate regulation of emotions, (f.e. controlling, suppressing)
- / perfectionism,
- / excessive diligence and accuracy,
- / idealism,
- / difficulties in setting boundaries,
- / neuroticism,
- / obsessive-compulsive disorder,
- / anxiety,
- / strong sense of responsibility,
- / inability to distinguish between what is within and beyond one's control,
- / excessive need for control.

### Organizational factors:

- / unstable financial situation of the organization,
- / incompetent leadership,
- / incompetent, ineffective management and planning,
- / unequal division of tasks,
- / unclear roles and responsibilities,
- / unclear instructions for tasks assigned,
- / assigning inexperienced and unprepared employees to difficult tasks,
- / no support,
- / lack of autonomy at work,
- / excessive workload,
- / non-participatory decision making process,
- / rigid hierarchy and particular standards carried over from business sector,
- / pressure to work fast,
- / no feedback,
- / underestimating achievements by superiors and colleagues,
- / working with people affected by trauma,
- / mission-driven atmosphere, self-sacrifice and too much commitment demanded,
- / too few employees compared to the scale of activities and recipients,
- / routine (unchanged consistency of actions),
- / violations of employee dignity: mobbing, discrimination, sexual harassment.



*NGOs are very focused on the results they want to achieve. They want to have it all as soon as possible, and believe they have to overcome all injustice at once. They can't cope with the fact that they have to let go of some things, that they can't win every battle. I think it is the inability to prioritize and choose what is worth fighting for. [psychologist (PhD) professionally engaged in research on burnout, Croatia]*

*We regulate our emotions to stay calm in front of our clients, and this is challenging for us. There are various strategies we use to regulate our emotions. Some of them are adaptive and some are quite negative, maladaptive, and leading to burnout and many other harmful consequences. [psychologist (PhD) - teachers' well-being specialist, Croatia]*

*What's more important is the work culture in the organization - is it, for example, a culture of self-sacrifice, specific for the [third] sector in Poland, given the lack of money and because all matters are urgent and performed simultaneously. Organizations try to balance these shortcomings and challenges with what they seem to have in their disposal, i.e. human work done in the „all hands on deck“ emergency mode. And this mode is present almost all the time. There are always too few people working there, it is always a job under time pressure. Very often it is accompanied by the inability to manage work time and set priorities in such a way that people can catch their breath, stay committed and experience the feeling of „flow“ at work - all this can act as burnout prevention. [anti-discrimination and anti-burnout activist and educator, Poland]*

When asked about the relationship between gender and burnout, **the experts emphasised the relationship between gender and other factors**, f.e. women work in helping professions more often, and men want to be perceived as strong, therefore they ask for help later than women. Gender may have an impact on the development of the syndrome, as it is associated with social roles (f.e. in the social perception, women cope better with frustration).

## **SOURCES OF BURNOUT**

Similarly, **age is also an aspect related to other factors**, such as work experience - people less experienced (usually younger) may be more prone to burnout. On the other hand, the risk of burnout tends to increase around the age of 40 - after around 10 years of work.



***BURNOUT IN  
THE THIRD SECTOR***

Experts agree that in recent years, the topic of burnout has been more prominently featured in the public discourse, which leads to greater awareness of the problem, but still insufficient. The attitude of professionals working directly with the syndrome must change to begin with, then – the awareness among the broadly viewed public opinion, which should be followed by systemic actions, including legislative ones.

Knowledge of burnout and its prevention covers mostly the individual level rather than the organizational one. Leaders often do not have the qualifications to deal with the problem, and overly focus on the immediate results of the organization activities, forgetting at times about the needs of employees. **First of all it is therefore necessary to build the awareness that a change at the organizational level is crucial, and only then to offer remedial tools.** One of the Slovenian experts emphasizes that specific value systems lie at the core of burnout – as an example, they mention the **“Slovenian mentality”** which positively values work, effort and patience, instead of a harmonious life and self-care. If helping others and self-sacrifice is the core value, it will be difficult to set boundaries at work. It is necessary to reflect on values and take the first step – to consciously decide when and how to work, when and how to rest.

Most experts agree that working in the third sector offers less security compared to working in the public or private sector – mainly due to the **unstable funding of NGOs**. The consequences of the uncertain financial situation of non-governmental organizations include: low salaries, work overload, working overtime, small teams (or lack of staff), high rotation in a team, implementation of too few or too many projects or projects selected randomly (due to the availability of funding rather than for their merits) in order to survive.

**Other risk factors specific to the third sector are:**

- / emotionally demanding work with recipients in a difficult life situation, especially those in trauma, and not being prepared for such work,
- / cyclical rhythm of work in NGOs: after intensive projects-oriented work, there is a standstill and uncertainty about the future,
- / frustration, when failing to achieve the intended goals and due to the fact that social change takes place very slowly,
- / aggression and hatred experienced by activists,
- / pressure to achieve the goals of the organization (on the one hand, survival in the face of financial instability, on the other hand, the implementation of the statutory activities and the organization's mission),
- / underestimating the work of non-governmental organizations, its unfavorable image, as well as insufficient support from the state and society,
- / lack of organizational rules and protection measures available in the public or private sector, f.e. trade unions,
- / blurred line between work and private life,
- / lack of professional support, including supervision,
- / extensive administrative procedures and a lot of bureaucracy, devoting a lot of time and energy to fundraising, writing reports, etc.

The Slovenian expert estimated that 40% of their work in an NGO encompasses administrative tasks, while the norm set by the Civic Chamber is 20%.

The Polish anti-burnout activist points out that **burnout is a process** that affects people regardless of their age, their family status and the period in their lives that the work in the third sector covers. This process can be presented as follows:



At the same time, the expert states that one should not generalize – not all NGOs have an organizational culture that leads to burnout.

Experts consider the following groups to be particularly prone to burnout: **leaders** (they bear a lot of responsibility for the organization, their employees and – indirectly – recipients of their activities), **women** (often more engaged and empathetic than men), **volunteers** (painfully experience the clash of ideals with reality), **activists working for minority organizations or with people in crisis situations** – bedridden, with disabilities, homeless, etc.



***PREVENTION AND  
COPING WITH BURNOUT***

Experts agree that there is very little support available, for NGOs in particular. **Preventive measures are specifically neglected, while it is precisely the burnout prevention that is crucial.**

*For several years, we have been working out a preventive method for employers, who did not experience this type of risk before - to make them aware that preventing mobbing and burnout really is worthwhile. We call it soft OHS because it actually refers to occupational health and safety, including mental hygiene. The point is for people to react to signals, to talk about threats and have someone listening to them, to be aware of when something negative is happening, to react as early as possible, to have warning mechanisms.*

*[trainer, psychologist and consultant, Poland]*

It is important to know the symptoms of burnout and the mechanism of its development: one usually begins their work with great enthusiasm and energy, to experience in time: frustration, overly critical attitude to their own work, withdrawing, avoiding contact with others, anger, intolerance and denial that something bad is happening.

Individual, organizational and systemic strategies are equally important in preventing burnout and coping with the syndrome. Examples of **individual strategies** include: meditation, writing a diary, physical activity, healthy diet, having free time in the daily schedule, practicing mindfulness, consistency and self-discipline (f.e. not answering messages or work phone calls outside of working hours). In the event of burnout, one can use psychotherapy, and when necessary – pharmacotherapy and psychiatric treatment. The currently available support is mainly focused on the individual. When planning interventions for burned out people, however, it is important to influence the whole organization and conduct an evaluation beforehand, determining what led to burnout. Support focused on the team or the organization as a whole is what is lacking the most. As an example of this type of activity comes the approach known as **collective care**, which includes support groups that provide space for expression, enabling people to be heard. These are f.e. discussion groups or holiday camps organized by activists. At **the organizational level**, burnout



is counteracted by: clear and transparent communication, honesty, respect and good interpersonal relations at work (the opportunity to talk about one's feelings, pain, frustration and burnout), good work culture and effective workflow, and a leader caring for employees and organization.

Our interlocutors emphasize **the importance of a leader** in the process of preventing and dealing with burnout. These people decide on the way work is performed in the organization and model the relationships within a team. They are responsible for building a favorable climate and for respecting the values, stances, opinions and feelings of employees. It is important to create a work environment in which it will be possible to set boundaries – building **an organizational culture that does not put work and the urgency of completing tasks over interpersonal relations, and where caring for relationships is one of the organization's duties**. It often depends on the knowledge and motivation of a leader for the organization to start the fight against burnout.

One of the problems that NGOs face at the organizational level concerns **promoting and rewarding only specific departments, teams or people (the contributions of others is not seen or appreciated), while the organizational structures "resemble a family"**, which makes it difficult to diagnose management errors and respond effectively to crisis situations. Relying on relationships often entails that the sources of the problems (i.a. problems concerning relationships) are placed outside the organization, while it is necessary to redirect the attention inwards, to the organization's mode of operating, as **the problem usually concerns the interpersonal relations in the NGO**. The solution then can involve managing in a way **that makes the members of different departments or teams feel "interdependent"**: appreciating all people contributing to the organization, giving equal attention to all employees, both: within the content team and technical/administrative staff. Less structural, less formal, people-focused and interdependent relationships promote burnout when conflicts, rivalry, and new people appear. But at the same time, they can also protect against burnout in the sense that they are a point of reference – different from the formal structure.

What can prevent burnout is **the inclusion of employees (as well as volunteers) in the decision-making processes in the organization** and covering all persons (including people not employed under a full-time job contract) with **the same regulations** related to communication, access to information,

access to supervision, the right to vacation leave, but also: inviting everyone to company celebrations. Such solutions can be introduced in the form of **policies, procedures or internal regulations in the organization**, such as: work regulations, anti-mobbing procedures, mediation procedures (clearly defined rules on when and how to report a violation, who to turn to for help – within and outside the organization). It also might be useful to appoint a shop steward in the organization or form a team responsible for the well-being of the employees, or schedule some free time within working hours (f.e. for brainstorming and creativity).

### **What systemic solutions are possible to undertake?**

- 1.** Employee education, f.e. in the fields of: emotional composure, relaxation and meditation techniques, assertiveness training, developing interpersonal competencies, but also in communication and conflict resolution in a team.

It is important for such support not to be limited to preventing and coping with physical and emotional exhaustion, but also to include working on the sense of self-efficacy and preventing depersonalization. Some experts recommended additional activities, such as: time management or stress management workshops, while others criticized them as a form of introducing an organizational culture focused on individualism, profit and immediate effect.

- 2.** Education of leaders, f.e. in the fields of: communication, management, accepting responsibility and delegating tasks, conflict resolution, work health and safety rules – also in terms of mental well-being.
- 3.** Preventive programs, f.e. including mindfulness in the organization.
- 4.** Support groups.
- 5.** Supervision, mentoring and coaching.
- 6.** Guidelines and procedures for NGOs – also concerning mental health prevention.

7. Consultations for NGO teams, provided by f.e. a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a specialist in occupational medicine, a HR consultant.

There is no consensus among the experts whether such interventions may indeed refer to a systemic dimension, and in particular, how to implement such a system effectively. However, the interlocutors indicated the possibility of creating a platform, a support network for NGOs, a union or an independent office where NGOs could get information and assistance, and through which training or workshops would be organized. The initiative here lies within the third sector, but **the support should be external and interdisciplinary.**

