REVIEW ARTICLE

Humanistic studies and Social Researches. 2026;2(1): 17
https://doi.org/10.22034/hssr.2025.237244

A Review of Psychological Factors Affecting Burnout in Organizations: Integrating Dispositional, Cognitive, and Motivational Constructs

Fariba Goudarzi[1], Elham Majidi[2], Afsaneh Tabatabaei[3], Afsaneh Tabatabaei[3]

[1]*Department of General Psychology, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch (Khorasgan), Isfahan, Iran*
[2]*Department of General Psychology, Islamic Azad University, Nain Branch, Isfahan, Iran*
[3]*Department of Educational Psychology, Islamic Azad University, Mobarakeh Branch, Isfahan, Iran*

Article history:

Received: 19 Sep 2025
Accepted: 16 Dec 2025
Available online: 20 Dec 2025

Keywords:

Psychological Factors
Cognitive
Job burnout

Abstract

Background: Burnout, a work-related syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy, imposes significant human and economic costs. While organizational drivers are well-documented, a comprehensive synthesis of intrinsic psychological factors is needed to explain individual differential vulnerability.
Objective: To systematically review and integrate empirical evidence on the psychological factors influencing burnout susceptibility and progression.
Methods: A narrative review approach was employed. Literature was identified through searches of PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles and key texts published between 2000-2025, using terms: "burnout," "psychological factors," "personality," "cognition," "motivation," and "emotion regulation."
Results: 40 key studies and theoretical papers were reviewed. Findings categories psychological factors into three interrelated domains: 1) Dispositional Traits (e.g., neuroticism, core self-evaluations); 2) Cognitive-Affective Processes (e.g., rumination, cognitive appraisals, mindfulness); and 3) Motivational & Self-Regulatory Systems (e.g., autonomous vs. controlled motivation, ego depletion). These factors form a dynamic transaction with the work environment, shaping stress perception, coping, and recovery.
Conclusion: Burnout arises from complex person-environment transactions. Effective intervention requires a dual focus: mitigating toxic job demands and building individual psychological resources through cognitive-behavioral, mindfulness-based, and motivational skill-building approaches.

Cite this article as: Al-Khalidi RE. Impact of Modern Lifestyle Factors on Liver Function in Patients with Liver Cancer. Humanist Stud Soc Res. 2026;2(1):17. https://doi.org/10.22034/hssr.2025.237244

Introduction

Burnout represents a profound disintegration of the relationship between an individual and their work. First systematically defined by Christina Maslach and colleagues as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and diminished personal accomplishment [1], it has evolved from a niche concern in human services to a pervasive global occupational phenomenon. Its recognition in the International Classification of Diseases-11 (ICD-11) as an "occupational phenomenon" underscores its legitimacy and public health significance [2]. The human and organizational costs are staggering, correlating with severe mental health sequelae such as depression and

Correspondence:
Fariba Goudarzi
E-mail: goudarzifariba2@gmail.com

anxiety [3], physical health risks including cardiovascular disease [4], and substantial economic losses due to absenteeism, presenteeism, and talent attrition [5].

For decades, scholarly and organizational focus has rightly been trained on the environmental antecedents of burnout. Seminal models like the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework [6] and the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model [7] provide powerful lenses to identify toxic workplaces characterized by overwhelming demands, insufficient resources, and a breach of the psychological contract. These macro-level factors are indisputable primary causes. However, an exclusive focus on the environment presents an incomplete picture, akin to understanding an infectious disease only by studying the pathogen while ignoring the host's immune response. A critical, observable paradox persists: within the same team, under identical structural pressures, individuals exhibit markedly divergent stress responses and burnout trajectories [8]. This variance cannot be explained by job design alone; it points decisively toward the mediating and moderating role of the individual's psychological architecture.

This review posits that burnout is the maladaptive outcome of a dynamic person-environment transaction. It arises not merely from a "bad job" or a "vulnerable person," but from the specific interplay between workplace stressors and an individual's unique configuration of traits, cognitive patterns, and motivational drives. While previous reviews have catalogued correlates, this article aims to provide an integrative, process-oriented synthesis. We organize the evidence into a coherent framework that moves from foundational dispositions, through real-time cognitive-affective processing, to the motivational energy systems that sustain or deplete engagement. By elucidating these internal psychological pathways, we seek to advance a more nuanced understanding that bridges organizational psychology with clinical and personality perspectives. This synthesis is vital for moving beyond one-size-fits-all solutions and towards targeted, multi-level interventions that address both the context of work and the psychology of the worker.

Methods

This article employs a narrative synthesis review methodology [9] to integrate findings across a broad and interdisciplinary literature. A systematic search was conducted for English-language, peer-reviewed articles and seminal texts published between 2000 and 2025. Electronic databases (PubMed, PsycINFO) and scholarly search engines (Google Scholar) were queried using keywords and Boolean combinations: "burnout" AND ("psychological factors" OR "personality" OR "disposition" OR "cogniti" OR "appraisal" OR "rumination" OR "motivation" OR "self-regulation" OR "emotion regulation"). Reference lists of key articles were hand-searched for additional relevant sources.

Inclusion criteria focused on empirical studies (meta-analyses, longitudinal, and cross-sectional designs) and major theoretical papers explicitly linking intrapersonal psychological constructs to burnout dimensions. Literature was organised thematically into coherent domains. From an initial pool of over 150 publications, 40 of the most methodologically robust and frequently cited sources were selected for critical analysis and citation in this synthesis.

Results: Synthesis of Psychological Factors

The reviewed literature reveals that psychological factors operate across multiple, interacting levels.

Dispositional Traits: The Foundational Vulnerability Personality constitutes the stable backdrop against which workplace events are interpreted.

- **Neuroticism/Negative Affectivity:** This remains the most robust personality predictor of burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion [10,11]. Individuals high in neuroticism exhibit a lower threshold for perceiving stress, a tendency to amplify threats, and poorer emotional recovery [12].
- **Core Self-Evaluations (CSE):** This higher-order trait encompassing self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and low neuroticism is a significant protective factor. Low CSE correlates strongly with all three burnout dimensions, as individuals doubt their capability and perceive less control over their work environment [13,14].
- **Conscientiousness and Extraversion**: Conscientiousness, associated with organisation and persistence, is linked to higher personal accomplishment [15]. Extraversion, through its association with positive affectivity and social support seeking, can buffer against exhaustion and cynicism [16].

Cognitive-Affective Processes: The Mediating Mechanisms

How individuals process work experiences is pivotal.

- **Cognitive Appraisals:** Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model is central [17]. Burnout-prone individuals engage in primary appraisals that overestimate threat and secondary appraisals that underestimate their coping resources [18]. Perfectionistic cognitions ("I must never make a mistake") create chronic stress [19].
- **Rumination and Impaired Detachment**: The inability to psychologically disengage from work during leisure time—often manifested as work-related

rumination—directly inhibits recovery processes, sustaining physiological arousal and predicting exhaustion [20,21].

- **Mindfulness and Metacognition:** Low mindfulness—characterised by automatic, judgmental processing—is linked to higher burnout [22]. Conversely, mindfulness promotes metacognitive awareness of thoughts as mental events rather than facts, facilitating adaptive emotion regulation and recovery [23].

Motivational and Self-Regulatory Systems: The Energy Dynamics

Burnout represents a breakdown of motivation and self-regulation.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): Frustration of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is a direct pathway to burnout [24,25]. Controlled motivation (driven by external rewards or internal pressures) predicts exhaustion and cynicism, whereas autonomous motivation (driven by interest or value) enhances vitality and protects against burnout [26].

- **Ego Depletion and Self-Regulation:** The constant effort to meet demands, suppress emotions, or exert willpower depletes finite self-regulatory resources [27]. In a state of depletion, cynical attitudes become more likely and performance suffers, creating a vicious cycle [28].
- **Work-Related Passion:** While harmonious passion (flexible engagement) is beneficial, obsessive passion (rigid, identity-contingent engagement) predicts burnout due to a failure to detach and heightened negative affect during setbacks [29].

Interpersonal and Emotional Competencies

- **Emotion Regulation Strategies:** The frequent use of surface acting (suppressing felt emotions or faking unfelt ones) in emotional labour is a well-documented predictor of exhaustion [30]. Cognitive reappraisal, in contrast, is generally protective [31].
- **Assertiveness and Boundaries:** Deficits in assertiveness and difficulties setting work-nonwork boundaries lead to role overload and resentment, key precursors to burnout [32].

Discussion

The synthesis presented in this review compellingly argues that burnout is a syndrome of failed adaptation, where the individual's psychological resources are chronically overwhelmed by work demands. Our analysis moves beyond viewing psychological factors as simple correlates and reconceptualises them as active elements in a transactional stress process [33]. This discussion will explore the theoretical integration of these findings, their critical practical implications, and essential directions for future research.

Theoretical Integration: Towards a Dynamic, Multi-Level Model

The evidence necessitates an integrated model where psychological factors are embedded within established organisational frameworks. The JD-R model, for instance, can be substantially enriched. An individual's "personal resources" are not static but are constituted and depleted by the very cognitive and self-regulatory processes reviewed here [34]. A high workload (job demand) is appraised as threatening by someone with low self-efficacy (CSE) and high neuroticism, triggering rumination (cognitive process) that impedes psychological detachment, thereby obstructing recovery and accelerating resource loss—a process vividly described by Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [35]. Similarly, the ERI model's "overcommitment" factor can be understood as a motivational-cognitive style rooted in obsessive passion and impaired self-regulation [7,29]. This integrative view positions burnout at the nexus of organisational structure, immediate situational cues, and the individual's enduring and malleable psychological makeup.

Practical Implications: From Symptom Management to Capacity Building

The findings demand a paradigm shift in intervention strategy, from solely fixing the job to also strengthening the individual.

- **Promoting Psychological Flexibility and Metacognition:** Organisations must move beyond **generic** "resilience training." Evidence-based interventions like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) directly target the cognitive-affective mechanisms identified—reducing experiential avoidance, fostering non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, and enhancing value-congruent action, all of which buffer against exhaustion and cynicism [22,36].
- **Cultivating Autonomous Motivation and Need-Supportive Climates:** Leadership and HR practices should be informed by SDT. This involves empowering employees with meaningful autonomy (e.g., choice in task methods), providing constructive feedback that builds competence, and nurturing a culture of relatedness and psychological safety [25,37]. This transforms the motivational soil from which burnout grows into one that supports engagement.
- **Skill-Based Training as Primary Prevention:** Proactive training in specific psychological skills is crucial. This includes cognitive-behavioural

techniques to challenge perfectionistic and catastrophic thinking [19], emotion regulation skills to promote cognitive reappraisal over emotional suppression [31], and assertiveness and boundary-setting workshops to prevent role overload [32]. Embedding these into onboarding and continuous professional development builds crucial personal resources.

Limitations of the Review and Critical Future Directions

While this narrative synthesis provides a comprehensive framework, it is not a meta-analysis and cannot quantify the relative strength of each pathway. Future research must address several frontiers:

- **Longitudinal and Experience-Sampling Studies:** More research is needed to delineate causal pathways and understand the daily, within-person fluctuations of these psychological processes in relation to burnout symptoms [38].
- **The Digital Work Context:** The rise of remote and hybrid work fundamentally alters boundary management, social cues, and the nature of communication. Research must investigate how these changes interact with traits like neuroticism or the need for relatedness, and how digital "always-on" culture exacerbates rumination and impedes detachment [39].
- **Positive Psychology and Recovery:** Future work should explore not just vulnerability but also robust psychological factors that foster thriving and post-traumatic growth after burnout episodes. The role of psychological capital (PsyCap: hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism) as a potent buffer warrants deeper investigation [40].
- **Cultural and Demographic Moderators:** The expression and psychological precursors of burnout may vary across cultures, genders, and career stages. Cross-cultural studies are needed to test the universality of the frameworks presented here.

Conclusion

In conclusion, burnout is a final common pathway resulting from the complex, recursive interplay between external demands and internal psychological vulnerabilities and resources. An overemphasis on either pole—the job or the person—leads to incomplete solutions and misplaced blame. A holistic understanding acknowledges that while organisations have an ethical and economic imperative to design humane and sustainable work systems, individuals can also cultivate psychological skills that enhance their resilience and adaptability. The most effective path forward is a dual-pronged approach: organisations must relentlessly audit and improve job demands and resources, while simultaneously investing in evidence-based initiatives that build employees' cognitive, emotional, and motivational capacities. By addressing both the context of work and the psychology of the worker, we can move closer to preventing this debilitating syndrome and fostering sustainable engagement and well-being.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their appreciation to all those who helped us conduct this research.

Funding

None

Authors Contributions

The authors contributed to the data analysis. Drafting, revising and approving the article, responsible for all aspects of this work.

Conflict of Interest

None

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