



Parental Burnout

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Abstract

In modern society all parents are exposed to an overload of responsibilities and activities related to caring for their children, with varying degrees of repercussion on individual and family well-being, which can be understood as parental stress. This condition has caused several emotional and physical changes whose repercussions have now come to be identified as parental burnout. This new condition can be understood as a chronic state characterized by intense physical and emotional exhaustion related to caring for children, associated with a gradual emotional distancing among family members, in addition to the loss of pleasure and reduced sense of fulfillment and effectiveness in exercising the parental. Parental burnout is caused by a chronic imbalance between overload and satisfaction, which is reflected in the lack of resources necessary to deal with stress related to the role of parents and caregivers. This article, written in the form of a narrative review, presents characteristics related to burnout, highlighting triggering factors, the repercussions on parents, children, and family and its consequences, complemented by the main current proposals for individual and family treatment.

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Introduction

Since the pioneering studies of Hans Selye in the 1930s, stress has attracted the attention of researchers in various fields of biological and social sciences such as psychology, physiology and sociology, which has contributed to the expansion and evolution of its concept. Initially characterized as a general adaptation syndrome involving various endocrinological responses which are activated by harmful stimuli that alter body homeostasis, stress currently has a strong presence in the lives of all human beings ^[1].

The term burnout was first used to express a set of dynamic symptoms characterized by emotional exhaustion (feelings of overload and depletion of emotional and physical resources), depersonalization (an attitude of detachment from the object of work) and a sense of diminished achievement (feelings of incompetence and lack of productivity) that affect people in certain work conditions considered above their physical and emotional capacities ^[2].

Analogous to the conditions observed in different professional work situations, the daily activities of parents, understood as parenting, although it is one of the most rewarding human experiences associated with happiness and pleasure, and a transition in people's lives, is considered a new stress- generating condition. Parenting can be understood as a complex, stressful function, exercised over the long term, demanding effort and energy, and which comprises a set of activities performed by the child's parents or reference adults with the purpose of guaranteeing survival and full physical and emotional development ^[3, 4].

Since the end of the 20th century, the topic of stress related to the family nucleus, mainly affecting fathers and mothers, and their activities in raising children, has aroused interest in the mental health area. However, it was only in the last two decades that so-called parental burnout began to be studied in greater depth, which provided an increase in knowledge about this important

condition that has been affecting families all over the world [5].

The objective of this article is to present updated information on the phenomenon of parental burnout, highlighting its causes and consequences and the main therapeutic measures indicated for both individual and family treatment.

Material and Methods

This is a narrative review of the literature that includes articles published in the databases PubMed, Google Scholar, Scielo, Scopus and Web of Science, which used the typology presented by Grant *et al.* [6], which allows an examination of the literature following the Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis (SALSA) structure. For this purpose, thematic, descriptive and narrative synthesis analysis were used, and no formal assessment of the quality of the studies was carried out.

Definition

In recent decades studies have emerged relating the events found in work- related burnout to changes observed in mothers and fathers in the daily context of childcare and the family environment, since all parents are exposed to varying degrees of stress that affect their well-being and family dynamics. This condition is called parental burnout [7], which is becoming a progressively more important and prevalent social problem in the modern world [8].

Parental burnout is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be understood as a chronic condition characterized by intense physical and emotional exhaustion related to caring for children, gradual emotional distancing from children, loss of pleasure and reduced sense of fulfillment and effectiveness in exercising the parental role with a marked contrast between the former and current self [7,9] caused by a chronic imbalance between overload and satisfaction, reflected in the lack of resources necessary to deal with stress related to the parental role [10].

It is now recognized that parental burnout develops and can be recognized in four dimensions: a) initially with physical and mental exhaustion that makes it difficult to get out of bed in the morning, staying all day and compromising the completion of the simplest daily tasks; b) gradual emotional distancing from children; c) saturation and progressive loss of pleasure in playing the parental role; e) sharp contrast between the now minimalist parent and the previously dedicated parent [11, 12], which leads parents to no longer recognize themselves as such, generating feelings of shame and guilt. Although it affects both parents, this condition is more common among mothers, who often play a dual social role both at home and at work, resulting in greater overload and an unequal division of parental responsibilities [13]. It is important to highlight that parental burnout should not be confused with postpartum depression, whose initial characteristics may lead to a later diagnosis.

Still without a consensus in the literature, it is considered that the starting point for the onset of parental burnout is exhaustion caused by the overload of activities in the domestic context, and the emergence of other characteristics occurs gradually, and it is not common for people to exhibit them simultaneously [14].

Prevalence

Although there are still few studies that attempt to measure the prevalence of parental burnout, mainly carried out in

Western European and African countries, it is possible to identify variations between 3.3% in the United Kingdom and 9.8% in Belgium, considering families with children without diseases or chronic impairments, which would raise these prevalences above 35% [5, 15-18]. It is important to highlight that to identify these prevalences, it is necessary to consider some factors such as the sex of the child, number of children in the family, social, economic and cultural characteristics that certainly influence the way of life and raising children, in addition to the use of specific and validated instruments [10, 19, 20].

Risk factors for the emergence of parental burnout

Several factors, both individual and related to the family and its context, are indicated as predisposing factors for the emergence of parental burnout. Regarding parents, the following can be highlighted: young and inexperienced parents; with a desire to be perfect parents; low resilience in the face of challenges of any nature; personality with characteristics of neuroticism or difficulties in dealing with stressful situations and/or managing emotions; low emotional capacity; tendency towards individuality and isolation; absence of a co-parent; overload of responsibilities in daily activities and at home; working part-time or spending a lot of time near the child; women who have or have had postpartum depression [12, 21, 22-24].

Associated with family composition, the following can be verified: large family, family disorganization or disintegration; families with children under five years of age; unrealistic goals and expectations; poor practices in raising children; difficulty in obtaining support from some type of social network; hypervigilant adults subjected to constant self-monitoring in order to avoid mistakes or failures; tendency to put the child's needs above their own needs; fear of being punished and feeling guilty when they fail in their parental role, which predisposes and accentuates the emergence of feelings of guilt and frustration [11, 13, 25].

Some factors associated with parental burnout can also be identified that tend to aggravate this condition. Personalities with individualistic characteristics, more frequently observed among Western populations and cultures [26]; birth of the first child; children with compromised health conditions (mainly chronic diseases); parents with little education or ability to assume the parental role; low level of social and family support; financial insecurity; unemployment and lack of time for leisure [13, 27, 28].

On the other hand, self-compassion (understanding and awareness of one's own suffering) of parents; high self-esteem; high level of emotional intelligence; good practices in raising children; setting aside time for leisure; positive coparenting; possibilities of external support and social support; low neuroticism and high conscientiousness, agreeableness and extroversion, are associated with less parental burnout [29, 30, 31].

Consequences of parental burnout

For parents, parental burnout causes decreased personal satisfaction, conflict between partners, inability to recognize and maintain positive relationships with the child, difficulty in structuring a healthy environment for raising children [4], depressive symptoms, escapes and alienation from reality, suicidal ideation, tendency to consume alcohol and drugs, sleep disorders, somatic complaints and dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis that exacerbates stressful

situations ^[10, 13, 32] and feeds a vicious cycle.

For the child, the most common consequences highlighted in the specialized literature are neglect, loneliness and isolation, development of aggressive behavior, anxiety, disobedience, difficulty concentrating, distraction, low cognitive performance, depression, violence and abuse ^[8, 9, 16, 25-27, 33, 34].

Treatment

The treatment of parental burnout requires actions directed at the individual and family members. As a first step, it is important to carry out an individual assessment to identify the presence of risk factors (which in many cases can be modified) and to recognize early manifestations. Initially, general measures should be invested in, such as readjusting expectations about the parental role,

controlling and/or managing schedules for different daily activities, seeking help from others to share the burden of caring for children, improving the quality and time of sleep, setting aside time for self-care, leisure and mental hygiene, in addition to maintaining a good diet ^[31, 35, 36].

In addition, specific actions based on psychological interventions should be instituted that aim to seek and promote balance in the parents' negative thoughts and emotions, which can be achieved with specialized treatments such as active listening and psychoeducation techniques that provide information about the problem and its signs and symptoms, enabling the recognition of the emotional condition and its causes, as an initial step for more specific therapies ^[16].

Psychoeducation plays a fundamental role in treatment, as it provides parents with information about the phenomenon of parental burnout and its most common signs and symptoms, allowing them to recognize and accept this new condition in their lives. It also makes it possible to understand the causes, which are often related to unrealistic expectations or the lack of balance needed to carry out family activities and satisfy their personal desires ^[37].

In addition, more differentiated therapeutic measures can be adopted, such as:

- a. Cognitive behavioral therapy is one of the most effective tools in treatment, that helps parents identify and change negative thought patterns, promoting the development of skills and strategies to deal with situations that require greater mental effort ^[38]. It can be associated with relaxation and meditation techniques, as complementary therapeutic processes.
- b. Acceptance and commitment therapy that addresses the acceptance of difficult emotions and the connection with values related to the role of father and mother ^[39, 40].
- c. Cognitive behavioral stress management that seeks to develop skills to reduce the overload of physical and emotional excitability and restore balance to daily life ^[33].
- d. Supportive therapy that aims to seek comfort, attention, and assistance from family and friends to share responsibilities and tasks at home ^[41,42].

The above mentioned treatment proposals can be implemented in isolation or in combination, which must be defined by specialized professionals in these different techniques.

Conclusion

In modern society all parents are exposed to parental stress to varying degrees, with repercussions on individual and family well-being ^[8]. Parental burnout is an important problem that affects parents and families on an increasingly large scale, and which deserves attention from both health professionals and society in general. In this sense, childcare programs should be encouraged and efforts should be made so that, in addition to care directed at children, actions are developed to promote greater support and attention to the health conditions of parents. Discussion and dissemination of the topic parental burnout can also contribute to the promotion and strengthening of resources such as the expansion of support networks, stimulating and increasing the capacity to train personnel and specialized services in primary health care, which should be linked to public policies that aim to offer adequate conditions for promotion, prevention and treatment. The expansion of knowledge should also focus efforts on offering information and resources that can help prevent parental burnout, aiming at the well-being of the entire family.

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