

“What we found was shocking. The stress levels of burned-out parents were higher than those of people in severe pain”

Moira Mikolajczak is at the forefront of research into **parental burnout**. She talks to Jessica Hamzelou about what causes this kind of **extreme exhaustion**, what to do about it – and the sometimes surprising impact of lockdown



“**A** STATE of vital exhaustion.” This is a surprisingly poetic description of burnout by the World Health Organization. Burnout – severe exhaustion caused by uncontrolled chronic stress – is increasingly becoming the focus of health research. It was originally identified as a work-related phenomenon, but now a form that affects parents is coming under the spotlight.

Any parent can relate to the fatigue associated with looking after a child. But for some parents, that tiredness can tip into harmful exhaustion, leaving them physically unwell and damaging their relationships with their children and partners.

Moira Mikolajczak at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) in Belgium has been at the forefront of research into parental burnout. Over the past five years, she and her colleagues have found that it isn't something that just affects parents of ill children – it can affect any parent, although it is more likely

to affect highly educated people who are perfectionists and put too much pressure on themselves.

Since Mikolajczak began studying the phenomenon, the field has expanded. A consortium of researchers she launched a few years ago to investigate parental burnout now has 90 members. The advent of covid-19 lockdowns, which have led to many parents juggling childcare with homeworking, has made the research more relevant and the need to understand this condition more urgent, says Mikolajczak. She tells *New Scientist* which factors can tip parents over the edge and how all parents can help protect themselves from extreme exhaustion.

Jessica Hamzelou: What is parental burnout?

Moira Mikolajczak: Parental burnout is like any burnout. It's an exhaustion disorder, but takes place in the parental domain. You are exhausted because of your parental role, even if you don't have difficult or ill children.

What are the symptoms?

There are three main ones. The first is exhaustion, which is not a mere fatigue. It is more than fatigue. If you're exhausted, and especially if you're emotionally exhausted, it won't disappear with a good night's sleep. The second symptom is emotional distancing from your children. At some point, you keep the little energy you have left for yourself. The last symptom is the loss of pleasure and fulfilment in your parental role.

Can you see burnout signs in a person's body?

We have looked at levels of cortisol in hair, which is a marker of chronic stress, and can show the level of stress that you have been exposed to over the past three months.

We took hair from more than 100 parents seeking treatment for parental burnout, and compared cortisol levels with around 70 parents who were in the same family situation, and had the same number of children, but were well.

What did this study show?

What we found was shocking. The level of hair cortisol in burned-out parents was twice as much as the other parents, and was even higher than that seen in people suffering from severe chronic pain. If you meet a parent in burnout, you can see they are exhausted and overwhelmed by stress. This study shows it beautifully.

Who is most likely to be affected?

Parental burnout affects around 5 per cent of parents, but this figure varies hugely from country to country. In many African countries there is almost no burnout, while in some Western countries, such as the US, Belgium and Poland, the prevalence is more than 8 per cent. Clearly the culture in which a parent is living is a risk or protective factor.

Women are more likely to experience this, and you are also more at risk if you have a high level of education or if you're a stay-at-home mother or father. Work is a protective factor, which isn't surprising because it gives you a place to breathe.

But we have shown that, weirdly enough, these socio-demographic risk factors are less important than personal factors like perfectionism and parenting practices. Sometimes parents just put too much pressure on themselves with children's extracurricular activities or trying to cook organic meals.

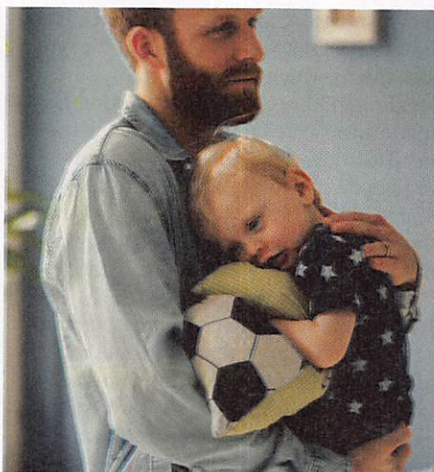
In one of your studies, you mention that some parents feel like they have to fake happiness.

Yes, this pressure comes from the positive parenting culture that we are experiencing in Western countries.

It is not enough now to just educate your children, send them to school and make sure that they are healthy. You have to make sure that your children can develop to the maximum of their potential in every domain, that they feel emotionally secure, that they feel competent, valued and proud of themselves. We have found that this has a cost for parents.

"Sometimes parents just put too much pressure on themselves"

Stay-at-home mothers and fathers are more at risk of burnout



KNIEL SYNNATZSCHKE/PLANPICTURE

Where has this pressure come from?

A historian at our university, Aurore François, is currently working to trace the origin of that pressure. It seems it can be traced back to the aftermath of the second world war when it was recognised that orphaned children who didn't receive any physical or emotional affection would suffer. Developmental psychology expanded, and psychologists started to write books to tell parents how to raise their children. Progressively, the pressure on parents increased, subtly but surely.

As a result of this rising pressure, parents are more exhausted. But that does not mean that parental burnout did not exist before. Aurore found a case of a mother who was sent to a psychiatric hospital in Belgium because of family exhaustion 100 years ago.

Is parental burnout a recognised condition?

It is not yet recognised by the mental health diagnostic manuals, but job-related burnout isn't either. Burnout as a whole is not yet recognised as a medical disorder in the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] or ICD [International Classification of Diseases]. But the DSM and ICD are updated all the time. It is not the case that because a disorder is not in the DSM that it's not a disorder.

What is the impact on children?

The impact on children is especially worrying, because we have found that parental burnout increases neglectful and violent behaviours, even in parents who are opposed to violence. The violence is in great part verbal, but can become physical. Parental burnout makes you become the opposite of what you were and aim to be.

Have you seen any trends in cases of parental burnout as a result of the covid-19 pandemic?

We are conducting a study in 20 countries. I don't yet have the full results, but I can tell you what we have found in Belgium.

We expected that parental burnout would increase during lockdown, but when we surveyed more than 1000 parents we found



ROEL BURGLER/ANPICTURE

It helps to know that you aren't alone if you are feeling burned out

"About a third of parents deteriorated during the lockdown"

that, overall, it did not increase. But this stability hid variation between individuals. About a third of parents deteriorated during the lockdown. They were much more exhausted. These were parents who had young children at home, and who had to work from home at the same time. They perceived the lockdown as a burden and as extremely stressful.

On the other hand, a third of parents' situations were improved thanks to the lockdown. They didn't have any extracurricular activities to run and could enjoy life at home, doing things they normally didn't have the time to do. Approximately a third of parents remained the same.

Is there a treatment for parental burnout?

We have started to research different approaches. Group therapy, where parents gather and talk, works well. Parents feel less guilty and ashamed in this setting – it normalises the situation. It is terribly helpful to know that you are not alone. Parents suddenly feel understood and valued as a person again. They start to find a solution together.

What about mindfulness? Does that help?

In another study, we compared group therapy with a mindfulness-based therapy. When it works, mindfulness works very well. But about a fifth of parents [who tried it] severely deteriorated. So mindfulness can be helpful or harmful. As a clinician, I guess that, for some people, mindfulness just adds another thing to do – now you have to meditate in addition to everything else. And if you don't meditate, you feel guilty because you were provided with a way to get better, but were not able to do it. We don't know who is likely to benefit, so for now we have stopped offering mindfulness.

What advice do you have for people who might be worried that they have, or are at risk of developing, parental burnout?

The advice is to be aware of both your stress-enhancing factors and your resources. And to make sure that you always care to rebalance any addition of a stress factor by the addition of a resource. You may have to solicit the help of others, or to lower your expectations

if you are a very perfectionist person.

But it depends on the severity. If the parent is experiencing severe parental burnout, then we not only advise you to work on the resources, but also to go and see a professional. A parent in burnout can think that there is nothing that can be done. They often think that only one factor is responsible for their situation – a difficult child or a partner who is not present enough or parents who aren't helpful. This is inaccurate. We have found in our research that no single factor can produce parental burnout alone. It's always the combination of several different factors.

Is there a way to find out if you have this condition?

We developed a test that people can take online. It is available at en.burnoutparental.com.



Jessica Hamzelou is a reporter for *New Scientist*. Follow her @jessHamzelou