

ON THE VERBALISATION OF STRATEGIES TO PREVENT BURNOUT

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In 2021, the collection *Understanding People (Comprendre les personnes)* of the French publishing house *Chronique Sociale* grew to encompass Michel Libert's work *Éviter le crash du burn-out (Avoiding the downward slope to burnout collapse)*¹. The content of the book whose title brings to mind the proverb „prevention is better than cure” is perfectly in line with the declared purpose of the organisation Social Chronicle founded in 1892 in Lyon which owns the publishing house with the same name. As advertised in the peritext, all the books selected to be published here are meant to help people keep abreast of the newest social trends whilst proposing an increasingly supportive and mutually respectful planning of our living together in society. More precisely, Michel Libert's vade-mecum of prevention is included in a collection whose aims are, according to its presentation on the official site, to address self-development and peer development by using input from psychology (<https://www.chroniquesociale.com/7-comprendre-les-personnes>).

The book *Éviter le crash du burn-out* comprises a preface, a foreword, an introduction, eight chapters, a conclusion, four documents (as appendices) and a bibliography. The back cover reveals that its author is a surgeon, former hospital manager, coach and co-founder of the *Stress and Burnout Clinic* in Brussels, in other words, a specialist whose written work is moreover the result of his own struggle with the common evil of nowadays societies that manifests as a state of extreme tiredness and emotional exhaustion. This actually proves to be another indicator of the appropriateness of this publication in this particular collection whose aims include the presentation of a wide array of concepts and currents, in all their diversity in the field, whilst examining real-life situations based on

¹ All the translations from French into English are ours.

concrete experiences in order to propose possible courses of action needed to cope with stress. His experience with burn-out, his managerial skills and his coaching activity are as many aspects that recommend M. Libert as an authority in the field, thus validating the utility of the strategies he brings to the readers' attention in order to make them avoid the physical and emotional exhaustion caused by stress.

Libert's text is endorsed by a preface signed by Philippe Corten, a rehabilitation psychiatrist and professor in work-related psychopathology at Université Libre de Bruxelles, who, from the very beginning, highlights the contribution made by the present book to drawing the public's attention to the importance played by coaching in stress avoidance. By working with the individual's sane part, Corten argues, the coach will help them adopt a lifestyle and develop skills that promote the principle of well-being, bringing to the surface and capitalising upon the individual's own underlying resources when faced with stressful situations (p. 9).

The authorial foreword is a personal confession of a previous burnout experience that first led to an autobiographical book entitled *Refaire surface après un burn-out par paliers de décompression* published in 2018. In an introductory paragraph whose prevailing functions of language, in R. Jakobson's model of communication, are the emotive and the referential ones which bring to the fore the addresser and the context he speaks about, Libert retraces the stages of his professional experience. From the enumeration contained in the 1st person narrative the reader becomes acquainted with the chronological order of the author's life events that led him from his career as a surgeon and hospital manager to coaching and managing a stress and burnout clinic. Libert's choice to bring to his readers' attention, in this part of the peritext, his previous book which recounted his own tormenting experience with burnout, when, by small gradual steps, he eventually succeeded in turning his anxiety, insomnia, worry and self-doubt into an opportunity to call into question his old ways of living, to consider his life from a different angle and to embrace change (p. 11), is one further element meant to establish his authorial expertise in publishing the current book.

The *Introduction*, bearing the title *The Chronicle of a Collapse Foretold*, is aimed at depicting the context which inspired this book, that is the society developments having led to what, in 2019, was recognised by the World Health Organisation as an „occupational phenomenon”: the burnout. The author argues that since the 1960s, there has been an optimistic view of an ideal world closely connected to the continuous progress of technology. All the machines available to mankind were supposed to free the world from physical labour, thus enabling the coming into being of the modern version of an earthly paradise, in the form of an abundance of leisure time to pursue one's leisure activities, of travel and of opulence. And yet, as the machines need to be operated by the human beings, their availability has only led to an increase in the desire to attain higher and higher productivity levels on the part of the human beings activating them; consequently, this has ultimately caused the descent into the burnout chaos (pp. 12-13). After this retrospective presentation, the introduction proceeds to give clarifications on the main topic and its correlates, like *acedia*, *burn-in* and *depression*, bringing into question subtle delineations such as the fine line between *burn-in*, *burnout* and *depression* (pp. 14-16). The authorial discourse of this part of the peritext is characterised, alongside the referential function of language (centered on the information to be conveyed regarding the portrayal of a society living under the threat of burnout), by the phatic and poetic functions. They are the ones focusing on the contact with the reader who is involved in the authorial discourse by the

recourse to the first-person pronoun in the plural *we* (*nous*), for example, and on the message itself, as the presentation of the psychological and social aspects related to the main topic is made in the form of an essay, punctuated by literary references. The poeticity is engendered by comments made on carefully selected quotations from Ovidius, Dante, Aldous Huxley, Albert Camus, which are meant to enhance the points made by the author. As they are present next to quotations from specialised literature in the field of psychology and sociology, from books written by H. J. Freudenberger and G. Richardson (1980), S. Peters and P. Mesters (2007), P. Chabot (2013), P. Canoui and A. Mauranges (2018), the prevalence of the poetic function could be said to earn the prefatory discourse the qualification of „atypical” measured against the scientific style that attempts to erase any trace of discourse subjectivity.

Before recommending strategies of preventing burnout, the writer finds it useful to present the reader with explanations of a set of factors inherent to the situations leading to burnout. As one of the notions closely related to it is that of *stress*, the first chapter aims to evaluate at what point of experiencing it we can actually start speaking about *burnout*. Bearing the form of a question, *Stress as a driving force?*, the title announces a chapter which will begin by approaching topics like intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the career-oriented ambitious type of professionals, the need to feel a strong sense of accomplishment at work and the pernicious slide from „I feel like doing that” to „I must do that”, especially when stress is *the* form chosen by the employers to motivate their employees. The chapter proceeds with the description of the three-staged process of how our body responds to stress, identified in mid 20th century by the endocrinologist Hans Selye as the General Adaptation Syndrome (alarm, resistance, exhaustion), which leads to a brief presentation of the endocrinology of stress focusing on the functions of dopamine, endorphins, serotonin, oxytocins. In line with the title which, delivered in the form of a question, urges the reader to ponder over the positive but also the negative nature of stress, the end of the chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the levels at which the lack of control is noticeable if an individual is under too much pressure. An important feature giving authenticity to the book consists in the presence of personal accounts made by patients cited as examples meant to sustain the viewpoints expressed on the topics under discussion.

As made clear by its title, *Identifying burnout symptoms and signs*, Chapter 2 is meant to provide its readership with useful keys to burnout detection in our immediate professional and family environment, by revealing how this polymorphic phenomenon manifests at the physical, emotional, mental and social levels. The final subtitle of this chapter fulfills one of the promises made by the preface, approaching in detail the difference between *burnout* and another notion from its semantic field which, next to stress, immediately comes to mind when thinking about it, namely *depression*.

Chapter 3, *Identifying professional fields most at risk of burnout*, starts with a review of the five drivers directing our behavior, which were first identified by the psychiatrist Éric Berne, known for his theory of the transactional analysis, and later resumed by T. Kahler’s theory: be strong, be perfect, please others, hurry up, try hard. The overview of these drivers segues into the reflection upon the relation between the individual and the professional part of one’s life. As the book was written during the lockdown imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the chapter makes it its duty to dwell on the question of teleworking and the team-out effect experienced by so many professionals in 2020, before putting under scrutiny,

in several sections, the case of the healthcare personnel, with a view to providing them with tools for burnout identification, prevention or cure - as the case may be.

The identification of such tools becomes a priority in the next chapter dedicated to pinpointing individual avoidance or adjustment strategies, that is active and passive coping. Listening to one's emotions, accepting and dealing with conflicts instead of letting them gnaw at oneself, good planning of one's objectives and courses of actions to fulfill them, with time allotted to the examination of the ways in which a situation has developed in order to adjust one's actions when adjustment is required, reducing to a minimum one's availability to intrusive electronic demands, looking for meaning, asking for help - on the one hand -, and the flight reaction and avoidance, the self-control taken to excess, the rigidity - on the other hand, are only a few of the strategies listed and presented in minute detail in Chapter 4.

Factoring in the Quality of Life is the title of Chapter 5 which from the outset quotes P. Corten, who, in the *Preface* he wrote to this book, reminded readers that quality of life equates with life making sense. The chapter thus resumes Corten's three-dimensional model of quality of life and the four winning strategies for achieving it, before discussing the notion of #GQL, Global Quality of Life, developed by J.-D. Budin and J.-C. Anna in 2018 which includes health, quality of life at work and quality of life outside work.

The examination of the range of strategies meant to help the reader avoid the slippery slope to burnout continues in Chapter 6, which is dedicated to finding ways to *Make Work Meaningful*. To this purpose, before giving an answer to the question „All in all, why exactly do we work?“ and naming the conditions that need to be satisfied for work to make sense in the eyes of the person performing it, this part of the book sees fit to recall the Japanese philosophy *ikigai*, and the Theory X and Theory Y on human behavior at work formulated by the social psychologist Douglas McGregor's in 1960.

The penultimate chapter, entitled *Resilience and Emerging from Crisis*, dwells on a model inspired from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, regarding the discomforts of the process of change entailed by the emergence from a burnout experience. It also enlarges upon, among others, the relevance of coaching in accompanying one on their trajectory from self-protection to change, of capitalising on one's qualities, of learning from one's mistakes, of meditation.

The last chapter, *Fostering Performance and Well-being: the Coach Manager Attitude* discusses management attitude and style. The topics covered are related to ways to motivate one's co-workers, to types of management (authoritative, participative), to the work atmosphere depending on factors such as flexibility, responsibility, standards, recognition, clarity, commitment and goodwill, to management styles, such as the Quinn model (1993), the social styles and the coach manager and to the qualities displayed by good leaders in preventing burnout in their organisations.

The conclusion is given a title, *The Holistic Approach to Burnout*. Based on Ken Wilbur's AQAL (All Quadrants All Levels) model and his integral theory, it proposes Libert's own interpretation of burnout in the integral vision advocated by the American philosopher. The elements belonging to the grid with four quadrants (interior-exterior, individual-collective) are represented as a conclusion in a personalised figure named *My integral vision of burnout* which invites its readership to fill in their own grid according to their own experience. The book comes complete with four documents consisting of questionnaires meant as tools to detect and assess burnout, drivers and ways of coping, cited throughout the chapters and reproduced here with their authors' permission.

Another characteristic of this book is its clarity which is manifest from its very beginning, for a mere glance at the *Table of Contents* reveals that the text enjoys the constant support of its peritext. Each of the eight chapters contains several sections with subtitles, which outline the way the ideas progress within the ensemble called a *chapter*. The chapter structure is as follows: a brief introduction – which in some cases bears a title like the case of the first chapter, *Where does our motivation come from?*, the content minutely divided into sub-sections boasting their own subtitles and summaries delivered as texts or in the form of a pie-chart, a table, a process diagram or a map. Regarding the presence of figures, mention must be made that they actually support the message delivered textually all throughout the book, and not just in the conclusive parts of the chapters, being a prominent element which enhances legibility and thus contributes to the clarity of the text. This is therefore also preserved at a visual level, due to the choice of layout, to the constant presence of figures, and to text formatting tools such as bold and italics. The coherence and unity of the ensemble is also achieved through references from one chapter to another, namely to ideas expressed either as text or as figures: we see, for instance, Chapter 2 referring the reader to a figure in Chapter 1 (p. 24), Chapter 1 referring, for further clarification of a particular aspect, to Chapter 7 (p. 30), Chapter 4 citing Chapter 2 (p. 46) or Chapter 6 citing Chapter 1 (p. 59). At the same time, the book acknowledges the limits of its presentations (Chapter 2 mentioning in its introductory part that it does not claim to be exhaustive), aiming at bringing under discussion relevant aspects related to the main topic.

As the advice at the end of the *Foreword* reads, Michel Libert's book advocates the idea that any unexpected potentially stressful event should be turned into an opportunity of self-discovery.

Michel LIBERT, (2021),
Éviter le crash du burn-out,
Chronique Sociale, Lyon, 107 p.