

BurnLife: Theory on Mental Exhaustion at the Work/Life Interface among Nursing Professionals

BurnLife: Teoria Sobre o Esgotamento Mental na Interface entre o Trabalho em Enfermagem e a Vida Pessoal

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Introduction

The nursing profession plays a vital, multifaceted role in population health, encompassing direct patient care, health unit management, hospital coordination, prehospital services, teaching, and scientific research.

This range of responsibilities positions nursing professionals as key players in supporting the well-being of individuals and families across all levels of care within both public and private health systems. The quality of nursing care directly influences healthcare quality, patient satisfaction, and safety (Santos et al., 2023).

Historically, caregiving has been connected to women and regarded as a natural characteristic tied to affection, charity, religiosity, and even motherhood.

Florence Nightingale, a woman and the founder of modern nursing, is frequently recognized as a landmark figure in shaping modern nursing. During the Crimean War, she coordinated care for injured soldiers and established practices, techniques, and principles that defined nursing and emphasized its scientific foundation and importance.

However, nursing care provided by women goes well beyond individual or innate traits; it is a fundamental part of establishing trust with patients and families, promoting comfort, safety, and humanized care (Renk et al., 2022).

Brazil has over three million nursing professionals distributed across four categories: registered nurses, nursing technicians, nursing assistants, and midwives. About 85% of these workers are women. Similar figures are observed worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that, as of 2023, there are roughly 29.8 million nursing professionals globally, with 85% being women (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025).

This female predominance is shaped by social and historical factors, as well as women's roles as caregivers at home and providers for their families. They often juggle multiple responsibilities, including being mothers, spouses, partners, daughters, caregivers, political leaders, researchers, and financially independent individuals.

Understanding this uniqueness is crucial for appreciating women's professional achievements and for recognizing how their combined work and domestic duties impact their mental and physical health (Renk et al., 2022).

Daily nursing duties encompass multiple demands and significant challenges such as heavy patient loads, administrative tasks related to financial and legal issues, extended hours, irregular shifts, staffing shortages, low pay, multiple jobs, limited career growth, emotional strain, poor working conditions, and ongoing professional development requirements.

Beyond their technical duties, female nursing workers often encounter social and cultural pressures such as lack of social recognition, gender bias, resistance to female leadership, appearance expectations, motherhood, leadership styles, and family and social commitments. This intersection of roles can greatly add to physical and

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mental stress, raising the risk of mental exhaustion.

Mental exhaustion is a multifactorial phenomenon that arises from the interplay between professional work and personal life, including family care responsibilities, interpersonal relationships, and other personal demands.

These various factors can lead to dissatisfaction, decreased performance, leaving the profession either partially or completely, or seeking other jobs to maintain financial stability and personal fulfillment. These issues are even more severe in situations where public health and family policies do not sufficiently support workers (Santos et al., 2023). In this context, the Study Group on Care Management, Scientific Publishing, and Occupational Health (GeeST) at the State University of Londrina (UEL) introduced the BurnLife theory. This theory views mental exhaustion as an inseparable phenomenon resulting from the interaction between nursing work and personal life.

The theory suggests that exhaustion results not just from work overload but also from a lack of support and recognition from peers and managers, which stems from various social, cultural, and professional pressures faced by nursing professionals.

Studies on the development and validation of the BurnLife assessment scale show a notable rise in this form of exhaustion among female nursing workers nurses. This emphasizes the importance of social and scientific reflection and the need for well-planned interventions, especially for a professional group increasingly impacted by the emotional and social pressures of work and personal life (Alcantara, 2025).

The BurnLife theory suggests that mental exhaustion arises from the combined effects of three main factors: workload, which encompasses long shifts as well as technical and administrative duties; overlapping social and family responsibilities, such as unpaid caregiving and household chores; and a lack of recognition in both professional and personal contexts. These elements work together to produce cumulative physical and emotional consequences that affect worker well-being, the quality of patient care, and the long-term viability of nursing careers.

To address BurnLife, it is crucial for nursing professionals to recognize its presence and adopt strategies that balance their professional and personal lives. These strategies include fair sharing of household and family duties among all members, establishing support networks during challenging personal times, designing work schedules that allow for proper compensation, and ensuring institutional acknowledgment of nursing care (Alcantara, 2025).

A cultural change is also crucial within families, schools, and social institutions. Future generations need to learn the importance of partnership and sharing domestic and family responsibilities, while public policies supporting occupational health and gender equality should be enhanced. These steps are vital to decreasing exhaustion and avoiding adverse effects on professionals and the broader healthcare system.

The BurnLife theory provides a conceptual framework for managers, researchers, and policymakers to identify exhaustion early, implement preventive measures, and foster healthier, more inclusive workplaces. Recognizing the unique aspects of women's work in nursing, along with structured prevention and support strategies, helps improve professional recognition, retain talent, enhance quality of care, and boost overall well-being and quality of life (Alcantara, 2025).

The social impact of the BurnLife theory goes beyond individual effects. Recognizing female nursing workers' contributions, advancing gender equality, and fostering shared household duties enhance social unity and community health. Policies inspired by this theory could lead to innovative strategies that address both work-related factors and social determinants of health, emphasizing a holistic approach to care and safeguarding healthcare professionals.

This new nursing theory offers an innovative contribution to nursing and occupational health by combining insights into mental exhaustion with the overlap of work and personal life. Its application encourages a holistic view of nursing professionals' mental health, fostering more human-centered management, structured public policies, and increased social and professional recognition.

Recognizing, studying, and intervening in BurnLife is crucial for enabling nursing professionals to care for others without risking their own health. This promotes sustainability, improves quality of care, and advances social justice. Additionally, the theory could aid research on similar phenomena in other professions by examining activities, work processes, and social issues unique to each occupation (Alcantara, 2025).

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