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HOW TO PREVENT EMOTIONAL BURNOUT FOR PROGRAMMERS

The problem of professional burnout is extremely relevant in our fast-paced, competitive modern world and could be called «a disease of civilization». Not to be at risk, not only should every person be aware of both causes and consequences of emotional burnout syndrome, but also learn how to take care of their mental hygiene.

The term «professional burnout syndrome» (burnout) was introduced in 1974 by an American psychologist H. Fredenberg. Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest and motivation that led you to taking on a certain role in the first place [1].

Initially, this term was applied to people who were professionally trained in the field of «helper» professions: doctors, priests, teachers, lawyers, social workers, psychotherapists etc. [2]. In recent years programmers have been added to the list of occupations with high risk of professional burnout occurrence [3]. Due to the fact that the profession of software developer is becoming more and more popular and demanding, it is relevant to study causes of progression and methods of self-prevention of burnout of IT-specialists.

Nowadays, the main driving force of most IT-companies is Generation Y. Young people have completely different expectations from work, unlike their parents: high salaries or good offices are not enough for them. Non-material values, such as big goals, interest, and creativity are in the first place. This is why getting job satisfaction becomes much harder in contemporary work environment.

Besides, frequent replacement of projects is a usual practice for programmers, testers, and managers. Work «for yesterday», overtime, «digesting» tons of information – all this leads to either professional growth or professional burnout.

Project managers are subjected to burnout syndrome even to bigger extent than ordinary IT-specialists. The managers work under pressure from both sides: their superiors and their subordinates.

The burnout syndrome is especially dangerous for the companies, since effectiveness of employees depends on their emotional state and the productivity of their work. In fact, one «burned out» project manager is much more dangerous than ten «burned out» developers. It's important to deal with burnout right away because of its numerous consequences [3; 4].

It is supposed that the main causes of burnout in IT-sphere are:

- highly intensive and stressful cognitive work that requires constant mental tension;
- chronic stress – it is said that «not a day goes by without failures when creating software»;
- difference between personal expectations and reality (it can be either the lack of interesting creative tasks or work on super complicated ones) [4];
- lack of physical activity, fixed work posture, eye strain.

Negative effects of burnout affect almost every area of human life – including your home, work, and social life. Burnout can also cause long-term changes to your body that make you vulnerable to illnesses like cold and flu.

How to recognize burnout yourself?

Most of us have days when we feel helpless, overloaded, or unappreciated –when dragging ourselves out of bed requires the determination of Hercules. If you feel like this most of the time, however, you may be burned out.

Burnout is a gradual process. It doesn't happen overnight, but it can creep up on you. The signs and symptoms are subtle at first, but become worse as time goes on. Think of the early symptoms as red flags that something is wrong and needs to be addressed. If you pay attention and actively reduce your stress, you can prevent a major breakdown. If you ignore them, you'll eventually burn out.

Physical signs and symptoms of burnout are feeling tired and drained most of the time; lowered immunity, frequent illnesses; frequent headaches or muscle pain; change in appetite or sleep habits.

Emotional signs and symptoms of burnout are sense of failure and self-doubt; feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated; detachment, feeling alone in the world; loss of motivation; increasingly cynical and negative outlook; decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment.

Behavioral signs and symptoms of burnout withdrawing from responsibilities: isolating yourself from others; procrastinating, taking longer to get things done, using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope; taking out your frustrations on others; skipping work or coming in late and leaving early [5].

It is important to distinguish stress and burnout. Burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as too much stress. Stress, by and large, involves too much: too many pressures that demand too much of you physically and

mentally. However, stressed people can still imagine that if they can just get everything under control, they'll feel better. Burnout, on the other hand, is about not enough. Being burned out means feeling empty and mentally exhausted, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don't see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress feels like you're drowning in responsibilities, burnout is a sense of being all dried up. And while you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don't always notice burnout when it happens [5].

There are general recommendations for workers how to avoid professional burnout [1; 2]. The main advice is to find balance in your life. Look for meaning and satisfaction elsewhere in your life: in your family, friends, and hobbies. Focus on the parts of your life that bring you joy. Take time off. If burnout seems inevitable, try to take a complete break from work; monitor your health (sleep, nutrition, and physical activity), etc.

There are also some specific tips for software developers [3]:

1. Play, learn, experiment. It's very profitable and productive in the short run to just do the thing you do best. Deliberately dedicating 20% of your time for goofing around with technology is one of the most effective strategies for avoiding burnout. Goofing around may involve trying out new libraries, creating something fun and not related to work.

2. Take breaks and allow yourself to indulge in other passions. There are many interesting activities besides programming. Hint: sports, cultural events, reading, Lego, socializing, fishing. If you keep on doing just one thing all the time, such as programming, one day you will inevitably wake up burned out and hating yourself for having no life.

3. Consider changing switching jobs or starting a different project. It may be that you are stuck doing uninteresting, soul-sucking jobs at your current job such as tweaking existing codebase all day long.

4. Invest in a good working environment and don't be cheap on your tools. Thus get the PC that will compile quick and not keep you waiting. Make sure you have a comfortable chair, table and monitors well set-up.

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