
Emotional information processing in burnout: An oculomotor and electrodermal investigation

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Abstract

Background: Burnout is a stress-related, highly prevalent syndrome. However, experimental investigation of emotional processing in burnout is poorly developed. In the present study, attentional distribution – as indexed by oculomotor activity – and physiological arousal – as indexed by electrodermal activity – toward emotional information were examined in burned out and healthy individuals. Method: Participants 'freely' viewed a series of 4-picture slides as their point-of-gaze was monitored using eye-tracking technology and their skin conductance recorded. Each picture matched 1 of 4 emotional categories, labeled as dysphoric, anxiogenic, positive, and neutral. Each slide was displayed during 20 seconds. Results: In healthy participants, the percentages of fixation number and fixation duration were higher on 'positive pictures' than on 'dysphoric pictures', and higher on 'positive pictures' than on 'anxiogenic pictures', whereas visual scanning was not depending on stimulus emotional category in burned out participants. No between-group or within-group difference in pupil diameter or electrodermal activity was detected. Conclusion: This study reveals an equidistribution of attention on emotional information in burnout. Contrary to healthy individuals, burned out individuals do not favour positive information as they process concurrent emotional stimuli. The dysphoric core of the syndrome possibly accounts for this tendency. Indeed, dysphoria has repeatedly been associated with an inclination to view emotionally categorized stimuli presented simultaneously in an unbiased manner. This work highlights the relevance of an experimentally driven investigation of the burnout syndrome.

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