Episode 5: Balancing stressors and resources with parental burnout expert Dr Isabelle Roskam

Burnout is like a feeling of extreme and severe exhaustion in a specific role. That's makes the difference, for example, with depression, which is cross sectional across domains across areas of life. Burnout is specific to one role. And for example, you can be burned out by your job, but not in parenting. And the reverse is also true. And most of the time parents who burn out say that they stay in the job in the workplace for a long time, because they want to avoid the stress coming from parenting. And the same is also true for those who are in job burnout. They say that, okay, my family is my safe haven.

Burnout is a stress related syndrome which corresponds to too much stress too long with too few resources to cope with stressors. And like in parenting, but also in, in the workplace, stress is just something normal. It's unrealistic to say that you will be a parent without stress. We have stress as parents and it's needed to be ready to rear our children to be a little bit stressed for them. But what leads to burnout is when you have too much stress too long, and you don't have resources to cope with stressors. There is an unbalance between the stressors on the one hand and the resources you have on the other hand.

Job burnout has been defined by Christina Maslach in the seventies and the three symptoms are emotional exertion. So you feel so exhausted that, okay, the idea that you have to go to your work today is just so hard that you are no longer able to come out from your bed. You have zero energy. When you think that you have to go to work and it's the same in parenting. It's just the same parents say, okay, I have zero energy as far as each time as I have to think about my children, the activities I have to do for them carrying them, playing with them. Okay. I have zero in energy and I'm in a survival mode. In my parenting role. So exertion is present in both job burnout and parental burnout .

In job burnout the second symptom is something like cynicism. And so that means that, for example, if you are a nurse rather than talking about Mrs. Jones, for example, you will talk about the case B in room C, because you have some kind of detachment and you can become cynical about people you care for because you don't have no empathy for them anymore because you so exhausted. It's a kind of protection of yourself to become distant from the patients you care or for the clients that you have in the workplace.

In parenting you have a sort of emotional distancing phenomenon, meaning that the parents who do not have energy anymore they do just the bare minimum. So they feed their children. They put them to bed. They put them at school, but not more. So they do not have the energy, for example, to listen to them about what they have done at school how they feel. And so it's like a very cold parenting without empathy, without emotions, without the emotional connection between the parent and the child.

The third symptom in the workplace is a loss of efficacy. In parenting. It is not like loss of efficacy because the parents knows what he has to do with the child, but it's much more like saturation, Feelings of being fed up. Something like no pleasure to be with the child to have a meal, to have leisure time or just to be with them. The parent who is burnt out has no pleasure to be with the children. And so you try to escape each, try to avoid any kind of situation.

In parental burnout, the majority, the vast majority of the parents were highly involved parents, parents who wanted to be the best mothers and the best fathers. And sometimes because they do have high standards. high perfectionism for example they become burned out.

What you describe is the process of burnout. Of course not all the three symptoms come together one day. Suddenly. And so the process starts in most of the situations by exhaustion. So you just feel to be in a very important fatigue and just overwhelming exhaustion, but that does not mean that you are already in this kind of emotional distancing and loss of pleasure with your children. And in this first space, it's very important to prevent burnout. Why? Because we know now that burnout has a very deleterious consequences, like neglect and violence against children.

And these two kinds of consequences are associated with the second stage, which is emotional distancing. It is because as a parent who doesn't feel empathetic with your children or to your children, that's you become able to be neglectful, and violent against them. And so it's really important to recognize that burnout is like a process. When you are in the first phase of exhaustion, you need to be in a preventive action because you have to prevent the consequences that arise in the second phase with the loss of emotional connection with the child and with the loss of pleasure. And so it's really important for professionals for clinicians, for example, to be able to recognize.

And the nature of the stressors, which have been accumulated in your balance is very specific to your life and to my life. If in your balance, you have the perfectionism traits as a feature, as a stressor, you will be at risk, not only to be in parental burnout, but also in job burnout. And one person who has main stressors which are common to job and preventing burnout, like neuroticism or low emotional competencies or perfectionisms rates or something like that, then you will be at risk to be in burnout in all the spheres. So both in job burnout, and also in parental burnout.

First the reason why we developed interventions was that parental burnout is highly prevalent, at least in Western countries. And many parents are concerned. And we wanted to provide them solutions. The idea is to think about the balance between stress and resources and the core idea of the treatment is that we try to rebalance the parental balance and to do that, we use four avenues.

What we try to do is to remove from the balance, some un-useful stressors and to be aware about the stressors I have in my balance, and to think about some of them while not useful, and that I can decide to drop.

Imagine that you have three children when the first one was born. You wanted to optimize his or her development. And the child has two, maybe three extracurricular activities, sports, culture, music, I don't know and social activities and so on. And when the second one was born, you loved him or her just at the same extent. And so you also wanted to optimize his or her development and she, or he has also three or a two, all three extracurricular activities. And the third one the same. And so at the certain moment, 9 even 12 activities, extra curricular activities to manage in a week.

And so it's just highly stressful for you for your partner, for the children themselves, because you don't have time to take to have a meal time correctly. When you arrive at home its late and you have also to do the homework for the children and they are tired. You just like a taxi and it's are really exhausting to, to have such kind of parental life. So you say to your children, okay ‘we are a family which with three children and each child has to choose one maximum, two extra curricular activities. If not, we do not have time to be together and to enjoy, to be together.’

The second avenue is that we have some stressors in the balance that we are not able to remove because it's impossible. Imagine that you have a child ADHD. Okay. You can' t change your child. He will have high agitation and motor activity, but you can say, okay, for example, doing homework with this kind of child is really hard. And I can just lower my standards and decide that I can do homework with my child two or three days a week, but I will delegate to someone else or to the school or to a neighbor or I don't know, a friend or grandparent or my partner, or I can decide with the teacher that's a one day in the week the child doesn't do any kind of homework because it is counter productive. You cannot remove some stressor, but you can, in most of cases you can try to alleviate the weight of some stressors.

The first one is to become aware of all the resources I have already in my balance. And most parents say, okay, I have a very nice partner, or I have very nice children, but I never asked them anything. Okay. Why? Because I'm so perfectionist. But perfection is that I think that if someone else does my job or do my task, it won't be done like I would like that this task will be done. And so you need to consider what prevents you from using the resources that you have and decide, how can I change my mindset, my beliefs, my way of thinking to accept, to agree that okay, I can share some task. I can receive some help from other people, from my children or for my partner, so and so on. To make a better use of the resources that you already have in your balance.

The second avenue for the resources is that you will try, we will try to add new resources, original resources. And the idea was that as you come into the group, the deal is that you will take the children from another family from Friday night to Sunday midday. And in another moment in the school year another family will do the same for you. And so the father said to us, told us that he gains two qualitative weekends two quality time in a year. The one of course when you leave the home with his wife, but also the weekend, they welcome the children from another family. And so this is one example of a new creative resource that we can bring into our balance to just to alleviate the weight of the stressor and to improve the weight of the resource.

And so for some parents it's completely possible to discuss with the teacher because the teacher is open to some solution for example, he know very well what is hyper activity and you can fully understand what happens at home and that it could be counter productive for the child and for the parent to have too much homework to do. And yes, you can have this kind of discussion with the teacher. But for some other parents, it is just not possible because the school philosophy is that like that, or the teacher has a very different ideas about equality in the classroom, for example. And he wants just that all the children have the same treatment. So we must go through stressors or resources on which we have a certain kind, a certain level of control.

The example of co-parenting is also an important one because in some families you have a partner who is completely available to help, but in other families, you cannot count on that. And it would be a very strong and hard conflict to gain much more help from the partner. When we have all the distresses and have resources on the table, we make some categories depending on, okay, what are the stress source I'm able to control? What are the stressors which have the best cost benefit ratio?

We must keep the energy to go through the stressors or the resources that we can manage at this moment. And this is a dynamic process. So maybe it will be possible in the next few months, for example, to work on co-parenting. But maybe that's now it's just not possible because the partner is not ready to do that. So we will try with other kind of stress or resources, but don't take it off the table entirely because as time goes on, that could change.

What we found was that the prevalence rates were highly different from one culture to another. So from one country to another, and it was not a random effect because when you see the map, the world map, the highest prevalence were found in Western countries. In the north of the world's map and in the south of the world map, we had prevalence that were sometimes near to zero, and the in Western countries the prevalence reach 8% like in the United States, but also in Belgium.

And so we try to explain the difference in the prevalence rates across countries. And what we had in mind is that maybe that it was due to demographic variables. So for example the family types in some countries you have multi-generational families or polygamous, families. We also thought about some demographic aspects, like the number of children. So we consider several social demographic variable, like educational level and working status and so on. And the second set of variables we considered were that we wanted to control for social economic factors or like the gross domestic product in each country because yes, it's really important to consider that in some countries you receive some help from the state as a family, as a parent. And the third sets of variables were the cultural values. And we consider individualism and collectivism. And what we saw when we put all these explanations in the model was that the only value, which was able to explain the differences in prevalence weights was individualism.

So there are several explanations about the way that individualism produces parental exhaustion. So the first one is that, of course, in individualistic countries, you must be self-reliant. The second one is that in individualistic country we transmit to our children individualistic values also. So we teach them to be assertive to give their opinion to say no words when they do not want to do something, to have their own ideas, to be creative, to go their own way. Okay. That's fine to become an adult in an individualistic country. But at the same time, it's really hard to have children who say no, who provide their opinion all of the time. Because each time you ask something, you have to negotiate to justify why you ask them to do something now and not in two hours for example.

A third kind is that in individualistic countries, also individualism is associated with value like competition. And so we always compare ourselves to other parents. And the role of the social media in this in this matter is really important because on social media, all of the families share only the best of themselves. But also we want to be the best parent to have the best children we want, that my child will be the best at school. I want them to perform in at school, but also in their extracurricular activities. I want always to optimize the children for them to be the best, but I also want to be the best mother or, and my husband wants to be the best father. And so we have, high standards because in individualistic countries, we have the competitiveness as an important value, and it's really exhausting to live in such kind of environment when you always strive to be better than yesterday and to be better tomorrow than today.

If you are a perfectionist person, you will be very sensitive to recommendations to parents about how to feed or to play or to sleep and you will try all the days to fit with all the recommendations. If not, you will feel guilty for not being completely aligned with those recommendation. And yet it's really exhausting.

And the last avenue is that also the individualistic countries are the most egalitarian countries. I expect equality in the political life, in my house, but also in, in my job. I have the same salary that my male counterparts in the university, for example, but there is one area where equality is not achieved and its parenting. In most of the international surveys we see that 70% of caring and child rearing is always due to mothers because there aren't strong essentially beliefs about parenting that makes the mother to be the first caregiver. I have expectations, which are egalitarian expectations, which are very high because I can experience them in some parts of my life. But especially in parenting, I cannot achieve equality because in this specific area, my expectations are not fulfilled. And because of this unfulfilled expectation I feel frustrated by receiving less equality than I think that I can rate from my partner for example.