



Article

THE OFFLOAD ROOM

# If you don't make time for your mental health, you will be forced to make time for your illness

(PART 1)

Article written by: **Dr Cobus Pienaar**

PS: This article is written within a leadership context and for leaders but applies equally to everyone.

## A day at the office (a glimpse)

According to research, people send, on average, forty emails daily and receive ninety (with all the associated tasks). Many people, however, receive far more. Imagine receiving two-hundred emails daily as a leader during a busy time while you must attend endless back-to-back meetings, webinars, and conferences. That is what many leaders, according to Giles Hutchins and Laura Storm in their book *Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of life-affirming 21st-century organisations*, must contend with.

This is utter insanity. Our minds and nervous systems are not wired to filter and process this amount of input and stimuli. Consequently, this overload contributes to making us physically and emotionally ill, burnt out and depressed. A study by researchers at the University of California showed that some people are bombarded with thirty-four gigabytes of information daily. This is enough to overload a laptop within a week. Through our phones, the internet, email, tv, radio, newspapers, books, social media, and the urban landscape, we receive 23 words per second each waking hour. As a society, we must acknowledge that everyone's mental health will be negatively affected. At the same time, leaders are more likely to hide their mental health challenges under the rug of shame and stigma.

If we, as leaders, do not change the systems and structures that make people sick, we will perpetuate the "mess".

What drives people to make themselves sick in a work context? The main reason why many people work themselves into the ground, fight competitively and politically for promotions, worry about people stealing their ideas and spend a vast amount of energy on positioning themselves boils down to fear linked to the perception they have about themselves, which will be addressed later in this article. Fear of missing out, being excluded, not being seen, heard, or valued. Not being a success in society's and one's own eyes. Culturally, we are all, to some extent, addicted to external validation due to an impoverishment of a solid inner sense of worth.

## The mental health of leaders

In an article published by Barling and Cloutier back in 2016, titled "Leaders' mental health at work: Empirical, methodological and policy directions", little attention is focused on the mental health of leaders (compared to that of employees) and why leaders' mental health at work has been so widely ignored. Some reasons include that leaders should be morally responsible for the well-being of their employees, given their position, and that they should possess the qualities that would make them "immune" to daily stressors.

The poor mental health of leaders (given their position, decision-making impact, and span of authority) will have an enormous impact on the people they lead and, ultimately, the organisation if not adequately understood and managed. Poor mental health can weaken a leader's physical, cognitive, and emotional resistance to stress. Increased stress levels lead to, among other things, poor impulsive and emotion-driven decisions, poor social and interpersonal functioning, difficulties in concentration and poor sleeping patterns, to name but a few. Interestingly, poor sleep and sleep deprivation have been shown to predict higher levels of abusive supervision and a higher likelihood of exhibiting a more laissez-faire leadership style. In times of poor mental health, leaders are also more likely to engage in self-destructive leadership behaviours such as unethical behaviour. The behaviours mentioned above become direr when leaders experience anxiety (within the current context of complexity they find themselves in) and depression while trying to mask it with increased alcohol consumption and other addictions/compulsions as a coping mechanism. Even nonclinical levels of depression and anxiety could be sufficient to influence the quality of leadership. Research indicates that early childhood experiences associated with negative family engagements can impede the development of positive leadership traits.

The cognitive complexity and responsibility inherent in senior leadership positions add another level of stress that will influence the well-being and mental health of even the most resilient leader. Owing to their role, senior leaders often isolate themselves as a form of coping, which decreases their sense of belonging which is critical to mental health. Leaders might also consciously or unconsciously

carry the additional burden emanating from employees' negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anger) and behaviours (e.g., aggression, undermining). Frost and Robinson refer to this as "toxic handlers", which negatively affect a leader's mental health. Should leaders attempt to portray what to do in all situations and try to come up with all the answers themselves – is a desired goal for many leaders – it would likely lead to emotional exhaustion and poor performance.



## A toxic environment is more likely to change you than you are to change it. Get out!

(PART 2)

### **Burnout and some other dreadful diseases that are probably knocking at the door.**

While work can create a sense of purpose and community, it can also lead to incidences of stress or chronic stress. Stress leads to various health problems like depression, obesity, anxiety, insomnia, heart attacks, respiratory and digestive issues, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system. Comparing more than 106 000 people with stress disorders with more than one million without them, researchers found that stress was tied to a 36% greater risk of developing 41 autoimmune diseases. Scientific evidence indicates that people who find themselves in a state of chronic stress are less compassionate, collaborative, creative, innovative, and wise. According to a study by Gallup in 2018, which included 154 000 adults from 145 countries, the world is more stressed, worried, sad and in pain today than ever.

When chronic stress goes unnoticed or unmanaged, it evolves into a syndrome called burnout. Burnout is not a synonym for being tired or stressed; it refers to an experience specific to work, according to the literature. It is associated with feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to keep up with life's and work's incessant demands. According to Giles Hutchins and Laura Storm in their book *Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of life-affirming 21st-century organisations*, a Harvard Medical School Study found that 96% of senior executives in the US feel burnt out. At the same time, a third of them described their stress levels and work situation as extreme. The use of anti-depressants in the US alone has increased by 65% over the last 15 years.

In their "State of Workplace Burnout 2023" findings, the Infinite Potential research project highlights an unmanageable workload, a lack of organisational support, misalignment of values, unfair/inequitable treatment, and toxic leadership behaviours as the five leading causes of burnout.

Leaders may therefore experience and cause burnout at the same time.

## Some dreadful facts about burnout

- Burnout is not something you can recover from in three easy steps. It happens gradually and can take months or even years to develop. It can, however, take weeks, months, or even years to recover. Even after making professional and personal changes, the effects of burnout might linger for a lifetime.
- It can happen to anyone in any industry and at any level.
- It more so affects those younger and earlier in their careers.
- It is higher for women than men.
- It impacts your brain negatively. The brains of chronically burnt-out people show similar damage as people who have experienced trauma. Burnout reduces the connectivity between different brain parts, decreasing creativity, working memory and problem-solving skills. Burnout also causes the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for cognitive functioning – to thin. Therefore, the part of the brain that controls memory and attention span is weakened. The exact process happens in ageing people, but it occurs much more rapidly in people who are stressed out for prolonged periods (interwoven into the concept of burnout).
- The number one cause of burnout is workload.
- Burnout will primarily affect three of your biological systems (the hormonal, immune, and digestive systems).

## Do I have a problem? Knowing the signs

The following depiction of the various phases of burnout will provide a good overview of whether you are on the road to burnout.

# THE 12 STAGES OF BURNOUT



Diagram 1: Stages of burnout

On a lighter note. People who are not burnt out are 49% more engaged, feel 50% more psychologically safe, have a 30% higher sense of belonging and feel 217% more supported by their organisation than people experiencing burnout.



## Well-being also means looking honestly at your role in your suffering

(PART 3)

### Headwinds

A person's "hardwiring" makes changing their behaviour challenging, according to Kets de Vries in his book, "Essays on the Ugly, the Bad and the Weird". Without considerable discomfort or pain, people (leaders included) will not be prepared to change. This is supported by Gabor Mate in his book, "When the Body Says No", where he observes that people seem more likely to change when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than that of changing, or they decide to live with the "pain".

In cognitive dissonance theory, Blakeley suggests that when people are confronted with information that contradicts or challenges their existing beliefs, they are thrown into a tense and dissonant state of mind. To restore harmony, they may avoid new information or change their beliefs to support the latest information. When new information is presented and it is too challenging, people tend to have a strong tendency to distort it (or provide justification) to preserve their existing core beliefs. This might be especially so for leaders, considering the literature that suggests that a leader's underlying motive is to protect their self-image.

Consequently, people who are not intentional about being well will unlikely change. Rarely will they assume personal responsibility. On the contrary, most often, they will transfer what is on the inside to the outside. And if they experience problems because of their unwillingness to change, they will more likely reframe their dysfunctional ways by blaming others when things go wrong. They will therefore keep relying on their maladaptive ways to deal with their unwillingness to consider how they create their demise. According to Gabor Mate, in his book "When the Body Says No", many people maintain that they are strong, even indestructible. They tend to convince themselves that they can handle physical or emotional pain by repressing it, ignoring it, or deflecting it by fussing over other people's problems. Positive thinking will neither solve the problem, and it will probably become a destructive coping mechanism. By ignoring reality, you repress your negative emotions, increase your stress levels, and ultimately predispose yourself to disease.

Sigmund Freud summed this up well when he said: "Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways."

If you want to change, your first step is to become aware and take responsibility for your own "dysfunction" by asking how I am complicit in creating what I do not want.

People generally prefer quick fixes (in all their different forms), and leaders are not exempted. While busy with outer "doings", they are numbing their inner "being". When people do not feel whole, they search for something "out there" to fix a deep wound in "here". More concerning is that people in general try to solve their challenges (of which burnout may be one of them) by swimming in the "shallows" while the answers are to be found in the "deeper end" of the ocean. The point of departure is that everyone needs to deal with what is "inside" that "blocks" them.

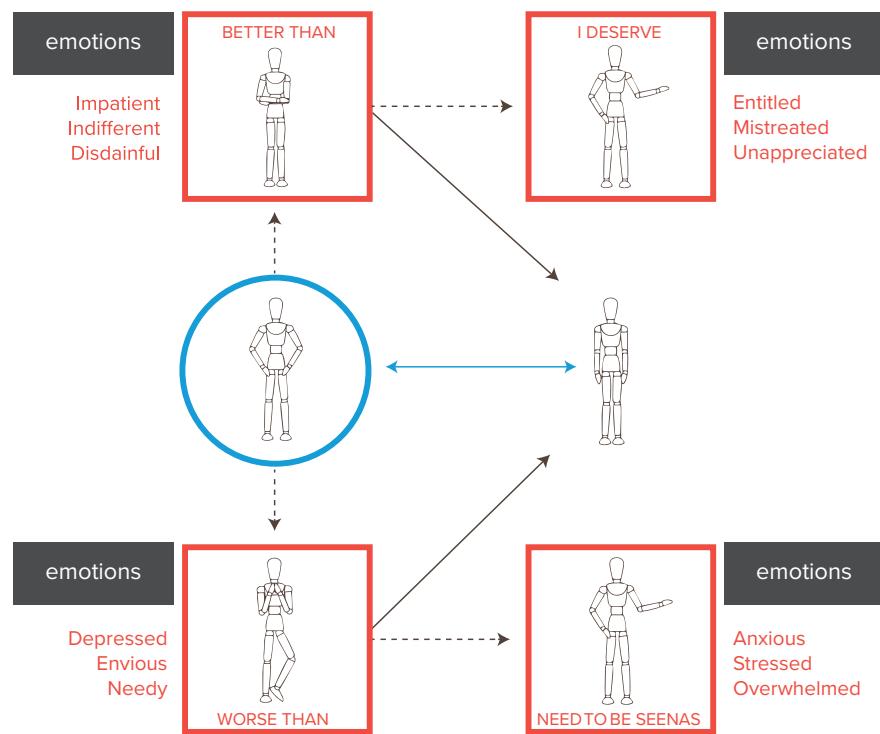
## Swimming deeper

So, what is holding you back? The following section considers an integrated framework for understanding how we create our own misery.

Many definitions and literature point out that burnout has its origins in the workplace only. I argue that individuals are the co-creators of their demise, which stems from how they perceive themselves in relation to others or what Arbinger may refer to as inward mindset styles.

The Arbinger Institute, in its books "The Anatomy of Peace" and "Leadership and Self-deception", developed a complete theory to explain how the phenomenon of self-deception develops within individuals and leaders, which will, among other things, affect a person's well-being. Self-deception entails the problem of a person not knowing they have a problem while blaming others for their problems. One of the Arbinger Institute's conceptual taxonomies illustrates how people adopt various styles of self-deception. The proposition of this taxonomy is that people either hold others in the same regard as they hold themselves, or they may separate themselves from others by either elevating themselves or lowering themselves in relation to others. Consequently, people become self-deceived due to this unconscious part of themselves.

The Arbinger Institute depicts four inward mindset styles (self-deceptions) individuals may adopt in relation to others while negatively impacting themselves and others at the same time. This taxonomy is diagrammatically illustrated in Diagram 2.



## Diagram 2: Inward Mindset Styles

Each of the four styles (self-deceptions) depicted in Diagram 2 will be discussed briefly to provide contextual understanding before examples are provided.

Type 1a: "I am better than". Someone with this type of self-view tends to think of themselves as superior, important, right, and virtuous in relation to others. In other words, a person with this style views others as inferior, incapable, irrelevant and wrong.

Type 1b: "I deserve". Often associated with the previous style, one might hold a self-view of "I deserve". A person with this view tends to see themselves as being mistreated, victimised and unappreciated while viewing others as mistreating them and being ungrateful and unwise.

Arbinger asserts that although a person may view themselves as "I deserve" or "I am better than", it will show up differently. For example, "I deserve" better and different treatment from others because I feel "I am better than" others. These two styles still share a similar source in that the person sees themselves as better and more worthy than others, and therefore they deserve better or different things or treatment.

The interconnectedness between the two preceding types is depicted in a case study provided by Blakeley, who refers to a case where she observed a leader (while consulting him) who was confident and full of self-belief. He subsequently developed a vision for his organisation and enforced its implementation. Consequently, people started to resist his efforts, as they felt he was not listening to them or considering their feedback. According to Blakeley, his blind spot was that he had fallen into the trap of believing that his understanding and vision were superior to everyone else's. When people came up with reasons why the vision would not work, he dismissed their insights, and regarded them as "resisting change" and unappreciative of his efforts. The Arbinger Institute states that people with an "I am better than" style, by which they see themselves as superior and right in their thoughts and actions, are less likely to incorporate others' feedback or consider 'new' information. This case study also shows how a person may move from an "I am better

than" style to an "I deserve" style, as the leader, in this case study may have believed that he was mistreated and unappreciated by his employees while seeing himself as better than them. People's styles may change depending on the situation, context, experience, trauma and childhood experiences, personality, and many other factors that fall outside the scope of this article.

**Type 2a: "I am worse than".** People with this view tend to view themselves as fated, insignificant and deficient in relation to others. They tend to view others as privileged and advantaged and therefore see themselves as defective and flawed. They tend to measure their worth in relation to others. They, therefore, use others as a yardstick to measure their value against.

**Type 2b: "I must be seen as".** Generally associated with the previous style comes another style, referred to as the "I must be seen as". Someone with this type of view tends to project an image to others of how they want to be seen to ensure that others view them in a particular way. They put on a mask (metaphorically) to cover up their inefficiencies and how they see and feel about themselves in relation to others. They may, for example, see others as judgemental, threatening, and evaluative.

The Arbinger Institute asserts that although a person may view themselves as either "I am worse than" or "I must be seen as", it may show up differently. Both these types still share a similar source in that the person sees themselves as less than others. Illustrative of the interconnectedness between these two types is someone who sees themselves as less capable than others (for whatever reason) (consciously or unconsciously) but is simultaneously worried about how others may view or judge them. Therefore, a person with this style then projects a self-image where they need to be seen in a different way to divert attention from themselves or the opinions they hold about themselves.

Blakeley again provides a practical example of a leader she observed (while consulting) who had unsurpassed financial knowledge but a limited understanding of people management. Her employees experienced her as cold and aloof and wanted her to become more consultative and involved in the team. She resisted accepting feedback about her management style and refused to change her behaviour. On closer examination, the leader disclosed to Blakeley that the main reason for her resistance was that she believed that her authority would be undermined if she became too close to people. She feared that they would challenge her more readily if they became too comfortable with her and that she might be considered weak and even incompetent in the area of people management. Hence, she refused to consider the prospect of changing her management style.

In terms of the Arbinger taxonomy, someone who views themselves as "deficient" (i.e., worse than) in some way, as in the case of this leader who thought she had a limited understanding of leading people, might resist feedback because it might confirm something she already believed about herself. To hide this deficiency, she might put on a mask, figuratively speaking, and justify why she behaves in the ways described by not considering the feedback from her colleagues.

It is impossible to illustrate all the practical ways this could play out owing to contextual (work and personal) factors, childhood experiences, personality, genetic factors, and everything that affects how the person sees themselves in relation to others and the world. The previous section attempted to illustrate, with two examples, the interplay between these four inward mindset styles (self-deceptions) and their impact on the person and those around them and, ultimately, a company's results.

We propose that leaders, like many others, are less likely to understand how these styles would influence their mental well-being/health if they uphold any of the four styles depicted in Diagram 2, as leaders might not even be aware of these styles, let alone be conscious about them. Leaders can only attend to these unconscious processes if they are assisted in making them conscious, whereafter, they have a better chance to address them.

There are many nuances in these styles (which require deep self-reflection), which will vary from person to person. Consequently, I decided to use myself as a case in point to illustrate how these styles influenced my mental well-being (at least one example per style). The personal examples I will share about my life in the subsequent paragraphs are just the tip of the iceberg and *requires an ability and in-depth understanding of this work to understand the interaction and manifestations of these various inward styles at any given moment*. There is a plethora of examples to choose from, and the list of examples and consequences is endless. As the reader, you will be requested to read between the lines when you consider my examples.

PS. It becomes harder to see these styles over time as our ego continuously finds more 'eloquent' ways to hide our self-deceptions from our consciousness.



You can't create a robust and intimate relationship with someone who is in the habit of ignoring what they feel or consistently running away from the unhealed parts of themselves. When distance is created between us and ourselves, it is also created between us and other people.

(PART 4)

## MY “WORSE THAN” STYLE

From a young age, I felt that our family (including me) did not measure up in various ways compared to others. I made a conscious vow to myself as a young child (I think I was about 11 or 12) that I would never want to feel like this again. I viewed myself and our family as worse off than others – I used others, my friends, and their families as the yardstick to measure my self-worth. This view I had of myself in relation to others was often accompanied by feeling deficient, broken, and ashamed. In addition, I was envious of others. I would, for example, not invite people to our house, and I became very “creative” as to why I should not do so, as we stayed in a low-income area according to my “standards”. But I realised that this would not solve my problem, and if I did not take matters into my own hands, I would probably end up in the same “place”. This then propelled me into the dysfunctionality of the other three styles.

The following quote resonates so well for me when considering this style, “If you had to pretend to be okay during your childhood, you are probably doing it as an adult too”.

## MY “BETTER THAN” STYLE

The previous style contributed to me adopting a “Better than” style (which others might say is good, but it requires a better understanding of what this style entails). I became very performance-driven throughout the early part of my life. Based on my performance, I now had proof that I was better than others. I was better because I had more drive and discipline than others. [Do not get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with being disciplined or striving to be better tomorrow.] For example, I became impatient and irritated with people, family or colleagues who did not meet my standards or worked too slowly. I felt indifferent to those who were not performance-driven. And if they responded too slowly or not to my “standards”, I would do the work myself and subsequently started to delegate less and less, thereby taking away their responsibility. As a result, I started feeling overwhelmed with everything I had to do, as few could do it as quickly as I did. Subsequently, I did not make time to relax (or take a vacation) or care for myself, for example, as I needed to get better because I never wanted to feel “worse than” again. The impact was that I started spending less time with family and friends (eroding relationships). Performance consumed me, and in the end, I lost my joy for a couple of years. This performance-driven style was the harbinger of burnout in my case.

## MY “I DESERVE” STYLE

Because I thought of myself as better than others (superior – I had the evidence as I had finished my PhD in 30 months). When I did not get the promotion, as I thought I should, I immediately felt mistreated, unappreciated, and resentful of others and the organisation. When I adopted this style, I was not good to myself and others because I spewed negativity. I often internalised my feelings and it literally made me physically and emotionally sick. It is draining for others to be around me when I operate from this style. The worst part is that I took this resentment with me into other situations. As they say, “wherever you go, there you are”. Let me not lecture you on the mental health challenges that emerge when you carry resentment in your heart.

## MY “I MUST BE SEEN AS” STYLE

This is one of the styles that often shows up for me. Let's say, for example, that I need to protect and project the image of being a good leader (however, I've constructed 'good leadership'). When this style comes into play, I've seen how I would not have difficult conversations with people, clients, or colleagues over the years. I would also be less willing to provide others with constructive feedback or even challenge an idea, as I would feel judged/watched and thereby risk giving up my image as a good leader because I wanted others to like me. Consequently, I often felt anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed owing to the façade I tried to portray and not doing what good leaders do, as I was more self-concerned about how others would evaluate me. Today I am a different person, and it is all because I became aware of how this style led to most of my health challenges and the negative impact it had on others and myself.



## SOME TAKEAWAY NOTES

As a leader, you care for others, so who are taking care of you? Do not let stigma get in the way of seeking professional assistance. And the bravest thing you could ever do is to reach out and ask for help, and it is available. Deep conversations with the right people are priceless. Examining your internal operating system would give you a better chance of taking responsibility for yourself and your actions. The more you learn about yourself, the less you will be a passive victim of your “internal system”. And the deeper you go, the greater the chance of getting well.

On reflection, the Arbinger Institute provided me with another vantage point to consider my mental health and how I was creating my demise, but more importantly, how to improve my mental health and effectiveness as a leader and to become a better human being (not perfect, just better). Leaders must do this deep work to achieve breakthrough results for themselves and those they work and live with. As a leader, you must find a way (sometimes with qualified and professional help) to understand your “internal operating system”.

Do not just slay your demons; befriend them and discover what they've been feeding on. It remains an ongoing journey. This reminds me of the quote by Blaise Pascal, “All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

**If you do not heal what hurt you, you will bleed on people who did not cut you.**