



Article

THE OFFLOAD ROOM

The calm before the internal storm

Article written by: **Dr Cobus Pienaar**

I used to think the people who burn out were the ones who fall apart. You know—the ones who miss deadlines, cancel meetings, stop showing up. But I never missed a deadline. I never showed visible strain. I held my tone in meetings. I delivered the work. I stayed calm.

So, I assumed I was fine.

Until one day, mid-sentence in a conversation, I just... blanked. The words left me. The thread vanished. It was not dramatic, but it shook me. For the first time, I realized I was physically present but emotionally absent. And I could not fake my way past that.

What I did not understand then was that I was not broken. I was overloaded—silently, gradually, and biologically.

The silent accumulation

The body does not signal strain in clear language. It whispers. It blunts your emotional range. It disrupts recall. It compresses nuance.

Researchers Bruce McEwen and Peter Gianaros refer to this as ***allostatic load***—the gradual “wear and tear” on the body resulting from chronic stress without recovery. Different systems—neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, metabolic—work overtime to adapt. Eventually, that adaptation leads to dysregulation and exhaustion.

You do not collapse. You simply operate with less and less internal bandwidth. Your clarity dulls. Your presence fades. And yet you are still “high-functioning.” That is what makes it so dangerous. Because everyone, including you, assumes everything is okay.

Why men are especially prone

Men, in particular, often contain rather than express. Decades of research have shown that many men lose access to their emotional vocabulary over time—a phenomenon known as **normative alexithymia**. It is not only a difficulty in expressing emotions, but also a difficulty in identifying them.

We are taught to power through, not pause. To manage, not name. So when disconnection begins, we override it.

What I have learned since is that disconnection is not a sign of emotional fragility. It is the body's last line of defense—a physiological protection.

Unless we interrupt it, the erosion continues—quietly, invisibly, and persistently.

Finding release

My interruption was not dramatic. It was a private moment where I decided to stop absorbing everything and let something out. I did not need to analyze it. I just needed to end the accumulation.

What followed was not clarity, but relief. My system could breathe again.

That was my first real experience of release—when I realized I could stop holding everything inside and finally set something down.

The question I keep asking myself

How much longer do you and I want to appear fine, if it costs us the ability to actually feel fine?