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Clinical Case Studies 2002; 1; 170

DOI: 10.1177/1534650102001002005

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The Female Entrepreneur

Burnout Treated Using a Psychodynamic Existential Approach

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Abstract: A burned-out female entrepreneur was treated using a psychodynamic existential approach. Psychodynamic theory contributed to this treatment approach idea that people choose an occupation that enables them to reenact significant childhood experiences. Existential theory contributed the idea that people attempt to find existential significance through their work. Burnout is assumed to result from a failure in the existential quest. This case demonstrates that when treating burnout, it is essential to address (a) Why, psychodynamically, did the individual choose the particular career and how was it expected to provide existential significance? (b) Why does the individual feel a sense of failure in the existential quest, and how is this related to burnout? (c) What changes need to happen for the individual to have a sense of existential significance? In addition to demonstrating a treatment approach for burnout, the case contributes to the understanding of gender differences in burnout and the family dynamics of entrepreneurs.

Keywords: burnout, female entrepreneur, psychodynamic-existential.

1 THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH BASIS

The psychodynamic existential approach is based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that people have a need to believe that their life is meaningful, that the things they do—and consequently they themselves—are important and significant (Pines, 1993, 2000a). The second assumption is that people tend to choose an occupation that enables them to replicate significant childhood experiences, gratify needs that were ungratified in their childhood, and actualize occupational dreams and professional expectations passed on to them by their familial heritage (Pines, 2000b; Pines & Yanai, 2000). The first assumption derives from existential psychotherapy (e.g., Frankl, 1976; Yalom, 1980), and the second assumption derives from psychodynamic theory (e.g., Pruyser, 1980). Existential theory explains why so many people in the Western world attempt to find existential significance through their work (Becker, 1973). Psychodynamic theory explains why they choose to do it through the particular career

CLINICAL CASE STUDIES, Vol. 1 No. 2, April 2002 170-180
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that they have chosen (e.g., Kets de Vries, 1991; Obholzer & Roberts, 1997). Why does one person try to achieve a sense meaning by being a manager, another by being an entrepreneur?

When the choice of a career involves such significant and emotionally loaded issues, people enter it with very high hopes and expectations, high ego involvement, and passion. The greatest passion is typically located where some unresolved childhood issue lies. Success gives highly motivated individuals a sense of existential significance and partially heals their childhood wounds. When they feel that they have failed, when the work does not give their life a sense of meaning, they burn out (e.g., Pines, 2000a, 2002).

Burnout is a process in which highly motivated and committed individuals lose their spirit (Freudenberger, 1980, p. 13; Maslach, 1982, p. 3; Pines & Aronson, 1988, p. 9). It is experienced as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term emotional demands (Pines & Aronson, 1988).

The connection between burnout and people's failure to derive existential significance from their work has a very concrete implication. It can be translated to a treatment approach for career burnout. The treatment plan has the following three steps:

1. Identifying the conscious and unconscious reasons for the individual's career choice and how the chosen career was expected to provide a sense of existential significance.
2. Identifying the reasons for the individual's failure to derive a sense of existential significance from the work and how this sense of failure is related to burnout.
3. Identifying changes that will enable the individual to derive a sense of existential significance from work.

These three steps are demonstrated in the treatment of a burned-out entrepreneur named "Margaret."¹ Before describing the course of her treatment, a few words about entrepreneurs seem to be in order. An entrepreneur is an individual who is "instrumental to the conception of the idea of an enterprise and its implementation" (Kets de Vries, 1996, p. 856). Entrepreneurs were described as an "enactment of an archetype on the organizational stage" (Czarniawaka & Wolff, 1991), as innovators and catalysts of change who continuously do things that have not been done before and do not fit established societal patterns (Schumpeter, 1934, 1965). They are "a puzzling figure to large segments of the population in many societies" (Kets de Vries, 1980, p. 43).

A growing research literature attests to the interest in entrepreneurs (e.g., Bonnett & Furnham, 1991; Brandstaetter, 1997; Kets de Vries, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1985, 1996; Knutson, 1998; Miner, 1997, 2000; Nicholson, 1988). A significant number of studies showed that entrepreneurs have distinct personality traits (e.g., Aldridge, 1997; Bonnett & Furnham, 1991; Brandstaetter, 1997; Fraboni & Saltstone, 1990; Frese, Chell, & Klandt 2000; Holler, Host, & Kristensen, 1992; Kets de Vries, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1996; Nicholson, 1988; Plant, 1996; Solomon & Winslow, 1988).

Among the traits mentioned most often are high achievement and need for control, internal locus of control, autonomy, distrust, independence, assertiveness, self-

confidence, initiative, optimism, imagination, persistence in problem solving and single-mindedness, leadership, decisiveness, competitiveness, and a desire for applause and risk taking. Many of these traits are part of the masculine stereotype (Basow, 1992).

In-depth interviews and psychoanalysis with entrepreneurs—almost all men—help explain what makes them the people they are. These clinical studies suggest that the childhood of entrepreneurs often involves deprivation and turmoil, with such themes as “the parent who went away” dominating their life stories. Father is portrayed as absent, remote, unpredictable, and rejecting, and the mother as strong, controlling, and assuming part of the father’s role. The early experiences of parental rejection, inconsistencies, and control cause controlled rage, hostility, guilt, and suspiciousness of people in position of authority (Kets de Vries, 1980, 1996).

In light of this rather masculine portrayal, it seems interesting to examine the personality traits of female entrepreneurs. A number of studies that focused on female entrepreneurs (e.g., Belcourt, 1990; Mulholland, 1996; Reed, 1996; Stevenson, 1986; Symons, 1988; Vega, 1996; White, 1984) found them to be rather similar to their masculine counterparts. One study found, for example, that women entrepreneurs opted for moderate risk more frequently than female managers and were most motivated by influence and personal achievement (Seth & Sen, 1995). Another study showed female entrepreneurs to be less trusting, requiring higher levels of control, and considering the corporate environment as confining when compared to female executives (Brodsky, 1994).

The current article addresses gender issues in entrepreneurship through the analysis of the case of a burned-out female entrepreneur. It demonstrates the unconscious reasons for her choice to be an entrepreneur and how this choice was expected to provide her with a sense of significance. It examines the reasons for her failure to derive significance from her work and how this failure is related to her burnout. And it describes changes that she made, changes that enabled her to have a sense of existential significance in her life.

2 CASE INTRODUCTION

Margaret was a 34-year-old, attractive, Caucasian woman. She had been married 8 years and had two young children, a girl, 5, and a boy, 3. She was the entrepreneur and CEO of a successful company manufacturing medical equipment.

3 PRESENTING COMPLAINTS

Margaret came for therapy complaining about burnout. She was proud of the company she built but felt physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted. She felt “empty,” “drained,” and “utterly exhausted.” Life seemed to have no meaning. She hated waking

up in the morning and felt trapped when she was in her office. Although she enjoyed the contact with clients, she felt intimidated by her role as a manager. At home, she felt inadequate as a mother, unable to respond to the needs of her sensitive daughter or to control her energetic boy. She felt that her husband, who worked many long hours but was not very successful in his accounting firm, did not shoulder his part of the family responsibilities and was angry and frustrated with him. Her anger manifested itself in the bedroom, where sex had become a very rare event.

4 HISTORY

Margaret is the middle child in her family of origin. Both her older brother, 36, and her younger brother, 32, were physicians, as was her father. The father was a prominent heart surgeon, very sure of himself ("always right"). The mother, a beautiful and elegant woman "gave up her artistic ambitions for the sake of the family" and was a devoted mother and wife. The parents' marriage seemed to be successful. "They divided tasks between them." Mother created a home and "was a very presentable doctor's wife." Father was the breadwinner. Margaret competed with her brothers for father's attention. She enjoyed her mother's nurturing but took her for granted. When she wanted to discuss "serious" matters, she turned to her father.

It was her father who suggested that she study biology so that she could switch to medicine later on. It was also her father who supported her idea to build her own company. "Building the company seemed like the right thing to do at the time," recalled Margaret. "I didn't want to be dependent. . . . I saw that there was a market for medical equipment and understood that it could be a very lucrative business. My father and other physicians I worked with supported me." Margaret's husband helped her with the financial aspects of the business that turned out to be far more successful financially than his own accounting firm.

When they first met, Margaret was attracted to her husband's "masculine energy" and his admiration of her. Her husband, for his part, was attracted to Margaret's "intelligence, articulation, and class," and was very impressed by her. She seemed very different from other women he dated. Now, after 8 years of marriage, her enjoyment of his admiration turned to disrespect. His "masculine" tendency to focus on his work instead of his family (very similar to her father) became a major stress. For her husband, the admiration of Margaret's intelligence turned to stress as evidence of his inferiority relative to her (demonstrated by the success of her company and the failure of his firm).²

5 ASSESSMENT

Margaret seemed to be suffering from burnout. Her response to the Burnout Measure (Pines & Aronson, 1988) only confirmed this diagnosis. Margaret reported feeling

very often tired, depressed, physically and emotionally exhausted, and “wiped out.” She felt unhappy and weary, disillusioned and resentful of people around her, trapped, hopeless, and burned out.

When asked to describe her father, her mother, and herself on a list of traits that were found to characterize entrepreneurs (e.g., love of challenge, need of control, initiative, independence, involvement), she described both her father and herself as very high on these traits and her mother as very low.

She described her father as being a little disappointed in not spending more time with his children when they were young and her mother as very disappointed with her life because she didn’t actualize herself.

6 CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION

Margaret’s family background (the middle child in a family in which father was the dominant figure and mother gave up her life for him and the family) helps explain the path she chose and her eventual burnout. Like other successful career women, Margaret identified with her father. He was the one who encouraged her to succeed and was her role model. In identifying with him, she rejected her elegant, feminine, submissive mother as a role model. But rejecting her mother made it difficult for her to function as a mother and a wife. Given her parents’ division of labor, she could either be successful like her father or feminine and a good mother and wife like her mother. Because her father was more dominant in the family and given her brothers’ identification with him, it is not surprising that Margaret chose to follow him. But once she did and was successful as an entrepreneur, something was missing. Success did not give her life a sense of meaning but left her feeling empty and drained. What was lacking in her life was the female side portrayed by her mother. Her masculine lifestyle made her feel inadequate as a mother and frustrated as a wife. In her marriage, she played the role her father played in her parents’ marriage, but she discovered that she did not like it. Unlike her mother who adored her father, Margaret did not respect her husband and was not attracted to him sexually. What she perceived originally as masculinity turned out to be a chauvinism she resented.

Being a successful entrepreneur, beating her brothers in the sibling rivalry, and receiving her father’s respect was supposed to make her happy and give her life a sense of meaning. However, once she achieved all that, she discovered that it did not. The hectic life of a businesswoman did not leave much time for herself or her family and it felt very wrong. The discovery was very painful and was the trigger for her burnout.

7 COURSE OF TREATMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS

When Margaret came to therapy, she reported feeling totally exhausted physically, emotionally, and mentally. Identifying her problem as burnout, as is often the case, brought about great relief. The label made sense to her and made her feel optimistic.

Therapy lasted 2 years and was conducted in weekly 50-minute sessions. The first number of sessions centered on analyzing Margaret's family tree, or "genogram" (Dagley, 1984; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). The focus of the genogram was on the occupations, personality, and interpersonal relationships of all members of Margaret's family of origin. It helped Margaret see how she identified with her father and rejected her mother as a role model and the consequences this had for her occupational choice, her decision to become an entrepreneur, and the type of man she chose for a husband.

In one session, Margaret was asked to recall a childhood memory. She recalled that when she was in elementary school, her mother was "the most beautiful woman among all the other kids' mothers." She remembered opening her mother's closet and smelling the wonderful fragrance of her perfume. She always dressed elegantly and "was perfect." As the only girl in a family of three kids, it would have made sense for Margaret to identify with her mother and want to become a beautiful and elegant woman like her. But the dominance of her father in the family and her rivalry with her two siblings made that choice seem too confining.

In another session, Margaret recalled a dream she had before her marriage. In it, she saw herself as a bride wearing black.

Therapist: How did you feel in the dream?

Margaret: Very sad.

Therapist: What was the sadness about?

Margaret: I felt a terrible sense of loss.

Therapist: What were you losing?

Margaret: I felt I was losing my freedom.

In another dream, Margaret saw herself "looking for a wild black horse that ran away." She saw him in her dream "running wildly in a beautiful green meadow." Her heart ached as she imagined "the beautiful horse galloping, his black mane blowing in the wind." Following the analysis of both these dreams, Margaret understood that for her, getting married meant becoming a prisoner like her mother. She also understood the price she paid as a woman by following instead the role model of her father.

Margaret decided to reconnect with her inner feminine self. She did it by buying elegant clothes, getting a new flattering haircut, and, like her mother, starting to get a manicure regularly. She described what it felt like to stand in front of the mirror at a store and look at herself.

Margaret: It was amazing. The saleswoman looked at me and said I looked beautiful. And it was true. I looked really nice and feminine and the clothes looked very nice on me. It was a new me in the mirror.

Therapist: What was new about the woman you saw in the mirror?

Margaret: I never saw myself as attractive or as feminine. That was the way my mother was and I was not like her. I was plain and not attractive or elegant.

Therapist: Is it possible that you have inside you a part that is like your mother?

Margaret: It's a strange thought. But I think it's possible.

Therapist: What does it mean that you have inside you a part that is like your mother?

Margaret: It means that I am like her in some ways.

Therapist: In what ways would you have liked to be more like her?

Margaret: She was a wonderful mother and wife, and she always looked beautiful. I have no energy for my children and Dave [her husband] says I'm frigid.

With time, Margaret came to understand the connection between her relationship with her father and mother, her career choice, her difficulties in her roles as a mother and a wife, and her burnout. The understanding forced her to make some changes in her life.

The first change involved her work. Analyzing what she loved most and what she hated most about her work, Margaret concluded that she most loved initiating projects and making contacts with clients. She hated the day-to-day details of managing the company, a task that required her physical presence. Her solution was to hire a manager who will manage the company. This freed her to spend more time with her children and for taking care of herself. She started exercising regularly and spending relaxing time in beauty salons—like her mother and unlike her former self.

Hiring the manager also enabled Margaret to spend her time at work doing things she enjoyed and felt successful in. The time freed from her work, which she now spent with her children, reduced her children's neediness and made her feel better as a mother. Improving her appearance, and the attention she started receiving from men, made her feel feminine and attractive. These feelings changed the dynamics of her relationship with her husband, who no longer saw her as frigid but rather as a desirable woman who is attractive to men. Feeling happy and successful in her work, her role as a mother and wife, and feeling attractive and feminine made Margaret feel that her life was rich and satisfying, that it had meaning of the kind that mattered to her most.

8 FOLLOW-UP

Three months after the termination of her therapy, Margaret called. She said she was very happy in her work, her marriage, and her relationship with her kids. "I feel contented and happy," she said. "I don't think I have ever been happier."

9 TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS OF THE CASE

Over the course of her therapy, the first question addressed in Margaret's burnout treatment was why she chose her career as an entrepreneur and how she expected to derive from it a sense of existential significance.

Given the importance of professional success to her father, his dominance in the family, and her admiration of him, it was clear that Margaret had to choose a career in which she would have a high-ranking position. She followed her father's script by choosing a field related to medicine.

The second question Margaret addressed was why she felt a sense of failure in her existential quest, and how this sense of failure was related to her burnout.

Margaret was "a good girl." She did all that was expected of her. She became a successful entrepreneur, her father's pride and joy. But somehow that didn't make her happy and did not give her life a sense of meaning because she felt a failure as a woman and a mother. As noted by Barnett (1993), motherhood is the "core role" for most women. Her sense of failure and lack of meaning were major contributors to her burnout.

The last issue addressed in Margaret's therapy concerned the changes that needed to take place for her to be able to derive a sense of existential significance from her life.

Given Margaret's identification with her father and rejection of her mother, and the consequence it had, made finding a balance between the internal representations of her parents an obvious focus of therapy. When she found that inner balance by reconnecting with her feminine self, she was able to introduce greater balance into her life. Hiring a manager enabled her to enjoy work again because she now spent fewer hours in her office, and the time she spent involved doing things she enjoyed and felt successful in. Spending more time with her children reduced her feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a mother. Improving her appearance, the attention she received from men, and feeling desired by her husband made her feel feminine and attractive. Feeling successful in her work and family and feeling attractive and feminine made Margaret feel that her life was rich and meaningful.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS TO CLINICIANS AND STUDENTS

Margaret's case demonstrates the basic assumption of the existential approach, that the root cause of burnout lies in people's need to believe that their life is meaningful. Margaret burned out when she felt that she was no longer making a significant contribution to either her company or her family. Margaret's need to derive a sense of significance from a career as an entrepreneur in an area related to medicine is explained by psychodynamic theory.

Based on an existential-psychodynamic perspective, it is clear that in analyzing the causes of Margaret's burnout problem and in treating it, it was essential to address the following questions: (a) Why did Margaret choose her career and how it was expected to

provide existential significance? (b) Why did Margaret feel a sense of failure in her existential quest, and how was this perceived failure related to her burnout? and (c) What changes needed to take place for Margaret to be able to derive a sense of existential significance from her work?

Once these questions were addressed in the context of her therapy, Margaret's burnout problem was solved and she was very happy, satisfied, and excited about her life.

When Margaret came for therapy she was exhausted and deeply unhappy, but she could not articulate clearly what her problem was. The existential-psychodynamic conceptual framework helped her define her problem and make a connection between her burnout, her family background, and her sense of failure in the existential quest. Figuring out the connection between all these pieces of the puzzle of her life helped Margaret make the kind of changes in her life that resulted in a life she seemed truly excited about.

NOTES

1. Details of the case have been disguised for confidentiality.
2. The connection between the things that make people fall in love with each other (in Margaret's case, the fact that her husband adored her and was sex typed) and the things that later become a source of stress and couple burnout (seeing her husband as inferior and his sex-typed attitudes) has been noted before (see Pines, 1996, 1997, 1999).

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