Using Design-thinking to EXPLORE BURNOUT among DESIGNERS IN THE WORKPLACE and Propose Solutions

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Introduction

Burnout is an occupational phenomenon and is defined as a "psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, pg. 399; World Health Organization, 2019a; World Health Organization, 2019b). Three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and reduced efficacy or accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). The greater the job-person mismatch within the six areas of worklife— workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values—the higher likelihood of burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 1999; Leiter & Maslach, 2004; Maslach, 1998; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

> " I've told my managers I was burned out. We would tell leadership that we were burned out. . . . They didn't really seem to care; . . . as long as the project got done."
> — **Rebecca, senior UX designer, large global enterprise**

Job turnover, excessive absenteeism, and numerous physical and emotional symptoms have been linked to burnout and have significant financial implications on the organizations where those whom suffer work. Workplace burnout has been widely researched and associated among human service occupations. Burnout interventions have been implemented by organizations as a way to assist employees suffering with or prone to burnout, with mixed results. Creative industries, particularly the designers who create visual designs, products, and experiences, according to the needs of clients, consumers, and application of products are among occupations who may be prone to burnout. However, there was a lack of empirical research on burnout as it pertains to designers and the organizations and conditions in which they work. Using design-thinking strategies, the purpose of the research study was to explore burnout among designers in the workplace and propose solutions.

Methodology

> " Ultimately, I feel like I can't design. . . . And, I have to just swallow it all and obey what I'm asked to do. I'm so sad and frustrated."
> — **Amy, graphic designer, university**

The study was divided into three parts and used a purposive sample of designers. Participants included web designers, graphic designers, animation designers, interior designers, motion graphics designers, industrial product designers, fashion designers, UI/UX designers, instructional designers, design educators, and architectural designers working full-time in private- and public-sector companies and institutions. Part one involved implementing strategies for looking and exploring burnout among designers in the workplace. The following strategies were implemented in sequential order: online survey, interviews, affinity clustering, findings from the interviews, journaling, affinity clustering findings from journaling, and creative Persona profiles to summarize research findings. Part two consisted of design-thinking workshop with a group of designers to further understand and receive feedback on the results of the findings and develop solutions for alleviating and preventing burnout. Part three involved interviews with designers working for a company or institution for over 20 years to gain insight on their success and experiences with burnout to help inform future research.
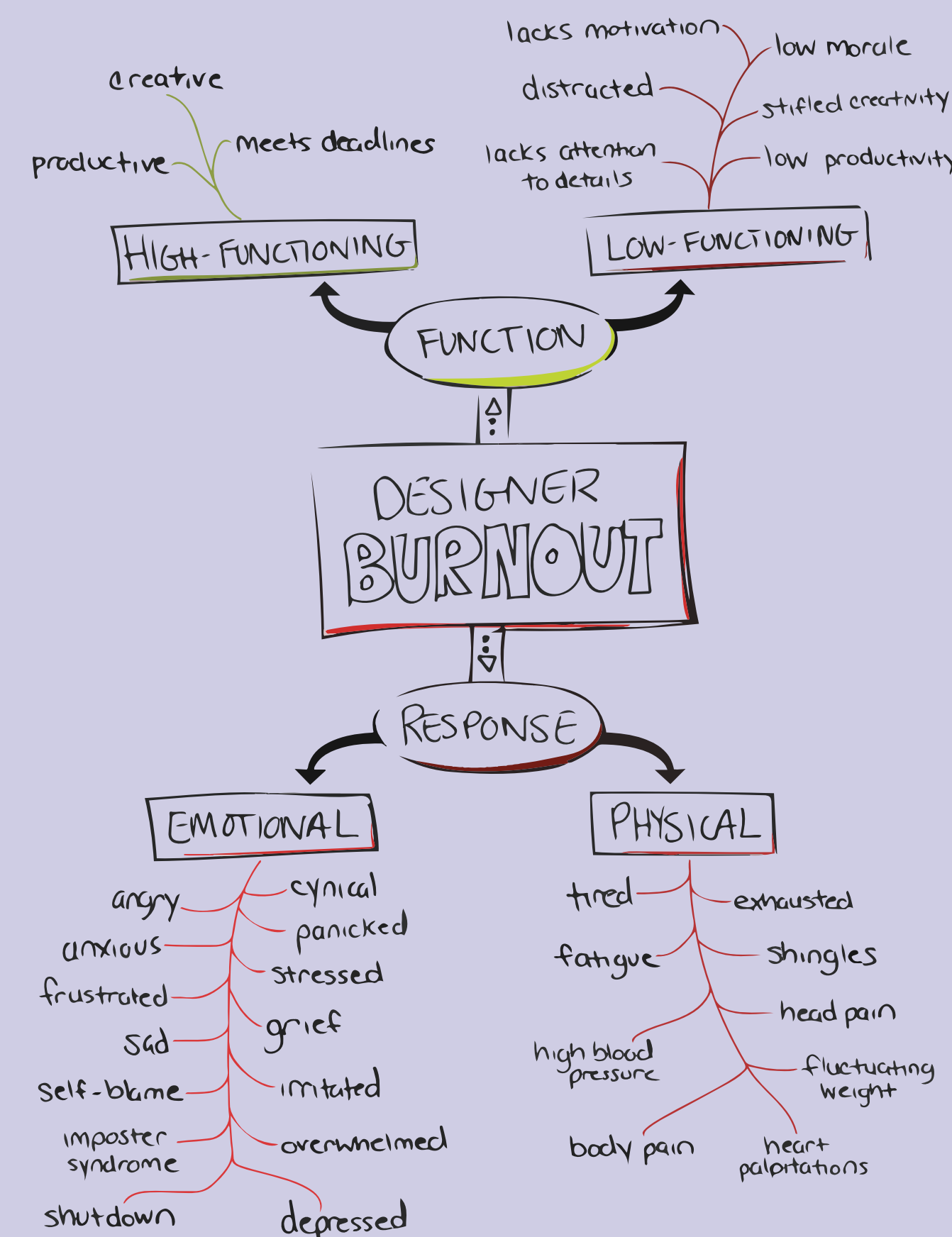

Findings

Results from qualitative design thinking strategies found that the majority of designers in the study had experienced burnout at some point in their careers. Burnout was expressed in many different ways; some not outwardly obvious. Respondents spoke of exhaustion and low morale due to long work hours, heavy workloads, and toxic work environments, as well as depersonalization and reduced efficacy and accomplishment from poor leadership and not feeling valued. Coinciding with burnout literature, a lack of recognition, promotion, and career growth opportunities were common antecedents found among respondents who had or were experiencing burnout. Findings suggest thoughtful acts showing value and appreciation would significantly improve one's morale and deter burnout.

There were interesting findings not identified in the literature that were said to cause burnout, consisting of monotony of work; indifferences among colleagues; and being an empath and a minority.

The consequences of burnout experienced by respondents were serious and poignant. Depression, shingles, cardiovascular issues, and fluctuating weight were among the grievous cited. Many suffering from burnout were highly-functioning at work. If they did not voice burnout to their managers or make mistakes, their employers were presumed unaware of their struggle, leaving them suffering in silence. Overall, findings revealed the complexity of burnout and how emotional and different it is for every person. Burnout interventions noted from respondents were overwhelmingly of an individual approach, consisting primarily of coping strategies. Solutions proposed for alleviating and preventing burnout in the workplace were focused on better communication; leadership support; managing workload and expectations; and establishing company fit within an organization. Burnout is a wicked problem, not solved by one solution. However, by utilizing design-thinking, it was better understood and proven to widely affect designers among multiple design disciplines and in different ways.
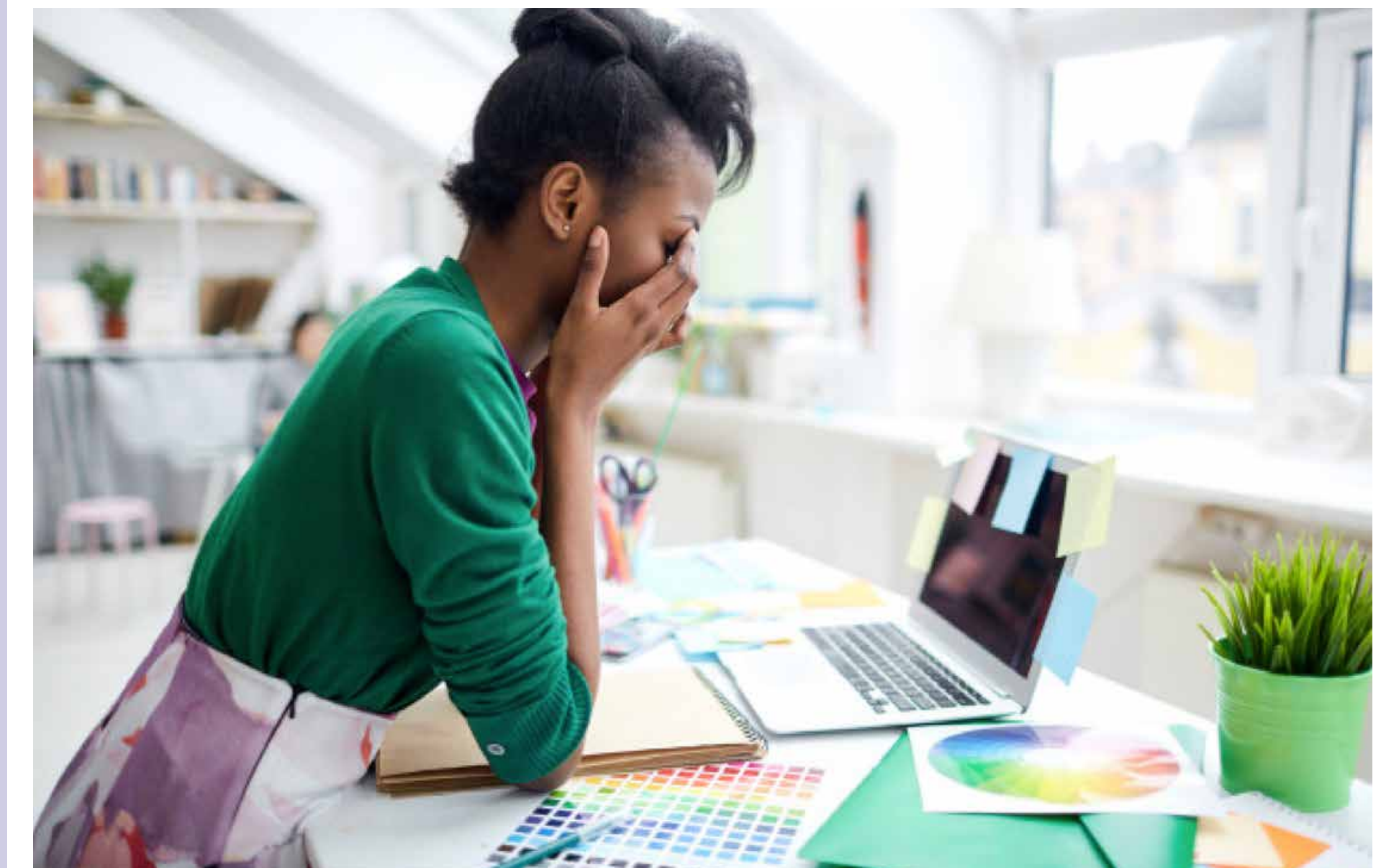
> " I've actually gone to the doctor and they've said, 'Your job is stressing you out and causing these things.'"
> — **Jaime, remote senior instructional designer, non-profit agency**

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