



The experience of burnout among
Slovenian farmers and sources of support:
a qualitative analysis

.....

GLOBAL SOCIAL NEXUS 2026

Nataša Dernovšček Hafner, PhD, ZRC SAZU

15-16 MAY 2026, Ljubljana, Slovenija

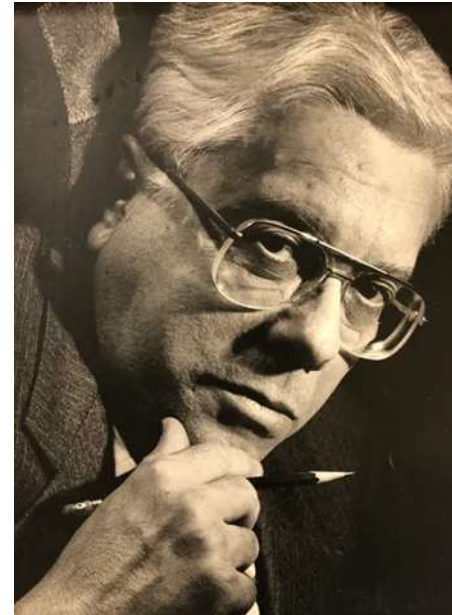
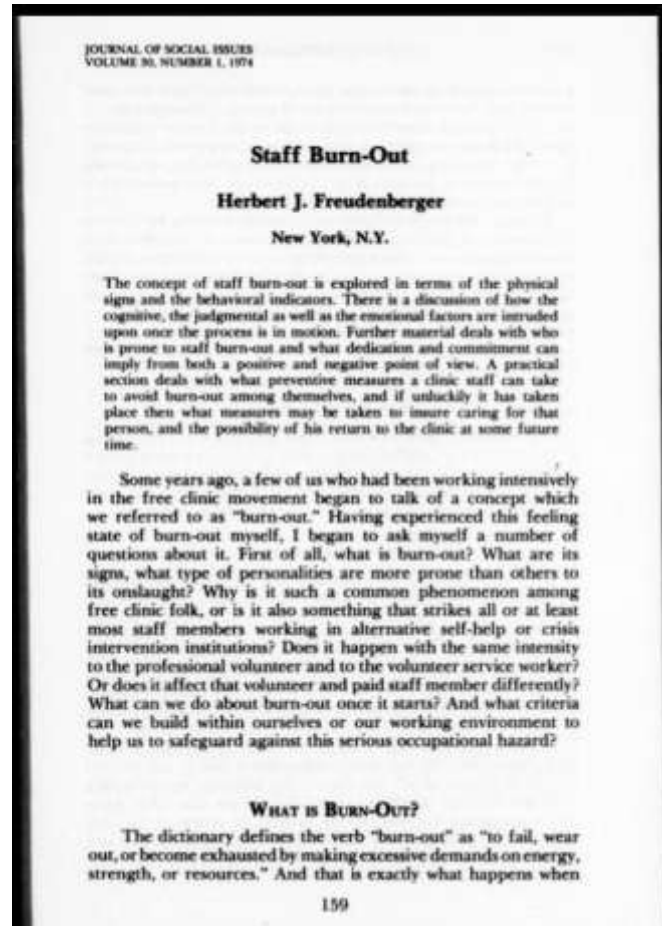
This presentation was prepared as part of the Research Program Group "Studies on Distress and Being Well" (code: P5-0115-23), which is co-funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency and Programme POČUTJE NA KMETIJI: KREPITEV VIROV IN ZNANJ, co-funded by the Ministry of Health.

Sofinancer
projekta



REPUBLIKA SLOVENIJA
MINISTRSTVO ZA ZDRAVJE

WHAT IS BURNOUT?



Herbert J. Freudenberger (1926–1999)

A state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one's professional life.

The Journal of Social Issues
1974: Vol 30 Iss 1

Burnout is a condition characterized by:

- Emotional exhaustion
- A negative and impersonal attitude towards coworkers, clients, and family members (depersonalisation)
- A sense of personal ineffectiveness and failure

(Maslach and Jackson, 1981)

BRUCE
POLJA
MOČI



Source: Van Gogh

ACUTE STRESS – CHRONIC STRESS – BURNOUT

- 1) **Acute stress** (“a tough day”): a response to excessive demands; it can be beneficial and help you work faster.

This is a short-term reaction. Your abilities are restored after sleep or rest.



- 2) **Chronic stress** (“weeks–months”): demands persist, recovery is insufficient. Long-term worries or pressures, hindered recovery, fatigue, rumination, and tension.

Difficulty falling asleep or waking up tired.



- 3) **Burnout**: demands exceed coping abilities over a long period. Chronic overload and loss of the ability to recover (problems do not go away even after rest).

This is not just “too much work”!

It is like a tractor running at high revs without cooling or maintenance – leading to more breakdowns, and a decline in performance.



WHAT IS BURNOUT NOT?



➤ It is not ordinary fatigue

If the balance between demands and resources does not change, the condition worsens!

➤ It is not a matter of character or discipline

➤ It is not a personal problem; it is often linked to:

- working conditions
- characteristics of a particular profession (a high level of responsibility, a heavy workload, and, seasonal peaks...)

THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

PHYSICAL
RESPONSE

P

T

CHANGE IN
THINKING

CHANGES IN
EMOTIONAL
RESPONSES

E

B

BEHAVIORAL
CHANGES



BACKGROUND

- ❑ Mental health challenges among farmers are shaped by the **specific conditions** of **farm life and work**.
- ❑ Study conducted within the project '*Well-being on the Farm: Strengthening Resources and Knowledge: The fields of strenght (PoljaMoči)*'



AIM OF THE STUDY



To **explore** Slovenian farmers' subjective **experiences of burnout**.



To identify **resources and forms of support** that contribute to recovery.

METODOLOGY

- ❑ Qualitative research design.
- ❑ Semi-structured interviews (February and June 2025).
- ❑ 7 participants (5 men, 2 women) all farmers
- ❑ Age range: 23–47 years (average age 35).



RESULTS

❑ Three participants (2 W, 1 M) experienced **burnout** diagnosed by a physician.

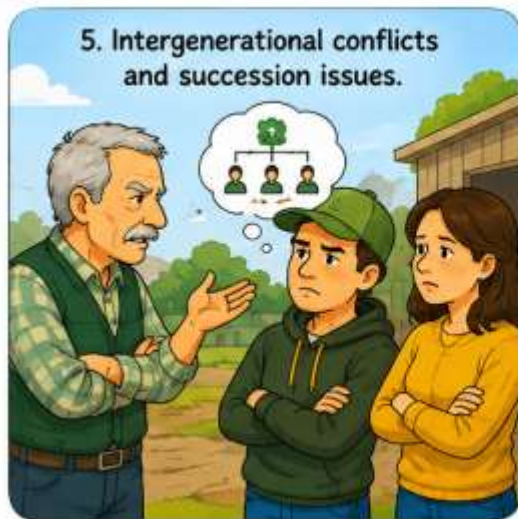
❑ Symptoms

- persistent fatigue
- sleep disturbances
- listlessness and
- inability to work.

❑ What makes full recovery difficult?

- lack of understanding from extended family members
- Inability to take time off from farm work

KEY STRESSORS IN FARMING LIFE



IDENTIFIED STRESS AMONG FARMERS AND FARMWORKERS

- **Economic pressures:** financial instability, debts ...
- **Social and community issues:** isolation and loneliness, family dynamics, housing conditions
- **Environmental factors:** climate change (floods, droughts ...), pesticide exposure
- **Occupational factors:** workload, autonomy, long working hours, performance pressure, labor force availability, worker interest, role definition
- **Health and safety risks:** injuries, lack of access to (mental) health services, pandemics
- **Market dynamic:** global competition, consumer trends, conversion to organic farming



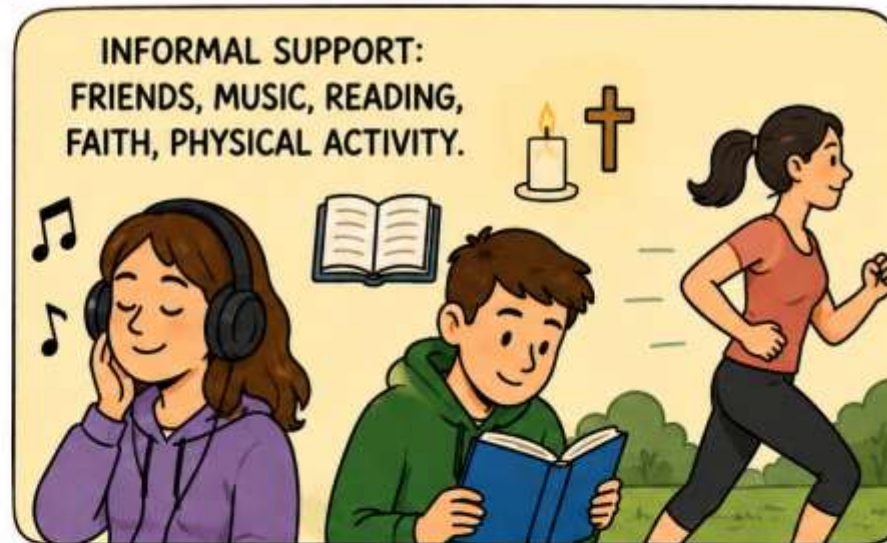
MENTAL & HEALTH ISSUES: anxiety, depression, suicide risks, substance abuse, PSD, bad physical health, farm exit intention.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT:
PSYCHOTHERAPY AND
THEMATIC WORKSHOPS.



INFORMAL SUPPORT:
FRIENDS, MUSIC, READING,
FAITH, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.



PARTNERS WERE OFTEN KEY SOURCES
OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT.



RETURNING TO SPORTS HELPED
REDUCE STRESS IN SOME CASES.



STORIES FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED BURNOUT

"Believe me, you know very well when you're burning out. Apart from the loss of a loved one, it's probably the most terrifying feeling in life."

In the morning, I had my own chores to do—spraying, moving the livestock, and some urgent work in the barn. In the afternoon, my neighbor called me: "Can you come help me fix the baler? My wife is home alone with the kids." I went, of course. I got home at eleven o'clock at night. When I opened the fridge, there was no dinner. Just a note: "You're not the only one who's tired." And that's when I asked myself—who am I really helping?

To feel satisfied with your work, you keep taking on more and more extra work and responsibilities. At some point, you even become "addicted" to work. **You no longer know how to stop.** As soon as your schedule isn't completely filled, as soon as you see a free day, you start—consciously or unconsciously—looking for ways to make the most of that day. Some might say there's nothing wrong with that, that you're living life to the fullest, taking it by the horns. I have to tell you that this isn't the case. At some point, you burn out. What is that? We don't know what that is in the countryside. When burnout hits you, you need maximum support from those close to you so you can recover as quickly as possible. And you need even more support afterward to make sure something like that doesn't happen again. In rural areas, these kinds of things are still largely misunderstood and unimaginable, even though they do happen.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS



1

Burnout among farmers is closely linked to socio-economic and cultural pressures.

2

Qualitative approaches provide valuable insight into lived experiences, which may encourage new research in the field.

3

Greater public and professional awareness is needed!



.....

Thank you!

natasa.dernovscek-hafner@zrc-sazu.si

.....

www.omra.si

Co-financier:



REPUBLIKA SLOVENIJA
MINISTRSTVO ZA ZDRAVJE
