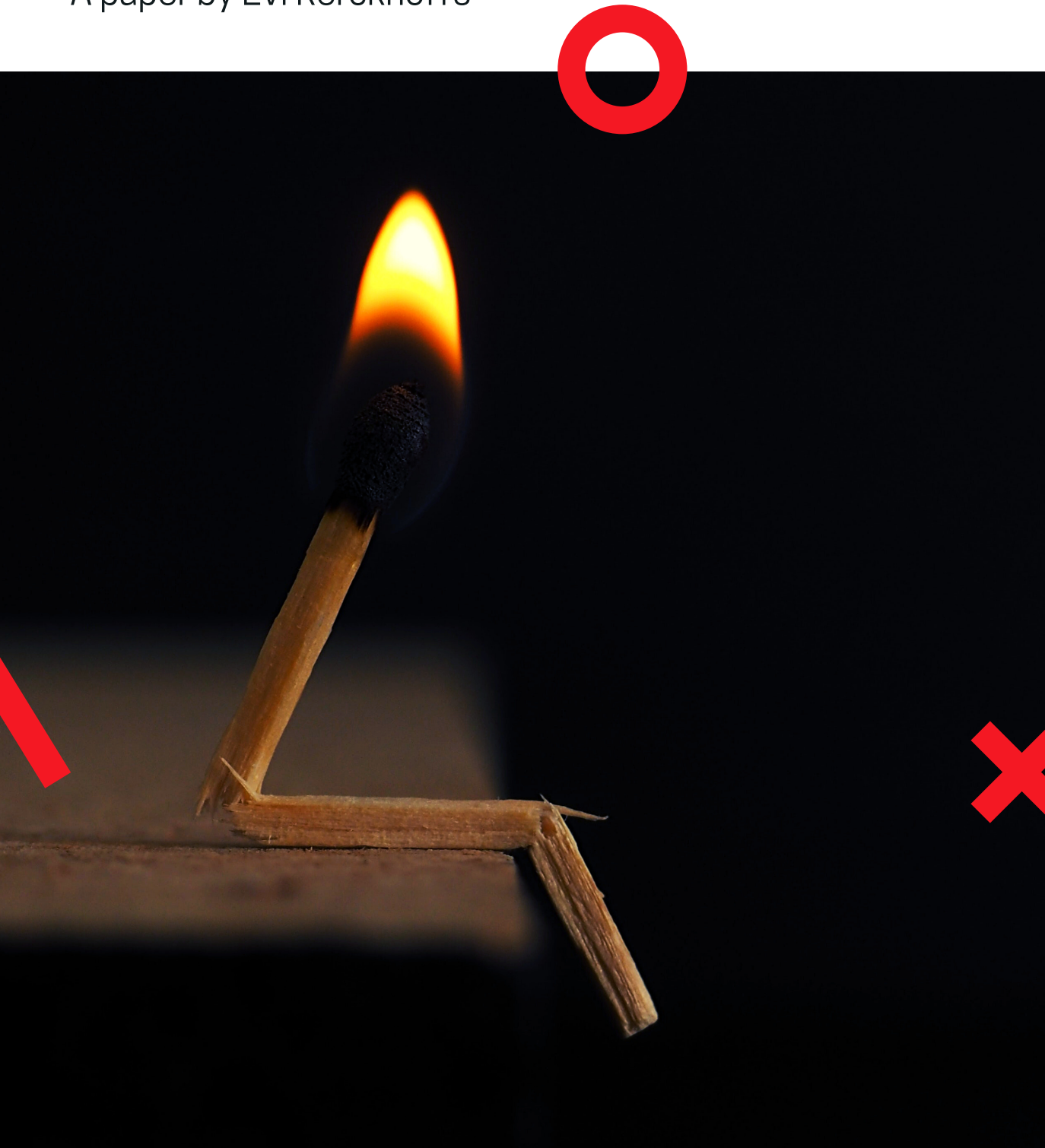


# Thanks society, I am burnt out.

A paper by Evi Kerckhoffs

TRENDING TOPIC



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# BURNOUT

noun

- 1.a. prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors (Volksgezondheidszorg.org, n.d.).
2. b it impairs both personal and social functioning.
- 3.c. when suffering from a burnout, physical and psychological health can be affected, not just for the individual, but for everyone affected by that person.
- 4.d. in 2018, an estimated 263,500 people were diagnosed with a burnout in the Netherlands, of whom 150,100 are millennials.

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**Research** conducted in this paper shows that technology, financial stress, and overachievement are three things that millennials in the Western culture struggle with that often lead to burnout. Millennials in many parts of the world are raised with the idea that anything is possible if they put their mind to it. This is an ideal that cannot be kept up, which often leads to disappointment and stress that the generation does not know how to deal with.

Within Western culture, it is common to see work and personal life as one thing. Research has also shown that many people are afraid of taking days off, taking personal time off, or using earned vacation days for fear of looking incompetent. When they are dealing with a burnout, they often deal with it themselves because of the individualistic culture.

"When I made it out of my 20s without making the Forbes 30 Under 30 list, I wasn't crushed, but I was far more disappointed than was healthy. And it wasn't about the recognition - it was the shame of feeling like I haven't done enough with my life and that time is running out" (Curtin, 2018b).

"I had spent a weekend in San Francisco, the epicenter of the Millennial overachiever. I was supposed to be on vacation. Instead, I developed an inordinate amount of stress because I have yet to start and go public with my own company" (Curtin, 2018).

"It created a stressful situation in which failure was not an option for me. It was not necessarily that anyone else was putting this pressure on me, but my financial situation was what caused this tension" interviewee.

"I forced myself to do too much: too much work, too many social obligations, perfectly tidy house, I couldn't do it all at once" (Saskia, n.d.).

"I was drowning a little more every day in my personal life, desperately trying to cling to an ideal I was not able to achieve, rather I was merely able to survive my perpetual dissatisfaction" (Godwin Paccard, 2018).

**THESE DIFFERENT BURNOUT STATEMENTS ALL HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON: OVERACHIEVING BECAUSE OF EXPECTATIONS AND SOCIETAL PROBLEMS THAT LED TO A BURNOUT. DOES THAT MEAN IT IS WESTERN SOCIETY'S FAULT THAT MILLENNIALS HAVE BURNOUTS?**

# MASSIVE PRESSURE ON MILLENNIALS IN WESTERN CULTURE

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*Millennials<sup>1</sup> within the Western culture have been raised with the idea that everything is possible, as long as they work hard for it (Meester, 2019). This is a positive way to look at life, but also comes with the consequence of having an overwhelming sense of disappointment and guilt every time they do not succeed at something.*

Millennials (born between 1980 - 1996) have incredibly high expectations from their work-life because of this view on labor. This created an environment in which it is frowned upon when someone asks for help and where someone needs to always do better and keep going. This has shown to often cause burnouts. Psychologist T. Satijn (2019) says this idea that everything is possible most likely comes to millennials while growing up. They grew up in a household where the parents were not struggling with social problems like a rough job market or a financial crisis. Their parents had it a little easier than their grandparents, which made them raise their children (the millennials) with a sense that everything is possible as long as they work for it. Nevertheless, that does not match up with the 'real' world.

Because of this idea that everything is possible, millennials also turned into perfectionists (Bontekoning, n.d.). However, the world is not perfect, which is not a great environment for a perfectionist. They put a lot of pressure on themselves to perform perfectly, and a strong sense of personal responsibility accompanies this. That is why millennials are a high-risk generation. Psychologist T. Satijn (2019) agrees with this in an interview and says that millennials are raised with the idea that anything is possible; the sky is the limit. Because of this, they are more likely to be disappointed when something

does not go perfectly. Many also have the idea that they have to achieve everything before the age of 30. Nevertheless, a step-by-step plan of life is not realistic. Because of their perfectionism, they are less flexible, and there is a big disappointment when life does not go as planned. This creates a great sense of failure.

Because of the growth in socio-cultural developments like individualization, fragmentation, and the 'me-culture' are very much present in the United States and Europe (Schaufeli, 2017). The Western culture created a fragile generation that is always under pressure by society and social media. When this generation was asked why they went to a psychologist, the main reason was that they put the bar too high for themselves and are never happy with their results. Psychologist Derksen stated that this generation has a 'neurotic urge to perform' (Pel, 2017). That is why the millennials have been dealing with burnout<sup>2</sup> symptoms for the past years. They are continually working on their image, but not on their inner selves. They want to perform well but have never learned how to deal with the stress.

Two main factors that play a significant role in causing burnouts in Western culture are technology and financial stress (Murray, 2017). Technology is a constant trigger on the brain and therefore prevents it from getting time to rest and cope with all of the stimulation during the day. Financial stress is also a significant factor since millennials get confronted with this as soon as they try to become independent. They have more debt from college and health care costs than previous generations and have to start saving for their retirement as soon as they start earning money. Interviews with several millennials also showed that they feel pressured to perform well and pay back loans as soon as they can, to make their parents proud of them, mainly if they supported them financially.

Company physician M. Michels (2019) also states that he thinks the combination of always being online, studying and working creates a busier lifestyle for millennials that is often a cause for burnouts. Multitasking all of these factors makes it harder for them to find relaxation. In a survey conducted by East Weymouth with 2000+ millennials in the US about their burnout and stress experiences, results showed that 56% think the main factors of their burnouts are technology and media<sup>3</sup> overload (Brown, 2019). 55% also mentions that the social pressure they have to deal with online is a high-stress factor as well. This research also showed that 78% of respondents believe that life is more stressful for them today than it was for previous generations. Reasons given for this are debt, a competitive job market, and expensive healthcare as the top reasons for stress, as shown in the image below.

1. See the glossary on page 15, for definition millennials.
2. See the glossary on page 15, for definition burnout.
3. See the glossary on page 15, for definition media.

#### Why life is more stressful for millennials:

More debt	78%
The job market is more competitive	76%
More expensive healthcare	70%
Future of the nation	64%
Political climate	63%
Future of the planet	61%
Technology or media overload	56%
Social pressure online	55%
Dating is harder	31%
Risk of identity theft	29%
Online bullying	26%

## THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON BURNOUT

*Different cultures and countries are not the same. Millennials in different cultures are also not the same. However, they have one thing in common; they are under a great deal of pressure and cannot take it anymore.*

The Netherlands is an 'always on' society (Pel, 2017). That makes it impossible to keep personal and work life separate. One-third of the clients of psychologist Derksen say their work expects them to always be available for calls. Besides that, there is a massive expectation from society for millennials to act in a certain way that is seen as 'perfect' (Elsebrock, 2018). This has worked its way into the self-beliefs of millennials. That also causes them to have very high standards of life that they want to live up to; 86% of researched millennials think it is crucial to find a partner for life, 50% expects to climb to the highest position in their sector in their career and 54% wants to earn money above average. Careerwise (n.d.) also surveyed millennials and 27% state that the social pressure of having to be successful is the most challenging factor for them. 59% also state that they struggle a lot with expectations from themselves and 46% struggle with wanting to do everything perfectly when working.

There is also the financial stress on Dutch millennials that causes more pressure to perform well and succeed (Elsebrock, 2018). When millennials succeed in getting a job, they must start saving for a pension, and 12.51% (CBS, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) have to pay off huge college debt. Pension funds will most likely not be there anymore once they retire, so this elevates the pressure on having a proper job that can put them in a position to save money.

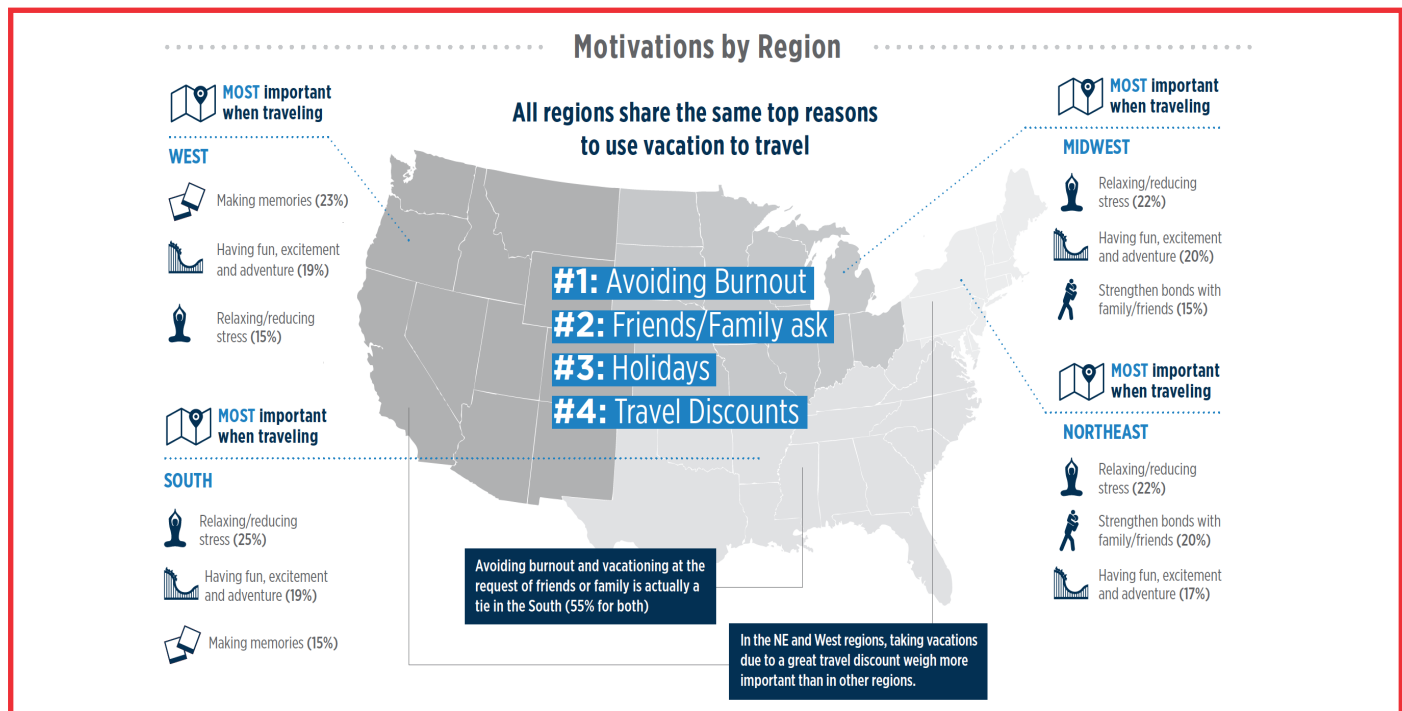
When focusing on the American millennial burnouts<sup>4</sup> Deloitte found that one of the main concerns is the 'overwhelmed employee' (Stulberg, 2016). Workers hardly take a break, and this is proven in a research done by the University of Texas. In the results of this research, it states that Americans regularly work between 10 pm and 6. am besides their regular work hours. Psychologist Jaffe explains in an article that millennials now feel comfortable sacrificing their mental and physical health to live up to expectations and pressure from American society (Jaffe, 2019).

Besides always being online and working overtime, Americans also tend not to take their earned vacation days to recover from this pressure (US Travel Association, 2018). It turns out that employees are concerned that they will appear less dedicated or even replaceable if they take a vacation. The association also conducted a research that showed that the main reason for Americans to travel when they do, is to avoid a burnout, as shown in the image below (US Travel Association, 2019). When asked what the most important benefits of traveling are, the main benefit is said to be reducing stress.

In a comparison research between American and Chinese workers, the most notable result was that the coping style with problems and stress is different (Cheung F, Tang CSK, Lim MSM and Koh JM, 2018). The United States is a more individualistic culture and thus, the American workers were taught to take care of themselves without help from others. They, therefore, cope with stress by themselves. Whereas in China, there is a collectivistic culture and therefore Chinese workers can more easily get social support from their environment to deal with stress and other problems. However, both cultures were significantly similar when comparing the sense of personal accomplishment and workaholicism. In both cultures, it is noticeable that there is a lower feeling of personal accomplishment when they work less.

“BUT WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO THE CORE REASONS FOR BURNOUTS, IT IS ALL THE SAME.”

4. See the glossary on page 15 for definition millennial burnout



# MEDIA'S EFFECT ON BURNOUT

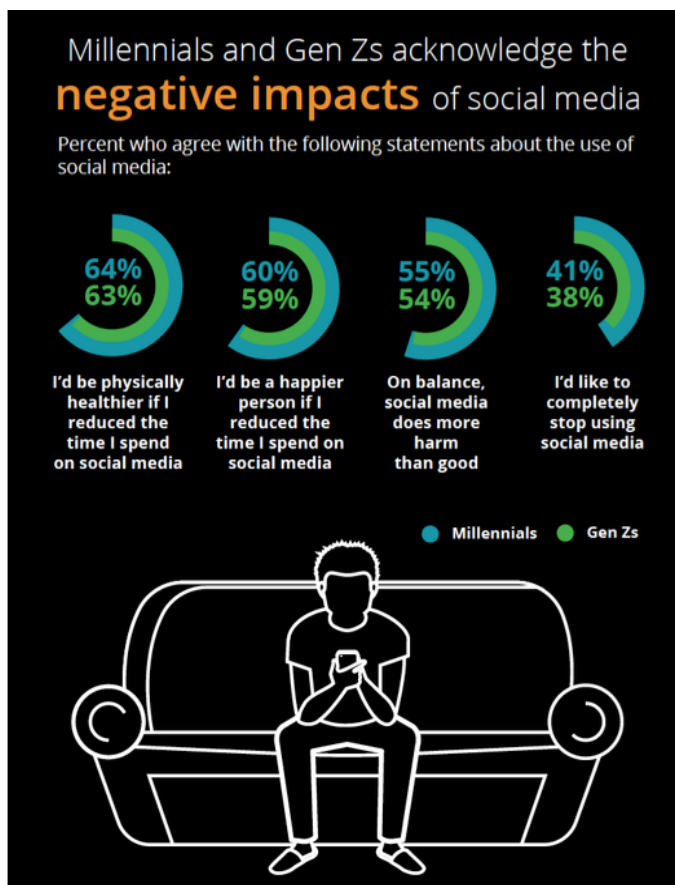
In Japan burnouts and being overworked have come to a problematic number as well ("Japan: one-fifth of employees at risk of death from overwork" report, 2019). Risks because of overwork conclude strokes, heart attacks, and suicide. Hundreds of cases like such have to get reported every year. A research conducted from December 2015 to January 2016 showed that 1/5 of employees are in this risk area of death because of overwork. Employees felt high levels of stress related to work, and 22.7% of the companies who participated mentioned that their workers logged more than 80 hours a month of overtime.

Different cultures suffer from burnouts in different ways. Dr. Schaufeli says in his book 'Burnout: A Short Socio-Cultural History'; "The popularity of 'burnout' in North America can be explained by the fact that 'burnout' is a non-medical, socially accepted label that carries a minimal stigma. Paradoxically, the reverse seems to be true in some countries in Europe: burnout is prevalent because it is an official medical diagnosis that opens the gates of the welfare state, with its compensation claims and treatment programs" (Schaufeli, 2017). But when it comes down to the core reasons for burnouts, it is all the same. In every culture or country is dealing with the same problem; too much pressure and high expectations.

*A research performed on depression among US young adults by the University of Pittsburgh showed that social media exposes young adults to an idealized version of peers. This causes a distorted belief that others live a happier and more successful life and causes a feeling of envy (University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences, 2016). This has a significant effect on feeling depressed.*

In the Netherlands alone, the population spends eleven hours or more per person on social media every week (TijdWinst.com, 2019). It has been proven that with today's high frequency and stimulation of information, people who use social media and the internet this frequently are more likely to have a burnout. Because this time spent online means time spent receiving information that needs to be processed. Without sufficient time offline, the brain does not get a chance to process all of this information to avoid getting burnt out. Psychologist T. Satijn (2019) also mentioned this. He states that constantly rushed feeling is created, and that is addictive. Because of all the stimuli and news, there is an unconscious fear of missing something. This ensures that the brain does not get any rest to recover. Social media also often shows you this 'ideal' image of what life needs to be, which creates stress on a whole new level.

*When millennials and Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2010 (Marketing Tribune, 2019) from all over the world got asked by Deloitte about social media, they also seemed to acknowledge the adverse effects, as seen in the image on the left (Deloitte, 2019).*



Their “inability to switch off, coupled with the addictive functionality of mobile devices, can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and even fractured personal relationships” (Brown, 2019). As said before, because the brain receives stimuli and information all day long, brains do not get a signal to relax anymore. This way, stress accumulates, and the proverbial bucket flows over more quickly than it used to. Because of this problem, the average age at which the world population seems to be getting burnouts is already a lot lower. Besides that, personal contact and the feeling of connection produces the hormone oxytocin, which is the counterpart of the stress hormone cortisol (Betist, n.d.). Oxytocin makes you feel relaxed, whereas cortisol produces rushed feelings. But for this, you need to have human interaction. Research has shown that people who connect online still feel less connected with the people they interact with. Company physician M. Michels (2019) also states that the way millennials multitask on social media makes it more difficult for their brains to relax and to focus on something. They are often online while doing other things, which puts more pressure on their busy life.

Company physician M. Michels (2019) also says that social media creates pressure to always represent yourself in the best way, even if you are struggling. Life nowadays for millennials is all about being a ‘brand’ more than a person online (Foster, 2019). Their Instagram photos must show the world they are cultured and exciting, but not a party animal. Their Twitter should show the world their connection to current affairs but should not alienate anyone of a slightly different political persuasion. And of course, on all platforms, they should have enough followers to show the world they are ‘someone’ and their opinion matters. Besides that, their e-mails also follow them home, and their social media footprint is with them 24/7. However, there are more initiatives taken by society to see what they can do to remove a bit of this work-pressure. Helder Groen, a Dutch company in Haarlem, makes the desks go up into the air at 6 pm so employees cannot work nor answer e-mails until 9 am the next morning (Kewitz, 2014).

Culture also plays a different role in the media. Strategic framework building and the interpretation of social reality by the media users are being used in every culture by stakeholders involved, trying to influence media coverage (Dixon & Josey, 2013; Hinton, 2007). Research showed that different countries frame the news in a certain way. Several countries could be covering the same news but would share other things. They frame it the way they want their citizens to interpret the news. That also affects millennials who are influenced by the media. The media tells them that they must reach specific goals or look like certain people to be successful. This feeds into their self-image and perfectionism issues. Journalists and the media have designed social problems (e.g., poverty, migration, or aging society) in a way that their topics of news and consequences are interpreted as individually or socially caused. They make use of a popular paradigm for new media effects, that uses the framing of media and the framing of audiences. As a result, the fragmentation between cultures and social exclusion increases (Aalberg & Strabac, 2010; Iyengar and others, 2009). Meta-analyses on knowledge gap studies show that there is an unequal distribution of knowledge dissemination between social and cultural segments and between countries. Within the Dutch media, for example, articles often get shared about how ‘everyone’ seems to have a burnout (De Vries, 2019). That takes away from the seriousness of the problems diagnosed people have.



*Photo by Lisa Fotios from Pexels*



# TELL THE SAME STORY

*Previous statements like the struggles of millennials in the Western culture with the unforeseen disappointments in life, the technology nowadays that creates too much information to process, the financial stress that many millennials feel and that they feel like they have to sacrifice their mental health to live up to expectations, show the state of millennials in the Western culture. However, the pressure on millennials and workers in different countries like China and the high death risk because of overwork in Japan show that burnouts are a big issue in many places in the world. Almost every culture and country is affected by it. Perhaps because millennials are the ones entering the job market or starting to create a 'career' for themselves, they currently are in the picture and get affected more. Nevertheless, when it comes down to it, it is not just a generational issue, it is one of capitalism.*

Many of the stories behind burnouts found in interviews and research are dauntingly similar. They all come down to feeling too much pressure to perform perfectly. This often also goes hand in hand with the expectation that this perfect life needs to be created before the age of thirty. Company physician M. Michels (2019) also recognizes that millennials tend to want everything; a house, a good job, a family, time for leisure, et cetera, and often before they are thirty. This puts a considerable amount of pressure on them to always strive for more. This pressure is a huge problem, but are we as a society capable of fixing it? The answer to that is unclear, but what we can do is make people aware of the similarities between everyone's stories so everyone can work on it together. This can be done with a combination of Cialdini's principles of persuasion and good old storytelling.

By using the principle of 'Liking' and a little bit of 'Authority' (Cialdini, 2016), it would be possible for society to feel like they are all in this together and could fix the problem. The principle of liking is based on the fact that people create sympathy for others that are similar to them. This then turns into a way for them to be persuaded by these people to behave a certain way. This can be used to create sympathy with other people dealing with burnouts and to use that for the better. The principle of authority is based on the idea that people follow the lead of trustworthy experts. People are more willing to believe a solution when it comes to someone they relate to.

If the stories behind the burnout are shared by someone who is experiencing similar problems or expectations from themselves, people who see these stories might be inclined to reflect, realize they are doing the same, and do something about it. Psychologist T. Satijn (2019) mentions that acceptance becomes more comfortable when you see you are not alone. That might help them realize there is something they can do about it. So perhaps letting people with burnouts share their story on social media, on a communal account, or have someone share their stories for them, will help others see that they are not alone in this and that expectations of life need to be altered.

**“ACCEPTANCE  
BECOMES MORE  
COMFORTABLE WHEN YOU  
SEE YOU ARE NOT ALONE”**

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# THAT IS WHERE STORYTELLING COMES INTO THE EQUATION.

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*We have been telling stories since our ancestors developed enough brain content to use language (van Iersel, 2019).*

Scientists think that we even owe our survival to it. Our ancestors used stories to tell each other how they caught deer and how they outsmarted saber-toothed tigers. Strong stories to entertain each other at the campfire, but at the same time instructive best practices for young and inexperienced hunters. This way, they dramatically increased their chances of survival. These prehistoric survival mechanisms still largely determine our predilection for stories. It is not the beautiful language, the compelling dialogues, or the atmospheric descriptions that intrigue us so much, but the intoxication of endorphins that we administered unnoticed. Stories have therefore been used since time immemorial to fascinate, to pass on learning experiences, to touch and influence people.

Storytelling is based on the theory of the 'amygdala' that is a part of your brain, the 'emo-center' (Wijzer Werven, 2018). The amygdala makes connections between information that is created by different senses and links it to emotions. It also plays a vital role in the processing of stimuli and direct emotions from the outside. By first creating similarities and talking about shared values, the story behind the problem gets an entirely different starting point. Even Aristoteles talked about storytelling and its power (Koster, 2017). A story should have compassion, a little fear, and catharsis to make an impact. If these burnout stories have anything, it is these three characteristics. Together that can make an impact when telling the stories.

Stories convey a message more convincingly than other ways of transmitting information. The reader sees a similarity and relates. That is how millennials who have been or are suffering from a burnout could help other millennials by sharing their stories. They could share their stories online for others to read. This way, millennials that do not have a burnout (yet) have a chance to recognize their burnout symptoms earlier and prevent it from worsening. It could also help tell the tale of wanting to be perfect by thirty. Creating a storytelling movement might help society realize that this idea is not tangible. And who is better at helping society with this than communication professionals?

So the one thing that society can do together is share these stories and hope that it helps others. It is time that this problem affects less. It is time for new expectations, new goals, and a better-balanced way of living. It is time that we, communication professionals, stand up and give society a voice again.



*Photo by fotografierende from Pexels*

# IT IS CAPITALISM'S FAULT THAT MILLENNIALS HAVE BURNOUTS

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As explained, millennials have incredibly high expectations from their work-life because they were raised with the idea that anything is possible. Technology, financial stress, and overachievement are three things that millennials in the Western culture struggle with that often eventually lead to a burnout. Besides that, a high frequency of stimulation on social media prevents the brain from getting a signal to relax, which could lead to a burnout as well. The media also tells them that they must reach specific goals or look like certain people to be successful. This feeds into their self-image and perfectionism issues. However, burnouts are not only a Western problem but a world-wide problem of capitalism. Every culture or country has its way of communicating with one another, but in general, the problem of a burnout is caused by the same things; too much pressure and high expectations of themselves, other people, and society. They are continually working on their image, but not on their inner selves. They want to perform well but have never learned how to deal with the stress.

Capitalism, in my eyes, created a stigma for millennials. A stigma where it is expected to be perfect, have an excellent job with a high position, have a family, keep up their 'brand' online, and to be culturally well developed. They should have a perfect body, should have paid off all of their debts, and saved up for their pension, all before they are thirty. However, they have to do this, without being stressed and cannot complain about anything either, because then they will be seen as weak. Asking help is also out of the question, and preferably they should not take any time off, because then less work gets done.

This is not something that works, as proven. It is also something that is not fair nor humane, in my opinion. Capitalism created this picture of a perfect person that everyone needs to be. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that it is becoming too much for different generations. If there is one similar story that all of the millennials have stuck in their heads in combination with the way society currently works and it creates burnouts, there is something wrong and it needs to be fixed.

We created a system that we thought would work, but right now, it is making us feel unhappy, disappointed and frankly burnt out. That is not what life is about. It is time to use our inner fire for happiness. After doing all of the research and the interviews, there was a realization that every story is incredibly similar. This realization has now turned into the hope that a lot less damage will be done if some people take it upon themselves to share their stories, ideas, expectations, and experiences. We, as communication professionals, can use storytelling and awareness to help others realize they are not in this alone. Better yet, they can realize that there is no need to have these high expectations of themselves. Lives could be changed, and lives could be better.

***\* The research report with all of the conducted research and interviews is available upon request.***

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# GLOSSARY

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The following definitions are used when talking about the terms presented below.

## Millennials

There are several definitions of what age groups millennials belong to. For this research, when referred to millennials; they will roughly be born within the following years; 1980 – 1996. The term 'millennial' can come across as generalizing sometimes. In this research, a lot of the found results are about white, privileged millennials (often living in the United States of America). Therefore, when talking about millennials in this paper, it is to be realized that some generalizations have been made.

## Burnout

"Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. It is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy. As a reliably identifiable job stress syndrome, burnout places the individual stress experience within a larger organizational context of people's relation to their work. Burnout impairs both personal and social functioning. This decline in the quality of work and both physical and psychological health can be costly not just for the individual worker, but for everyone affected by that person. Interventions to alleviate burnout and to promote its opposite, engagement with work can occur at both organizational and personal levels. The social focus of burnout, the solid research basis concerning the syndrome and its specific ties to the work domain make a distinct and valuable contribution to people's health and well-being" (Fink, 2016, pp. Chapter 43)

## Media

"The term media, which is the plural of medium, refers to the communication channels through which we disseminate news, music, movies, education, promotional messages, and other data. It includes physical and online newspapers and magazines, television, radio, billboards, telephone, the internet, fax, and billboards. It describes the various ways through which we communicate in society. Because it refers to all means of communication, everything ranging from a telephone call to the evening news on television can be called media" ("What is media?" 2019)

## Millennial burnout

"You can feel stress, insomnia, self-doubt, cynicism, and as though you're in a void, like, 'How can I possibly succeed when there are not enough resources left for me?' There will be emotional exhaustion, a feeling of dissatisfaction, inadequacy, and also anger, and maybe physical pain that could take the form of Fibromyalgia or constant feelings of 'unwellness" (Sanghani, 2019).