

Burnout

What is burnout?

Burnout is a syndrome characterised by emotional and physical exhaustion. It shows itself in a negative attitude towards one's work and results in a reduced ability to cope. Burnout is a normal response to abnormal conditions.

What causes burnout?

Burnout is the result of stressful conditions both outside the work area as well as within it. It is a common occurrence amongst the 'helping professions'.

The effect of stresses at the workplace are 'taken home' and the effect of stresses found outside the workplace are brought into it. These stresses, in other words, augment one another.



Most nurses are women who have a second full-time job

Occupational stresses

1 Heavy demanding workload

- long, unsociable hours at work
- poor pay
- emotional demands of clients and their families
- expectation of a 'cheerful face'
- exposure to death and dying

2 Heavy responsibility

- no room for mistakes
- often blamed for situations out of the nurse's control
- at times left alone without doctor to consult

3 Insufficient support from superiors and colleagues

- pressure from the nursing hierarchy
- constant fear of victimisation
- little understanding or sympathy from superiors for pressures experienced outside of workplace
- pressure to excel individually leading to competition between colleagues rather than team work

4 Inflexible rules and bureaucracy

- the nature of the institution is important as its goals, resources, policies and procedures, define and limit the nurse's role

5 A sense of futility

- patients often return to hospital with the same problems
- excessive workload

Stresses external to occupation

1 Long travelling distances

- expensive
- time consuming

2 Two jobs

- Many nurses are women who have a second full-time job
- housekeeping
 - caring for husband and children
 - little time for leisure and relaxation

3 Other pressures in the community

- poor community facilities (eg: insufficient/inadequate child care)
- poor working conditions of family and friends
- repressive and restrictive legislation
- unemployment of others creating a dependence on the nurse

6 A sense of powerlessness in the system

- no control over where or when one works
- no control over the rules and decision making processes that govern a nurse's life

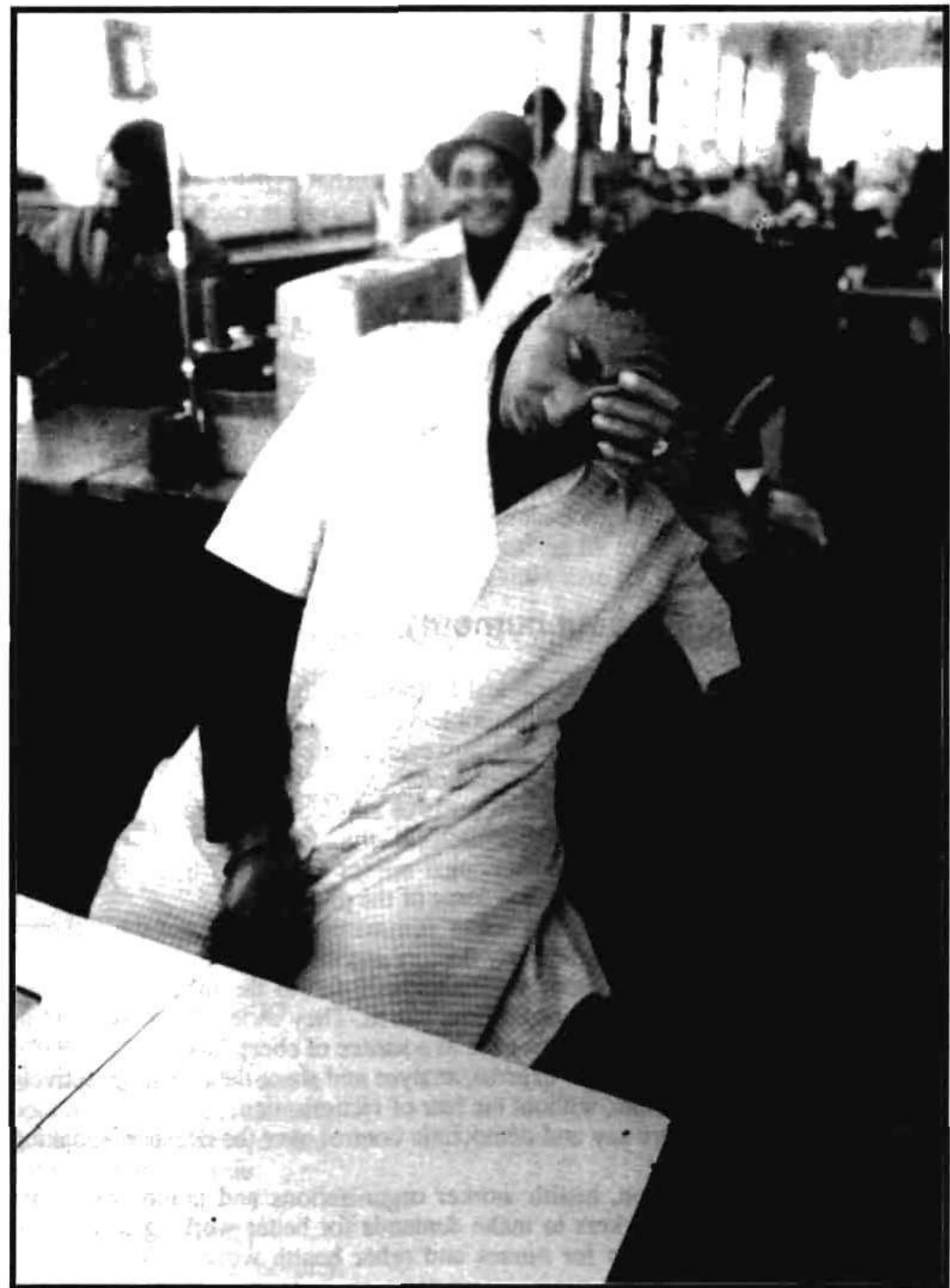
What are the symptoms of burnout?

- emotional exhaustion
- negative self-esteem
- negative attitudes to others and to one's work
- depression and withdrawal

What can be done about burnout?

It is important to realise that sociopolitical factors contribute equally to the burnout syndrome. As such, any solution to the problem must address these issues as well. A lot can be done within the workplace, however, to alleviate some factors leading to burnout. The following are possible solutions:

- Burnout could be alleviated by more positive attitudes to nurses by the health authorities and by a relaxation of the hierarchical structures.
- Support groups could be formed amongst nurses to discuss these issues and jointly to explore solutions to overcome some of the problems.
- Burnout could be reduced through better communication between the different categories of health workers, particularly doctors and nurses.
- Student nurses often suffer from severe burnout due to the pressures of study while being used as part of the hospital workforce. They should be considered as students, primarily, and should not be used as a source of cheap labour.
- Nurses should be encouraged to express, analyse and share their feelings actively with colleagues and superiors, without the fear of victimisation.
- Nurses should have more say and democratic control over the decision - making processes in their jobs.
- Through collective action, health worker organisations and unions can unite nurses and other health workers to make demands for better working conditions. They can provide protection for nurses and other health workers from acts of victimisation.



Burnout is a normal response to abnormal conditions and occurs in many occupations