

# Chapter 13

## Burnout and Active Coping with Emotional Resilience

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### 13.1 Burnout: Processes, Transactions, and Emotions

Ever since the first academic presentation of the concept of burnout, the emphasis has mainly been on its dimensional aspects (Maslach and Jackson 1981a). Although burnout—a form of chronic work stress—is typically a long-lasting psychological process, process models only emerged years later (Maslach et al. 1996, 2001; Maslach and Leiter 1997) and they make no reference to personal variables as relevant intervening elements. However, a comprehensive and explanatory view of burnout requires references both to the temporal processes and the transactions that express the interaction among stress factors, burnout, and the individual. It is impossible to describe or explain burnout without considering the personal variables of the people who experience it, which means taking into account the interaction, the transaction, and lastly, coping.

For many years, the study of burnout has emphasized two aspects: the multidimensional nature of the syndrome and the organizational factors of burnout (Maslach and Leiter 2005). Although from the start some authors emphasized the individual differences (Farber 1991; Freudenberger and Richelson 1980; Maslach 1976), studies continued to be focused on environmental factors, without taking intrapersonal

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factors sufficiently into account. When some of the relevant models of burnout (Cherniss 1980; Hobfoll and Freedy 1993; Pines 1993) paid attention to them, it was more easy to explain the levels of burnout. Many data indicate that it is impossible to explain burnout without considering the processes and transactions of people within their contexts, and the active and passive response processes to the organizational environment. Just as it is impossible to elaborate a psychological model of stress without referring to individual differences, burnout cannot be explained without them.

Most of the models of burnout (Cooper et al. 2001; Schaufeli and Enzman 1998), independently of the causes proposed, reveal the importance of individual differences in the response, that is, the levels of burnout range between their total absence and their massive presence. The most constant fact in the study of burnout is that, whereas, in some cases, there is extreme vulnerability to the process, in others, there is high resistance to it (Garrosa et al. 2008); therefore, the essential mechanisms of these differences must be explained. Although there are many models of differential responses to stress (Cooper et al. 2001; Griffin and Clarke 2011), probably the most generally accepted model is the transactional and interactive model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in their “appraisal theory.”

The theory proposes two components (not two phases): a primary component of appraisal of the situation or context, and a secondary component of appraisal of the available resources and means with which to respond. The first component corresponds to the perception of stressors, the second to the perception of resources; stress is the result of an imbalance between them. The differentiation of the two components is not always easy, although it is necessary to distinguish between them logically (Lazarus 1999): they are mutually interdependent. This proposal is based on the concept of transaction (Lazarus 1999), in which the idea that stress does not consist of either the environment or the individual, but of their cognitively perceived interaction. The result of the appraisal of stress can adopt three main forms: damage/loss, threat, or challenge.

The importance of Lazarus’ proposal lies in the introduction of the variable person in the response to stress. Stress ceases to be an automatic and stereotyped process and becomes an idiosyncratic process that is characteristic of each person (Lazarus 1991), an aspect that is frequently overlooked in models of burnout. From this perspective, burnout, a form of chronic work stress, cannot be conceived as an automatic process immediately generated by the organizational context, but as the result of the interaction between the organization and the person. Work conditions alone do not generate the experience of burnout, but instead, it is mediated by the person’s set of work orientations and attitudes (Cherniss 1980). Maslach and Leiter (2005) refer to this aspect when they allude to burnout as a kind of work stress concerning person–work inadequacy, but this model only considers inadequacy as the result of the incongruence of competences–demands, not as a global form of the incongruence of a person’s beliefs, goals, and values. In the “job–person fit” model, incongruence occurs between the competence and demand variables, without expanding to include the incongruence between the personal and the organizational variables.

From Lazarus' perspective, the concept of meaning constitutes the origin of the transactional process of stress and not only its final result. Meaning and the search for meaning are primary elements of the transactional process (Park and Folkman 1997), and, therefore, the person's belief system determines the process of stress arousal (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The meaning granted to the context and the situation is the beginning of human experience, made up of cognition and emotion. In this sense, meaning is the result of primary appraisal, of the framework of the transaction and the dynamic reappraisal to which it leads (Dewe et al. 2011). Specifically, this means that expectations and the meaning of work constitute the immediate framework for the onset of stress and burnout. The most important organizational stressors are the work aspects that do not match work expectations or one's personal interpretation of the job (Villa-George et al. 2011).

According to the theoretical proposal of Lazarus (1999), stress is inherent to the emotional response. There is no psychological stress without emotions. As proposed and summarized by Smith and Kirby (2011), stress and emotions are two facets of the same reality, and emotions are the most interesting and informative side. In this sense, from the beginning of the formulation of burnout, the concept was presented as an emotional effect (Maslach and Jackson 1981a, b), the result of an excessively demanding interpersonal context. In this sense, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is operationalized as the assessment of an emotional experience, and its first and basic dimension is emotional exhaustion. Thus, the proposal falls within the current approach to emotions as core elements of the response to stress.

However, there is some doubt about whether the concept of burnout in its real operationalization truly assesses the emotional aspects of the response to stress. Enzman (2005) considers that the habitual proposals of burnout really assess workers' fatigue and not their emotional response. As shown in the meta-analyses (Lee and Ashforth 1996) and general reviews (Schaufeli and Enzman 1998) carried out, burnout is predominantly associated with work demands and work load (Maslach and Leiter 2005), which means that the MBI does not really assess burnout as an emotional process, but rather as the effect of work fatigue linked to the organization of work (De Vries et al. 2003).

However, in the current model of stress as an emotional response (Finan et al. 2011), burnout, as a process of chronic work stress, seems necessarily linked to emotional work responses, so it is important to establish the type of emotional responses that are elicited by the responses of chronic work stress and their conjoint effect. The theoretical framework for this purpose also comes from the "appraisal theory" and its application to the work setting, that is, it considers the frameworks of meaning and the value conferred to work and the responses produced in diverse negative work situations and incidents. In this sense, it is important to determine the set of values and the different appraisal patterns of the work situation that produce the emotional responses of stress (Lepine et al. 2006).

For this purpose, it is necessary to start out from a transactional proposal that takes into account the three possible general responses to stress in the work setting: loss, threat, or challenge. Following the model developed by Lazarus (1999), the work response to stress elicits complex emotional responses that are the result of

the transaction between the context and the person, depending on the perceived meaning (Lazarus and Cohen-Charash 2001). That is, work stress not only produces exhaustion, but before that, it produces a complex panorama of negative emotions. From this perspective, the emotional response of burnout is more complex than simple exhaustion and includes other emotional forms, such as sadness, disillusion, despondency, tedium, resignation, irritation, or hopelessness. The accumulative and interactive effect of all of these leads to exhaustion as the core emotional syndrome.

From this proposal, burnout is not exclusively a response of exhaustion, but a complex emotional, transactional response, which depends on the person's system of meanings, the situations and work incidents. This means that the activity of coping is more complex and varied and not exclusively the result of the capacity to resist the quantitative pressure of stress and its burden.

The elaboration of a complex and broad emotional model of burnout requires the consideration of various components. On the one hand, following the current models that consider emotions as action tendencies (Fridja 1986), the emotions elicited at the work setting are guidelines of action toward the organization, basically of approach or avoidance. On the other hand, concerning the necessary presence of self-referred negative emotions, such as shame and guilt, certain aspects of the personal experience of the self must be taken into account (Lewis 2000). Taking both aspects into consideration, the set of negative emotions elicited in the work setting can be considered a specific negative emotional syndrome in itself, similar to that described by Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) for positive emotions, in this case, characterized by processes of exhaustion, rejection, and distancing. In any event, the burnout syndrome cannot be reduced to an emotional syndrome even though this is an essential part of the whole.

## 13.2 Coping, Stress, and Burnout

If there can be no stress without transaction, there cannot be any burnout without coping. Lazarus said, "where there's stress, there's coping" (1990, p. 11), and, transferring the proposal to burnout, we would have to say, there is no burnout without coping, and that the onset and maintenance of burnout indicates a failure to cope. In general, the definitions of burnout underline organizational factors and occupational forms of chronic stress as the strictly direct causes, but as in real work, it is impossible to totally preclude stress factors, the onset of burnout does not depend so much on chronic work stress factors, but on the failure to manage them, on the absence of effective ways of coping. From this perspective, the absence of effective ways of coping is a decisive element in the presence of burnout, but coping has not been a central element in the studies of burnout (Pines 2009), maybe because the social psychology of burnout has been underlined, and not the clinical psychology of the process.

Research on the topic of coping began in the 1970s, starting with the first works of Lazarus (1966), as a way of including conscious and intentional cognitive and

behavioral conduct in the management of stress (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). One of the most habitual definitions of coping is the one proposed by Lazarus as “the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts a person makes to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus 1999, p. 110). The definition underlines coping as a transactional and interactive process, that is, characteristic of each person and in specific situational contexts. Simply stated, coping is a person’s response to the experience of stress, therefore, it depends on this experience. Stress and coping are two interdependent processes.

One of the most habitual criticisms of this type of definition is that it restricts coping to intentional and conscious efforts (Snyder 2001). Responses to stress are not only intentional, the result of people’s conscious effort, but of their set of psychological responses, which include daily skills, routine behaviors, and competences and resources, that is, all their adaptive capacities (Aldwin 2007).

In this sense, the importance of the processes of leisure and, in general, of recovery has been underlined with regard to ways of coping (Iwasaki and Schneider 2003). Currently, various authors defend the organization of leisure and recovery as an active form of coping (Schneider and Wilhem 2007). The process of recovery has been described as the series of activities outside of work that allow people to disconnect from work and to increase their well-being, mainly through the activities of psychological distancing, relaxation, experiences of development, and control of free time (Moreno-Jiménez et al. 2009). In this sense, the activities of recovery would prevent the depletion of the person’s resources and of their effect on burnout, as presented in the conservation of resources (COR) model (Hobfoll 1989).

Many ways of coping have been differentiated and they depend on the theoretical approach chosen. From the start, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) established two important ways of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Whereas the first focuses on modifying the situation, the second focuses on modifying the person’s cognitions and emotions, but neither predominates over the other, rather it depends on the situation and the moment of the process. Many proposals have been made based on this organization of the types of coping (Billing and Moos 1981; Carver et al. 1989; Skinner et al. 2003). Frequently, this broad and general categorization has been replaced by more concrete and specific categories, which has led to a proliferation of ways of coping (Aldwin 2007; Dewe et al. 2011), such as humor or religion.

Pines (2009) considers that the application of the ways of coping to burnout have been excessively influenced by the study of coping with stress. Instead, she proposes some ways of coping, derived both from the theory of burnout and of coping. She proposes that coping with burnout has two essential modalities: active or passive. Active coping attempts to change the causes of burnout, whereas passive coping attempts to avoid the situation. In turn, each one of them is divided into outward coping and inward coping; that is, aimed toward the direct causes or toward the responses to burnout. To assess this theoretical proposal, the author has proposed a 13-item questionnaire (Pines 2009, p. 263).

Based on a transactional model of burnout (Cherniss 1980; Garrosa et al. 2008), the study of burnout as a process cannot be carried out without taking the aspects of coping into account. In fact, there are many direct or indirect references to coping in the study of burnout, sometimes explicit and other times implicit. Thus, for example, in his model of the development of burnout, Cherniss (1980) introduces the third phase, distancing, as a result of a defensive way of coping. According to Schaufeli and Enzman (1998), avoidance coping explains between 5 and 10% of the variance of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, whereas active coping explains 15% of personal accomplishment, which confirms other general studies that show that problem-focused coping is related to a decrease in the stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping is related to an increase in strain (Day and Livingstone 2001; Sears et al. 2000). A study by Peeters and Rutte (2005) on burnout with primary school teachers shows that problem-focused coping can be effective in situations of high work demands. Leiter (1991) proposed burnout as the conjoint result of stress factors and ways of coping.

Coping strategies and coping style have been differentiated: the former are situationally specific forms of strategies, whereas the latter are relatively stable forms that indicate stable personal variables. There is sufficient research to state that some forms of coping do not come from the direct nature of the problem, but from personal styles (O'Driscoll et al. 2009). Therefore, Jang et al. (2007) propose that coping styles are related to personality.

The important and critical goal is not to describe ways of coping, either positive or negative, associated with burnout—although they may be important, illustrating, and even necessary in some aspects—but to determine the function of coping in the process of burnout. As described in the reference work of Schaufeli and Enzman (1998), burnout is the result of dysfunctional coping, considering coping as a set of characteristics of resistance to stress (Costa et al. 1996).

However, this theoretical framework needs empirical research to determine whether the effects of coping on burnout are direct, moderating, or mediating, and it needs methodologies that explain its causal effects, such as studies of diaries and longitudinal studies. Likewise, the qualitative study through in-depth interviews and the use of narrative methodologies serves to determine more accurately the real effects of coping on burnout (Aldwin 2007). This extension of methodologies and procedures could doubtless provide general answers to the function of coping in burnout, but it would also no doubt reveal the complexity and variations of the effects.

Ways of coping are not only aimed at suppressing or decreasing the sources of stress or accommodating them, but, in some cases, they are aimed at maintaining and increasing them. This is what happens when the context is perceived as a challenge or a personal or professional opportunity, which extends the concept of coping to the contents and developments of positive psychology (Dewe et al. 2011). The concept of stress-related growth is a formulation of this approach (Park et al. 1996).

There are different ways of coping that can be described within the framework of Positive Psychology. Positive coping (Dewe, 2008) is described as the search for

meanings and perceptions that generate positive emotions and behaviors in the work setting, that is, those that lead to a state of communicative well-being, a professional and personal development, and more personal experiences and resources that increase professional competence (Hobfoll 1998). Proactive coping was initially described by Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) as a way of anticipating the onset of problems and their suppression; in this sense, it is proactive behavior. It has been defined as “an effort to build up general resources that facilitate promotion towards challenging goals and personal growth.” The main characteristic of proactive coping is the improvement of quality of life (Greenglass 2002; Schwarzer 2001) and, according to Aspinwall and Taylor (1997), it would consist more of the management of goals than of risks.

Other ways of coping related to Positive Psychology are anticipatory coping and preventive coping, both focused mainly on demands and the situations in which they normally occur. Like proactive coping, they are oriented toward the future, but they are characterized by anticipating foreseeable events, whereas proactive coping provokes the occurrence of events and situations that would not normally occur.

Coping cannot be reduced to a mere set of people’s characteristics and the form of their activity within the context, but rather, specific and relevant socio-cultural aspects of coping must be taken into account. In her monograph on stress and coping in 2000, Carolyn Aldwin initially introduced a chapter on this topic, denouncing the scarce number of investigations and developments, theoretical and empirical, dedicated to this theme. In her 2007 edition, she admits some developments achieved in recent years, but still acknowledges the scarce study of coping. In the past few years, social ways of coping, which are considered collective coping aspects, have been introduced, for example, “relationship-focused,” “collaborative,” or “communal” coping (Berg et al. 2008). Although there are differences between the models, they all emphasize that the work of coping is not exclusively individual, but instead, it shares interpersonal resources, and some of them are strictly social and institutional.

The approach is clearly relevant from the perspective of occupational health psychology, whose immediate context is not isolated work, but collective work in formal and informal groups. Coping with work stress and with burnout develops and is influenced by the corporate culture that is typical of each organization. Aldwin (2007) made the sharp observation that, whereas the habitual psychological models of coping underline specific factors or interpersonal variables, other approaches of the social sciences have emphasized the cultural models that act as perceptive frameworks and a formal reactive. In this sense, Markus and Kitayama (1994) have noted that coping behaviors are culturally regulated. The organizational culture can influence coping in three ways:

1. It models the factors that can be perceived as stressful.
2. It affects the chosen ways of coping.
3. It provides institutional mechanisms to deal with stress factors and burnout.

From this perspective, the corporate culture itself is the necessary framework for ways of coping with stress and burnout.

Coping behaviors are not only situation-specific, nor are they only the result of personal variables, but instead, part of their variance comes from the organizational culture and the corporate climate (Cardador and Rupp 2010), understood as the set of values, goals, and symbols that are learned, shared, and practiced within a company. The effectiveness of the practices of coping with burnout is partially determined by their suitability to the corporate organizational culture.

### 13.3 The Model of Emotional Resilience

People have the biological capacity and psychological characteristics necessary to build their own environment, and this aspect combines with the human capacity to anticipate future emotional consequences and to reflect on one's potential to solve the problem. This capacity to anticipate and self-reflect reveals a very important aspect of human functioning, the capacity to intentionally self-regulate one's emotions and actions to achieve one's goals or solve the challenges of life. From this perspective, the capacity of self-regulation (Caprara and Cervone 2000) includes the competence of appraising one's own actions with regard to personal standards, planning, and setting goals aimed at reinforcing personal efficacy and motivating positive self-assessment, mechanisms that are functionally interrelated. This proposal leads to the idea of the reciprocal relation between individual self-regulation and social environment, which contributes to people's development, personality, and potential. People are not passive actors, they respond actively to the environment, they are dynamic, they contribute to the development of their own capacity, and are capable of planning their own actions, on the basis of their emotions. Therefore, personality from this viewpoint is a representative self-regulatory system (Bandura 2001; Moreno-Jiménez 2007).

Self-regulation is considered one of the most important aspects of individuality and a key aspect to understanding the human being. Literally, regulation means change, but it is more than that, it involves the reformulation of processes. It refers to a specific change, a change that involves modification of emotion, thought, and behavior in accordance with one's conscious desires, rules, ideals, goals, or other standards (Gollwitzer et al. 2009).

Within this healthy emotional context, people's resources play an essential role, so special attention has been paid to the positive personal skills inversely related to *burnout*. For this purpose, a model was established of emotional personality variables, which, in its positive dimension, constitutes the model of emotional resilience (MER): hardiness, optimism, and emotional competence. In this sense, researchers attempted to delimit a series of relevant variables to determine and predict the sources of resistance to burnout. Thus, people's hardiness, optimism, and emotional competence were included in the study to produce the MER. The development of this construct is based on a conception of personality as a system of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that interact with each other,



continually undergoing modification, but which also maintain relative autonomy (Moreno-Jiménez 2007). From this model, variables with emotional and motivational components related to positive emotions that promote processes of health and well-being were selected.

It is also based on a personality system characterized by the possibility of self-regulation when setting goals, providing feedback about their achievement, and the capacity of cognitive self-representation (Moreno-Jiménez 2007), as well as the capacity to exert control over one's processes of thought, motivation, and action—a distinctly human characteristic (Bandura 1999)—underlining the active nature of people and the intentional nature of behavior (Baumeister and Alquist 2009).

According to Maslach (1976), burnout involves attitudes, self-appraisal, and the appraisal of others that occurs within the social context, the fruit of social interactions. These relations are emotionally charged; they require emotional and personal competences to control and manage the emotional interaction. Professionals must manage and regulate their own and others' emotions, aspects that involve dealing with thoughts, images, emotions, etc. and which imply a high level of personal resources to solve problems. Therefore, professionals with a broad repertory of strategies will solve a larger number of situations. In particular, these skills are necessary in the case of assistential workers, who need to manage emotions as an important part of their work, in addition to responding to the physical and mental demands of their job. These professionals must have the emotional and personal competencies that allow them to plan, manage, and regulate their needs to express the desired emotions during the interpersonal transactions in the workplace (Maslach et al. 2001). From this perspective, burnout is an indicator that the workers were not able to adequately manage their emotions when interacting with the clients or users. In contrast, the expression of emotions, positive emotions, and sensitivity toward others' emotions can promote commitment, efficacy, and personal accomplishment (Bakker and Leiter 2010; Garrosa et al. 2011). Ultimately, emotional resilience can act as a protective factor in the face of burnout and it is positively related to engagement (Garrosa et al. 2011).

### 13.3.1 *Hardiness*

Hardiness is an attitude toward life that can be operationalized in three essential *hardy attitudes* (Kobasa 1979; Maddi 1999): *commitment*, *control*, and *challenge*, and in a series of strategies or *hardy skills* to solve diverse life situations, stress, and to modify negative moods. Hardy skills include diverse coping strategies, and social interaction strategies, as well as self-care practices. As noted by Kobasa (1982), individuals are not mere victims of change in the environment, but instead they plan an active and constructive role in the processes of stress to modify it. Hardy individuals are more likely to perceive changing situations as a challenge instead of a

threat, to engage in work and in themselves, to feel greater control over their lives (Kobasa 1982).

The concept of hardiness derives from existential psychology, from the definition of the concept of courage, which emphasizes the interrelations of beliefs about oneself and the world based on commitment, control, and challenge. From this perspective, individuals are conceived to be people who continually and dynamically construct their own personality, modifying actions, and who consider that change associated with situations of stress is a natural way of life.

Hardy individuals are characterized by their tendency to engage in life events (personal and work area, etc.), to perceive themselves as having the control to modify situations, and they consider change to be a natural characteristic of life. Individuals who score high in control, challenge, and commitment are therefore hardy (Maddi 2002). Hardiness is an important personality characteristic that affects the relationship between stressors and strains, and many studies have shown its relevance to health and performance (Eschleman et al. 2010). Therefore, these attitudes are interlinked and produce the resistance to stress style (Kobasa 1982); thus, the attitudes of engagement, control, and challenge are not a set of static traits, but instead, these characteristics affect the individuals' action mechanisms, so they even profit from situations of stress (Eschleman et al. 2010; Garrosa et al. 2008).

The action mechanisms of hardiness involve cognitive flexibility, the appraisal of situations as less stressful, understanding events, differentiating events that cannot be changed from those that can, acting decisively when the situation can be changed, and accepting the unchangeable. Hardiness leads to the transformational coping style that allows one to face stressors optimistically and actively (Eschleman et al. 2010), it can also indirectly affect coping (i.e., through its influence on social support), and, lastly, it favors the disposition toward healthy lifestyles that increase the capacity of resistance and physical health (Maddi 1999). For example, the study by Garrosa et al. (2008) integrates previous research on hardy personality, socio-demographic variables, job stressors, and risk-inducing burnout. Specifically, the hardy personality sub-dimensions explained diverse burnout sub-dimensions. Control and commitment were found to be significantly associated with protection from job burnout. Challenge was also found to be negatively associated with lack of personal accomplishment. Similar results were obtained with the application of more advanced statistical analyses, such as the application of neural networks (nonlinear statistical data modeling or decision making tools) to the study of hardiness and burnout (Ladstätter et al. 2010).

Ultimately, as resources, hardiness and coping play a relevant role in decreasing vulnerability to burnout. Control, challenge, social support, and active coping are negative predictors of nursing burnout, indicating that nurses with these resources have less burnout. Also, active coping has an inverse temporal effect on depersonalization and lack of personal accomplishment (Garrosa et al. 2010). These results show that hardy individuals, when faced with difficult, problematic, or challenging life situations, do not flee or escape, but they face them actively; they think that they can personally learn or profit from all situations. Thus, hardy individuals use active and direct coping forms, which are inversely related to avoidant or regressive coping.

Hardiness has a healthy effect (Eschleman et al. 2010; Maddi 2002); it is positively related to optimism (Garrosa et al. 2011; Scheier and Carver 1987), and negatively to stress and burnout (Garrosa et al. 2008, 2010; Ladstätter et al. 2010; Rowe 1997). Hardiness is positively related to active coping and seeking social support, and negatively to emotion-focused coping (Boyle et al. 1991; Garrosa et al. 2010; Ladstätter et al. 2010). According to Kobasa (1979), the effect of hardiness on health and stress is mediated by one's appraisal of the situations and the coping mechanisms used. Hardy people's tendency to perceive stimuli as opportunities for challenge increases their optimism with regard to their own skills to solve situations. Research has also revealed an association between hardiness and the use of problem-focused coping strategies.

### ***13.3.2 Optimism***

Optimism has to do with expectations about the future, the hope that allows us to perceive events as manageable. Seligman (1975) has shown that when we perceive a situation as uncontrollable and we believe we can do nothing to change it, a feeling of helplessness is generated, which has three types of negative consequences: it decreases our capacity to change situations, it increases our emotional alterations, and it blocks our capacity to perceive reality.

Optimistic people have a positive physical disposition and can see things with the expectation that they will be solved effectively. These emotions and thoughts will have a great impact on one's personal goals, on the definition of desired values, and on self-regulation to achieve goals in one's personal life and work (Carver 1979). Optimists make a continuous effort to achieve their goals, using coping strategies aimed at the problems. This way of coping and addressing problems has important implications in a person's life. The results of research show that the optimistic disposition is related to the achievement of goals and to active and effective coping strategies (Carver and Scheier 2009). In contrast, pessimistic people focus their attention on negative emotions; they distance themselves from or avoid situations.

Optimism seems to be a disposition (Carver and Scheier 2009) that involves skills that can be learned (Seligman 1998). From this viewpoint, what people think when they fail is determinant; according to research, this is the key to persistence and resistance to failure. Errors or difficulties are not impossible barriers for the optimist; difficulties can be overcome and do not prevent one from reaching the final goal, the desired emotion. When explaining the causes of failure, optimists resort to external, specific, and unstable factors. Thus, their self-esteem is not upset, they feel capable of acting to modify the course of events and obtain positive and predictable consequences from their actions.

Optimism can protect one from depression, it can increase the level of accomplishment, it can emphasize the feeling of well-being, and protect one from stress and diseases (Rasmussen et al. 2006). Optimism correlates with health, it improves

the functioning of the immunological system through the absence of negative emotions and the promotion of healthy behaviors (Seligman 1998; Carver and Scheier 2009).

It seems that optimism acts through diverse mechanisms (Carver and Scheier 2008):

1. Positive illusions, a stronger recall of past favorable experiences.
2. The capacity to relativize explanations and to question pessimistic formulations.
3. Maintaining hope, formulating clear goals, and having a view of obstacles as challenges to overcome.
4. Positive expectations about the future that help to appraise the present and events that have not yet happened.
5. Coping with unavoidable events that provoke distress, providing meaning that allows one to take advantage of the experience for one's own development.
6. Seeking part of the responsibility and an active stance in the face of stressful life events improves the levels of competence and helps to face situations as they occur.
7. Acceptance in the case of difficult situations, instead of struggling with the inevitable, and committing to one's values, overcoming the barriers that emerge, and aiming toward achieving one's personal goals.

This last point might be the key: accepting and committing to our values despite the difficulties; understanding this mechanism and, particularly, providing some meaning help to overcome situations of distress.

Optimism can be linked to higher workplace performance and lower burnout (Garrosa et al. 2011; Riolli and Savicki 2003). Optimistic people are more likely to make a plan of action for difficult situations, are less likely to give up, and have a more positive outlook on stressful situations (Seligman 1998). Optimism is positively associated with affective measures of employee attitudes, such as increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Segerstrom 2007). For example, in the study Garrosa et al. (2011), optimism had a main effect on all dimensions of engagement, emotional exhaustion, and lack of personal accomplishment, but not on depersonalization. These results confirm the positive effect of optimism to prevent burnout and to evoke engagement.

### ***13.3.3 Emotional Competence***

Emotional competence (EC) includes a series of capacities that involve knowledge of one's own emotions, the skills to differentiate and understand others' emotions, the skill to use a broad and varied vocabulary in the expression of emotions, the capacity to empathize, skills to differentiate between internal and external emotional expression, the capacity to use adaptive coping strategies for negative emotions or stress, knowledge about emotional communication within diverse social relations, and the capacity of emotional self-efficacy (Saarni 2000). When applied to work,

EC consists of transferring this potential to the work world. EC is something that is achieved and used to function in an emotionally effective way with regard to goals and objectives.

Saarni's (2000) perspective emphasizes the context that surrounds EC and includes within it the person–situation interaction. EC involves taking into account people's motivation to commit or establish relations that involve emotion, the type of contextual demands, values, and beliefs that people bring to their emotional experience. Saarni grants more importance to the processes of learning and development and also includes opportunities and the exposure to environments to learn emotional processes and schemas, and she considers that EC is a dynamic process.

Emotional competence is a verification of self-efficacy in the use of emotions in social interactions (Saarni 2000). From this viewpoint, people respond emotionally, through their knowledge of their own and others' emotions, regulating their emotional experience toward the achievement of results or goals. The desire to achieve results or goals integrates the commitment to one's personal morals.

The essential and most important aspects of emotional development include processes of behavioral self-regulation and coping, expressive behavior itself, and the processes of social relation.

Among the consequences of EC are effective management of one's own emotions, a feeling of subjective well-being, and the capacity to resist stressful situations (Saarni 1999).

1. *Control and management of emotion.* Coping strategies are essential in order to control and manage emotion. Emotionally mature people can control and manage their emotions positively; for example, they use physical exercise when they are in a negative mood, and they avoid using food to modify it, because they know that eating does not modify mood effectively. They use positive coping strategies with long-term beneficial effects on health. Emotionally mature people know that they can modify their mood to their own benefit.
2. *Subjective well-being.* Emotional self-efficacy is closely related to a person's appraisal of well-being and happiness; the tendency toward well-being has a lot to do with the acceptance of one's own emotional experience and honesty. Positive beliefs about oneself are associated with positive emotions and with the necessary energy to achieve one's important goals.
3. *Resilience.* The human capacity to deal with, overcome, and be strengthened or transformed by adverse experiences. In this sense, this process goes beyond the simple rebound or capacity to elude these experiences, because it allows one to be empowered and strengthened by them, which directly affects one's well-being and quality of life. Resilience is linked to development and human growth, including differences in the developmental stages and gender differences. Resilient people seem capable of facing stressors and adversities, reducing the intensity of stress and producing a decrease in negative emotional signals, such as anxiety, depression, or anger, and increasing curiosity and emotional health, thus showing that resilience is effective not only to face adversity, but also to promote mental and emotional health. Positive emotions seem to lead to higher levels of resilience

(Fredrickson 2009). Likewise, resilience also partially achieves its effects through the generation of positive emotions. The difference in positive emotions accounts for these people's higher capacity to recover from adversity and stress, prevent depression, and continue to grow (Fredrickson and Cohn 2008).

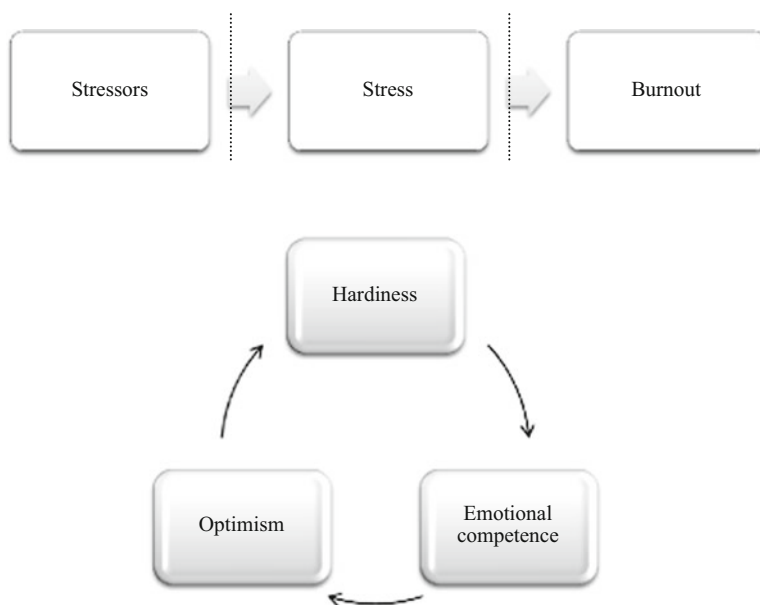
Ultimately, resilient behavior requires preparation, living, and learning from experiences of adversity. Resilience is produced as a function of social and intrapsychic processes. Nobody is born resilient, nor is resilience acquired naturally; therefore, it depends on the processes of interaction of the subject with other human beings and on internal processes (Saarni 2000). In this sense, EC could facilitate these processes, and it is an essential element for the development of resilient behaviors.

Therefore, EC is particularly important in professions where people must interact with clients (Garrosa et al. 2011), these factors should be a part of the workers' professional competence, and workers should be duly trained for this. EC contributes much to the quality and efficacy of the service, to the maintenance of positive communication and positive interpersonal relations in the organization, and to the healthy culture of the organization.

McCullough et al. (2001), for example, have shown that emotional incompetence deteriorates, obstructs, and/or alters adequate and effective communication between the nursing professional and the patient. In a similar vein, Heron (1990) describes EC as a necessary status among professionals of the health sphere, where interactions with patients are not contaminated by the effects of the professional's own anxiety and the accumulated anxiety of past experience. The deficit of some EC skills is also related to burnout (Garrosa et al. 2011). The model of Cherniss (1993) established a cause-effect relation between people's inability to develop feelings of competence or personal success and the burnout syndrome. Other studies show that successful executives are characterized by having more self-control, more responsibility, more fidelity, better social skills, and they establish relations with more people and take advantage of diversity (Leslie and Van Velsor 1996). Likewise, other studies have shown that, to the extent that workers have more skills to discriminate emotions, empathy, and to express their emotions verbally, they feel greater job satisfaction, and burnout can be prevented (Garrosa et al. 2011).

Emotional competence has very effective implications in the workplace (McClelland 1999), especially with the generation of a positive and effective group climate (Kelner et al. 1996). It is also related to productivity, and to workers' physical and psychological health and well-being within the organization (Cherniss 1993). Workers' EC favors the creation of a culture of respect and care among the workers and towards the clients, a considerate managerial system, greater adaptation to work demands, an effective and flexible communication system, more effective management of the organization, and acceptance of emotional expression (Garrosa et al. 2011).

The results with the MER show the relation between personal resources (optimism, hardy personality, emotional competence) and burnout and engagement. This model proposes the initial step in understanding the link between these variables, diminishing burnout, and reinforcing engagement (Garrosa et al. 2011). Figure 13.1 shows the representation of the optimal function of MER.



**Fig. 13.1** Model of emotional resilience in the prevention of burnout

### 13.4 Practical Implications

Educating and promoting emotional resilience involves dealing with hardiness and promoting a life attitude of commitment, control, and challenge. This perception of the world, of others, and of oneself involves a series of skills to solve diverse life situations and stress, and to modify negative moods. These attitudes include diverse coping strategies, and of social interaction, as well as self-care practices. Hardiness has to do with learning to appraise changing situations as opportunities and challenges, not as dangers.

People with these characteristics engage in work and people. Likewise, the perception of control over one's life helps to manage stressors more appropriately and to make the most positive decisions for the individual (Kobasa 1982). People with these characteristics of resistance do not avoid situations or just passively bear negative events, they are capable of making decisions for their own benefit and for that of the organization, as well as pointing out unfair situations or situations that generate distress. They are not passive people, who resist without criticizing; on the contrary, they are willing to change negative situations and they try to target health and well-being, modifying the aspects that can lead them astray from their goals.

Likewise, another important element is to promote optimism, especially the generalized expectations that things will work out positively (Carver and Scheier 2009). From this perspective, professionals learn that action will have a big impact on their

personal goals, on their definitions of desired values, and on their processes of self-regulation (Sundstrom et al. 1990). Learning optimism involves a process or mechanism of self-regulation that people use to achieve goals, to discover the barriers that may emerge on the way, and to choose the most adequate strategy.

An optimistic attitude toward life increases the probability of maintaining a continued effort to achieve one's goals, and persistence and determination in one's actions. From this viewpoint, professionals learn that an optimistic disposition is related to results and to active and effective coping strategies (Luthans et al. 2004). The proposal presented herein is to achieve the goals set by the person and the organization.

The effective optimist is capable of understanding a situation critically, and of openly indicating which elements do not correspond to the organization's set of ethical values or to their own personal goals and that need to be changed. In the work setting, optimistic people keep their hopes up, but are critical of the situations that should be changed and solved, and they work to carry out changes and seek creative solutions.

To develop EC, it is important to work with a series of capacities that involve knowledge of one's own emotions, verbal expression of emotions, and emotional self-efficacy (Saarni 2000).

Emotional competence in the workplace refers to two different but connected levels, the intrapersonal and the interpersonal level. The intrapersonal level involves developing emotional competences and using them personally. Regarding the interpersonal level, these competences extend to the social sphere, to relations with others, to being more effective in one's relations with others.

Workers' EC helps to create a culture of respect, ethics, and care among the workers and toward the clients. This healthy work environment will result in the development of resources that will have a direct relation with workers' positive appraisal, which, in turn, is related to greater effectiveness in interpersonal relations. Likewise, this positive view of oneself has been considered an important resource against work stressors (Hobfoll and Freedy 1993). Maslach et al. (2001) acknowledge the importance of positive feelings in the work setting and with regard to burnout and its involvement in the processes of self-appraisal and self-concept.

The studies carried out reveal that when workers feel they have fewer resources to deal with stress, they are more vulnerable to burnout. When workers have negative feelings about themselves, they may display incompetence in their interpersonal relations (patients/users and coworkers), which can generate difficulties at work. However, workers' positive appraisal when they perceive themselves as having resources is related to efficacy. From the perspective of increasing resources, it is important to promote professionals' assessable aspects, their personal and professional achievements, to increase their positive self-concept and levels of competence and social value, as well as to promote a shared culture of respect and ethics.

To sum up, in addition to the pertinent organizational changes, promoting emotional resilience generates an increase in personal resources that is related to higher self-esteem, higher frequency of positive emotions, and greater EC (Garrosa et al. 2011).



All these variables are dealt with together to develop emotional resilience, which will act as a protective element against burnout and increase the workers' likelihood of developing well-being within the organizations. Resources of emotional resilience are remarkably health-promoting, they are linked to lower scores in stress, positive emotional states, the use of adaptive coping strategies, high scores in engagement and self-efficacy, and greater subjective well-being.

The benefits of this proposal lead to desirable effects in task activity, persistence, cognitive functioning, and creativity, as well as in the quality of the service rendered and in positive interpersonal relations, where it contributes to the development and protection of mutual respect.

People who work in healthy organizations benefit from mutual positive emotions and from others' positive actions by being influenced by them. Lastly, ethical, altruist, and cooperative behaviors are produced, as well as a work environment committed to respect. All of these factors lead to favorable results in the workplace. Finally, we conclude with *some ideas* regarding practical implementation in organizations:

1. Training in coping strategies, social interaction as well as self-care practices. (Coping with work stress and with burnout develops and is influenced by the corporate culture that is typical of each organization).
2. Training in resilience. (People with a hardy personality engage in work and clients).
3. Building up mutual respect within the organization. (EC favors the creation of a culture of respect and care among the workers and toward the clients).
4. Training in dealing with EC. (To develop EC, it is important to work with a series of capacities that involve knowledge of one's own emotions, verbal expression of emotions, and emotional self-efficacy).
5. Co-development of an employee's occupational resources. (A healthy work environment will result in the development of resources that will have a direct relation with workers' positive appraisal, which, in turn, is related to greater effectiveness in interpersonal relations).
6. Positive feedbacks within the organization. (Healthy organizations benefit from mutual positive emotions and from others' positive actions by being influenced by them).
7. Promotion of optimism. (Induces important effects in task activity, persistence, cognitive flexibility, and creativity).

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