CHAPTER 6

How to raise your satisfaction when you are burnt-out:
Focus on the dimensions on which you are doing not poorly, rather than well, compared to others

Abstract - The purpose of this study was to determine if individuals in a state of burnout can become more satisfied with their performance through reflecting in a self-protective way on their qualities in comparison with self-generated others. A group of 156 teachers were asked to list dimensions on which they were doing well (i.e., self-enhancement) or not poorly (i.e., self-protection) compared with other teachers. As expected, individuals high in burnout derived more satisfaction and positive affect from focusing on the dimensions on which they were doing not poorly, rather than well, possibly because they are particularly concerned to avoid a sense of inferiority. It is suggested that in the long term, reflecting in a self-protective way on one’s qualities might even help to combat burnout. The implications concerning the theorizing on approach and avoidance orientations are discussed.

Burnout and related issues are currently receiving more and more attention. Although estimates vary considerably, depending on the occupational field and the criteria applied for burnout, it is clear that the prevalence of burnout in our society is high and that levels of occupational stress are steadily increasing (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Moreover, the negative consequences of burnout, such as job dissatisfaction, reduced commitment, absenteeism, and turnover, are manifold (see Burke & Richardsen, 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). As a consequence, burnout not only poses a problem for individuals afflicted by it, but also for the recipients of their services (e.g., clients, patients, and pupils). In addition, the costs of disability pensions and replacement of burnt-out individuals place a burden on society. In the present study, the research population consisted of teachers in secondary education, a profession that has the reputation of being plagued by burnout (e.g., Rudow, 1999).

Burnout is commonly regarded as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, resulting from prolonged stress at work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; see Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2000). Emotional exhaustion, the core component of

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burnout, refers to a depletion in emotional resources: One feels emotionally drained at the end of a working day. Depersonalization, the second component of burnout, denotes a cynical, negative attitude toward one’s work or toward the recipients of one’s service: Harsh jokes and stereotypical comments on clients are expressions of depersonalization. The third component of burnout, reduced personal accomplishment, refers to a perceived decline in one’s performance: One feels ineffective and has doubts about one’s ability to deal with problems at work.

As apparent from the definition of burnout, individuals suffering from this syndrome have lowered levels of satisfaction with their professional performance, an issue that is of primary concern in the present study. The central question addressed in this study is whether individuals in a state of burnout can become more satisfied with their performance at work through reflecting in a self-protective way on their own qualities in comparison with others. It is also examined to which extent positive affect is fostered by these kinds of comparisons. The assumption is that reflecting on one’s qualities in comparison with others may serve as an emotion-focused coping strategy with immediate benefits, such as a sense of satisfaction with one’s performance at work and positive affect, and possibly with long term consequences as well. That is, raising these individuals’ satisfaction and mood may not only be a pleasant experience for them -- it is, of course, more enjoyable to feel contented rather than frustrated about one’s performance -- in the long term, a sense of satisfaction may contribute to a decrease in feelings of burnout. When individuals in a state of burnout become more satisfied with their performance at work, they might ease the pressure and might hence reduce further exhaustion. In addition, positive affect seems to stimulate broad-minded coping and creative problem solving (Fredrickson, 2000), and may in this way help to combat burnout.

Reflecting on one’s own qualities in comparison with others may be particularly beneficial when individuals generate the comparison targets themselves. Comparing oneself with self-chosen or self-construed others, rather than with imposed comparison targets, leaves more room for distortion and, hence, for a self-serving interpretation: One is less bounded by reality. It may be relatively easy to selectively focus on specific individuals, or to construe individuals in such a way that one can feel good about oneself. Moreover, one can more easily concentrate on dimensions, or construe vague or ambiguous comparison dimensions in order to let a comparison turn out favorably. Especially comparison on vague,
ambiguous dimensions, such as ‘morality’, provides possibilities for a favorable, self-serving interpretation (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; VanYperen, 1992).

A number of studies have pointed towards the beneficial consequences of comparisons with self-generated others. In a survey study among cancer patients by Wood, Taylor, and Lichtman (1985), individuals appeared to engage in comparison with self-construed worse-off others. Cancer patients reported, for instance, that they sometimes compared themselves with patients who had been abandoned by their spouse, despite the fact that only a small proportion of such patients are actually left by their spouse (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983). Wood et al. suggested that these comparisons were beneficial because they may help to lower feelings of victimization (see also Wills, 1981). Furthermore, an experimental study by Buunk, Oldersma, and De Dreu (2001) indicates that comparison with self-generated others may have a positive impact on relationship satisfaction. Individuals were more satisfied with their relationship when they had listed dimensions on which their relationship was better than the relationship of most others, compared to a no-comparison condition, in which they listed dimensions on which their relationship was good.

In the present study, the consequences of comparisons with self-generated others are investigated, whereby we make a distinction between self-enhancing and self-protective comparisons (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Tice, 1993). Comparing oneself in a self-enhancing way means that one strives for a positive view of oneself vis-à-vis others: One tries to obtain a sense of superiority, of ‘doing well compared to others’. In contrast, comparing oneself in a self-protective way denotes that one tries to avoid a negative view of oneself vis-à-vis others: One tries to avoid a sense of inferiority, of ‘doing poorly compared to others’.

Self-protection tends to be a particularly important motive for individuals low in self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Tice, 1991, 1993; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994). To illustrate, Tice (1993) describes individuals with low self-esteem as follows: “They appear to be cautious, uncertain people who desire success but fear failure - and the fear often outweighs the desire, resulting in an attitude of self-protection” (p. 50). In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem seem to be primarily concerned to enhance themselves: They aim to be exceptionally competent or far above average. Studies on self-handicapping self-presentation and
task persistence in relation to self-esteem allude to the importance of the self-protection motive for individuals low in self-esteem (see Tice, 1993).

Given their reduced sense of competency and low self-esteem (e.g., Janssen, Schaufeli, & Houkes, 2000), individuals suffering from burnout may be primarily concerned to protect their self-image, and hence, to avoid a sense of inferiority toward others. Perceiving a decline in their professional performance, these individuals may be particularly afraid that, sooner or later, they will be inferior to others. Indeed, research by Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons, and Ipenburg (2001) shows that, with increasing levels of burnout, individuals are more afraid that they will end up in the position of a poorly functioning colleague. Moreover, enhancing themselves or obtaining a sense of superiority may be ‘aiming too high’ for these individuals, as they may believe that they lack the necessary ability or competence to defeat or win from other individuals. In line with this reasoning, a study by Brenninkmeijer, VanYperen, and Buunk (2001b) showed that individuals in a state of burnout experienced a decline in what was defined as positive superiority, that is the perception of ‘being better than others’ (see Van Lange & Breukelaar, 1992). In contrast, these individuals seemed able to preserve a sense of negative superiority, the perception of ‘being less bad than others’. Brenninkmeijer et al. (2001b) asked teachers to generate either positive or negative behaviors that other teachers performed more often and less often than they did. Superiority was computed by comparing the cognitive accessibility of behaviors that others performed more often with the cognitive accessibility of behaviors that others performed less often. Negative behaviors that others performed more often could be generated more quickly and were richer in content than negative behaviors that others performed less often, even among individuals in a state of burnout. Hence, individuals in a state of burnout seemed able to preserve a sense of negative superiority, and hence to protect themselves from feeling inferior. Among individuals low in burnout, positive behaviors that others performed less often were also generated more quickly and were richer in content than positive behaviors that others performed more often. This tendency was reduced, however, among individuals in a state of burnout, indicating that these individuals experienced a decline in positive superiority, and could not enhance themselves to the same extent as healthy individuals could.

Because the need to protect themselves may override the desire to enhance themselves, individuals in a state of burnout may be particularly
relieved to realize that they are not inferior to others. It is therefore proposed that individuals in a state of burnout may derive more satisfaction with their performance at work and more positive affect from concentrating on the dimensions on which they are not doing poorly compared to others, rather than on the dimensions on which they are doing well compared to others. In the present field experiment, teachers were asked to indicate either in which ways they are doing well (i.e., a self-enhancing focus) or in which ways they are not doing poorly (i.e., a self-protective focus) in comparison with self-generated other teachers. It was assessed to what extent this task evoked a sense of satisfaction with one’s performance as a teacher as well as positive affect. Because a possible difference between the two self-serving kinds of comparison would be that individuals in one condition formulate their qualities in a different way, or generate a larger number of qualities than in the other condition, it was also examined how many aspects individuals generated and whether they formulated their qualities in a positive way (e.g., ‘paying attention to pupils’, ‘flexibility’, or ‘humor’) or in a negative way (e.g., ‘not worrying’, ‘rarely absent’, or ‘no conflicts’). In this way, it could be assessed whether the number or the formulation of the generated aspects could account for the difference between the two self-serving kinds of comparisons.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Our sample consisted of 156 teachers in secondary education, a profession in which burnout is a well-known phenomenon (e.g., Rudow, 1999). The sample consisted for 58% of male participants. The mean age of the participants was 45 years ($SD = 8.7$) and the average experience as a teacher was 19 years ($SD = 9.8$). Participants were given a questionnaire that they could fill out at home and subsequently return in a postage-free envelope. In total, 18.4% of the teachers returned the questionnaire. One teacher had misunderstood the instructions and the answers of this participant were therefore excluded from statistical analysis.

**Burnout.** Burnout was measured with a Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers (MBI-NL-Le, Schaufeli & Van Horn, 1995), which consists of three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment (cf. Maslach & Jackson,
1981). The internal consistency of the subscales for exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment was .88, .66, and .81, respectively. The relatively low internal consistency of depersonalization was in line with several other studies (e.g., Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999; VanYperen, 1996). Because our primary interest was to investigate effects of burnout in general, and not of the separate dimensions of burnout, we recoded the personal accomplishment items and then summed all the items of the MBI into one burnout measure. Cronbach’s alpha for this total scale was .87. To get an indication of the burnout percentage in our experiment, we used a criterion developed by Brenninkmeijer and VanYperen (1999). Brenninkmeijer and VanYperen investigated how burnout could be most accurately assessed in a non-clinical sample by comparing the scores on the three burnout subscales of 44 well-performing persons with the scores of 29 persons diagnosed by clinicians as suffering from burnout. For a non-clinical population, the ‘Exhaustion + 1’ criterion resulted in a low (6.8%) chance of falsely labeling a person as burnt-out. According to this criterion, a person should be considered as burnt-out when he or she not only scores high (75th percentile or higher) on emotional exhaustion, but also high (75th percentile or higher) on depersonalization or low (25th percentile or lower) on personal accomplishment. In this experiment, in which participants were compared to a Dutch norm group of 916 teachers working in secondary education (Schaufeli & Van Horn, 1995), this criterion yielded a burnout percentage of 20.6%.

**Experimental manipulation.** The second part of the questionnaire was an experimental section in which participants were requested to describe themselves as a teacher. Dependent on the condition to which they were assigned, a self-enhancing or self-protective focus was induced. Participants in the self-enhancement condition were asked to list dimensions on which they were *doing well* compared with other teachers, whereas those in the self-protection condition were asked to list dimensions on which they were *not doing poorly* compared with other teachers. We told individuals to take their time and, similarly as in the study by Buunk, Oldersma et al. (2001), to generate as many aspects as possible, with a minimum of five aspects. Each aspect could be written down in a separate box. It was assessed how many aspects individuals generated, as well as the way in which the aspects were formulated. Two independent raters judged whether the aspects individuals generated were formulated in a positive
way (e.g., ‘paying attention to pupils’, ‘flexibility’, or ‘humor’) or in a negative way (e.g., ‘not worrying’, ‘rarely absent’, or ‘no conflicts’). If the description of an aspect contained one or more negative formulations, the total aspect was scored as ‘negatively formulated’. The raters reached complete agreement: Cohen’s kappa (Cohen, 1960), as a measure for the interrater agreement corrected for the agreement by chance, was therefore 1.00. After the experimental manipulation, we assessed the extent to which the task evoked positive affect, as well as a sense of satisfaction with one’s own performance.

Affect. Positive affect was measured with three questions (Brenninkmeijer, VanYperen, & Buunk, 2000). The items were “To what extent does this task give you a positive feeling?”, “To what extent do you find this task inspiring?”, and “To what extent do you find this task hopeful?”. Participants could indicate their answers on a five-point scale that varied from not at all (1) to very much (5). Cronbach’s alpha of this scale, as a measure for the internal consistency, was .83.

Satisfaction with one’s performance at work. Satisfaction with one’s own performance at work was measured with two items. We asked to what extent individuals 1) felt more satisfied with their own performance than before the task and 2) regarded their performance more positively than before the task. Items could be answered on a scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (5). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .92. We introduced the items by telling the participants that people might sometimes regard themselves differently, and sometimes not, when they have read particular information or have thought about particular things. This introduction was meant to give individuals an opportunity to change or to maintain their self-views after the task.

Results

We regressed positive affect, satisfaction with one’s performance at work, and the number of generated aspects on focus (coded as -1 for the self-protective focus and +1 for the self-enhancing focus), burnout, and the interaction between these variables. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the dependent variables are displayed in Table 1.
Table 1. Intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations of positive affect, satisfaction with one’s professional performance, and the number of aspects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Number of aspects</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of aspects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01

Positive affect. Table 2 shows that the two-way interaction between burnout and focus on positive affect was significant (see Figure 1). Inspection of the simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that individuals high in burnout (1 SD above the mean) reported more positive affect following a self-protective focus than following a self-enhancing focus (B = -.27, p < .05), whereas no significant effect was found among those low in burnout (B = .14, ns). Hence, as predicted, with increasing levels of burnout, individuals reported more positive affect when they focused on the dimensions on which they were doing not poorly, rather than well, compared to others.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression of positive affect, satisfaction with one’s professional performance, and the number of aspects on focus, burnout, and the interaction between focus and burnout.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Number of aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R²</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>R²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Main effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Two-way interaction</td>
<td>.04*</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus × Burnout</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05
Satisfaction with one’s performance at work. Table 2 shows that individuals high in burnout reported a larger increase in satisfaction compared to individuals low in burnout. In addition, a self-protective focus induced a somewhat larger increase in satisfaction than a self-enhancing focus. These effects were qualified by a significant Focus × Burnout interaction. As depicted in Figure 2, individuals high in burnout reported a stronger increase in satisfaction following a self-protective focus than following a self-enhancing focus (B = -.32, p < .01). Again, no significant effect was found among those low in burnout (B = .03, ns). As expected, individuals in a state of burnout reported thus more increase in satisfaction with their professional performance when they focused on the dimensions on which they were doing not poorly, rather than well, compared to others.
Figure 2. Satisfaction with one’s professional performance as a function of burnout and focus

Generated aspects. The number of aspects that individuals generated was not influenced by the type of focus, degree of burnout, or interaction between these variables (see Table 2). Moreover, individuals formulated their qualities almost exclusively in a positive way, rather than in a negative way. The number of negatively formulated qualities (less than 6%) was evenly distributed across the two conditions ($F(1,154) = 1.47, \text{ns}$)\(^\text{12}\).

\(^{12}\) As effects of social comparison tend to be more pronounced among individuals high in social comparison orientation (SCO), that is, with a strong individual tendency to compare oneself with others (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), we examined whether SCO moderated our results. Therefore, we regressed positive affect, the satisfaction with one’s performance and the number of aspects on burnout, focus, SCO, and the interactions between these variables. With respect to the number of aspects generated, no main or interaction effects of SCO were found. SCO did have a marginally significant main effect on positive affect ($B = .16, p = .05$). Moreover, a significant interaction effect between condition and SCO was found on satisfaction with one’s performance ($B = -.17, p < .05$), indicating that only among those high in SCO, a self-protective focus resulted in a higher satisfaction with one’s performance than a self-enhancing focus ($B_{\text{SCO-high}} = -.30, p < .05$, $B_{\text{SCO-low}} = -.02, \text{ns}$). Social comparison orientation did not moderate the effects of burnout.
Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether individuals in a state of burnout can enhance the satisfaction with their performance through reflecting in a self-protective way on their own qualities in comparison with self-generated others. We asked 156 teachers to list dimensions on which they were doing well (i.e., a self-enhancing focus) or were not doing poorly (i.e., a self-protecting focus) compared to other teachers. The distinction between these two self-serving kinds of comparisons is important, because self-protection can be assumed to be a particularly important motive for individuals suffering from burnout. Given their reduced sense of accomplishment and low self-esteem, they may be primarily concerned to avoid a sense of inferiority. These individuals may fear that they are, or will be in the future, inferior to others and may view a sense of superiority as ‘aiming too high’. Therefore, it was assumed that individuals in a state of burnout would be particularly relieved to realize that they are not inferior to others. We indeed found that these individuals derived more satisfaction with their performance as a teacher and more positive affect from concentrating on the dimensions on which they were not doing poorly, rather than on the dimensions on which they were doing well. Apparently, individuals in a state of burnout seem capable to benefit from comparing themselves in a self-protective way, rather than in a self-enhancing way, with self-generated others. This finding is in line with earlier research suggesting that individuals in a state of burnout manage to preserve a sense of ‘being less bad than others’, while their perception of ‘being better than others’ is reduced (Brenninkmeijer et al. 2001b). Moreover, it is in accordance with a variety of studies testifying to the dominance of the self-protection motive among individuals low in self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Tice, 1991, 1993; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994).

Our findings may have implications for the theorizing on the two fundamental, evolutionary adaptive motivational systems that underlie approach and avoidance tendencies (Elliott, 1999). In the literature on goal orientations, approach and avoidance are the equivalents of enhancement vs. protection. An example of an approach goal is ‘outperforming my colleagues’, whereas an example of an avoidance goal is ‘not doing worse than my colleagues’. Research on achievement goal orientations suggests that, prior to or during a task, these kinds of approach strategies typically
lead to better performance than avoidance strategies (Elliott, 1999; Elliott & McGregor, 2001, cf. Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). Yet, the current findings suggest that avoidance strategies may prove highly useful when one evaluates one’s performance at work. Especially for individuals suffering from burnout, evaluating oneself with a protective, defensive strategy seems to be an effective way of emotion-focused coping.

Can the strategy of comparing oneself in a self-protective way also help to combat burnout? We believe that this may indeed be the case. In the first place, the process of burning-out might slow down through increased levels of satisfaction with one’s performance. When individuals in a state of burnout, who tend to be perfectionist (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1981; Fry, 1995; Mitchelson & Burns, 1998), become more satisfied with their performance, they might relax and hence prevent themselves from further burning out. For example, with increasing levels of satisfaction, they might more easily show assertive behavior (e.g., saying ‘no’). Assertiveness is generally seen as important to reduce or prevent burnout (e.g., Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Higgins, 1986; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). In the second place, the persistence of burnout may be influenced by the experience of positive affect. Obviously, feeling happy is in itself a pleasant experience, but several researchers have posited that positive feelings may have long-term consequences as well (Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson, 2000; Myers, 2000; Haidt, 2000; but see also Lyubomirsky, 2000). According to Fredrickson (1998; 2000), positive affect may augment coping resources, including social, physical and intellectual resources, and may stimulate broad-minded coping: It broadens one’s perspective and gives insight into one’s situation. Positive affect may therefore be particularly important for individuals in a state of burnout, whose capacity for creative problem solving and proactive behavior has diminished (Noworol, Zarczynski, Fafrowicz, & Marek, 1993). Longitudinal research would be necessary to examine the long-term effects of self-protective comparisons with self-generated others upon the development of burnout and professional performance.

Analysis of the listed aspects indicates that our two conditions did not differ with respect to the number and the formulation (positive vs. negative) of the qualities that were generated. One might expect that individuals in the self-protection condition would list more aspects than those in the self-enhancement condition, based on the robustness of negative superiority (Brenninkmeijer et al., 2001b). This appeared not to be the case, however,
a finding that is perhaps due to the fact that we requested a minimum of five aspects. Moreover, individuals predominantly formulated their qualities in a positive way (e.g., “respectful”), rather than in a negative way (e.g., “not chaotic”), irrespective of the type of condition they were assigned to. Hence, the number or the formulation of the generated qualities do not seem to constitute the essential difference between the two self-serving kinds of comparison.

A limitation of the present study is that we did not ask our participants whether they indeed engaged in social comparison when asked to list their qualities vis-à-vis others. We do know that only a few participants explicitly referred to other individuals when listing their qualities, but to our opinion, this does not imply that participants generally ignored social comparison information. Whether ratings of oneself vis-à-vis others (i.e., comparative ratings) can be considered as social comparisons, constitutes a controversial issue in social comparison research (see Wood, 1996). Nevertheless, a study by Buunk (1998) suggests that individuals indeed retrieve social comparison information to make comparative ratings. Moreover, a recent study by Buunk, Oldersma et al. (2001) suggests that it is the social comparison component that raises one’s satisfaction: Individuals were more satisfied with their relationship when they had listed dimensions on which their relationship was better than the relationship of most others, compared to a no-comparison condition, in which they had listed dimensions on which their relationship was good.

Another limitation of this study is that we do not know what kind of comparison targets individuals generated. The generated qualities most likely reflect downward comparisons. For example, an individual who lists conscientiousness as a virtue of him or herself in comparison with others apparently considers some colleagues as less conscientious. Because only a small proportion of the participants explicitly referred to less competent others, however, we cannot exclude the possibility that individuals have generated upward comparisons. In the first place, participants may have thought about the characteristics on which they outperform more competent individuals, although none of the participants explicitly reported these kind of comparisons. In the second place, they may have thought about the characteristics that they share with more competent others. In the third place, even when the generated qualities refer to downward comparisons, individuals may have thought of upward others in the process of searching for their qualities. That is, they may have considered a wider range of
comparison targets than those to which their qualities pertain. One participant, for example, wrote between brackets “Well, there are so many good teachers in our school”, before listing his qualities. And of course, it is also possible that participants generated qualities of themselves by making lateral comparisons (i.e., with equally competent others). Future research may want to delve into the specific comparison targets that are activated when individuals reflect upon their qualities vis-à-vis self-generated others.

Despite these limitations, the present study demonstrates that individuals in a state of burnout may benefit from thinking about the dimensions on which they are not doing poorly, rather than about the dimensions on which they are doing well, compared to self-generated others. Comparing in a self-protective way, rather than in a self-enhancing way, increases the satisfaction with their performance at work and fosters positive affect. In light of these findings, we propose that this technique may be applied in the treatment of burnout as a simple and effective tool to promote emotion-focused coping and, possibly, to combat burnout. In the case of burnout, thinking about the ways in which one is ‘not doing poorly’ vis-à-vis others may thus be not such a poor focus, and apparently more adaptive than a focus on ‘doing well’.