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Avoiding Burnout to Preserve Performance

Richard G. McFarland, PhD and Andrea L. Dixon, PhD

Salespeople are subjected to high levels of stress on a day-to-day basis, which, over time, can lead to burnout if they lack sufficient coping resources. Given the major problems associated with burnout, managers and scholars are interested in discovering factors that help salespeople cope with stress and reduce burnout. In our research, we propose that *interpersonal mentalizing* (IM) skills may be effective in reducing salesperson stress and its negative outcomes. Salespeople with greater IM skills are better at regulating their emotions, building work relationships, and understanding what others think. We propose that these skills help salespeople to cope with stress and reduce burnout through a process mediated by active and avoidance coping strategies. Moreover, we believe that those with better IM skills oscillate between active and avoidance coping strategies, a process resulting in more optimal coping.

Professional Selling is Stressful



A professional salesperson fulfills many roles: prospecting, selling, leading team selling efforts, providing after-sales service and support, handling complaints, etc. Given the presence of so many potential stressors in the salesperson's work environment, salespeople can be overwhelmed. This, in turn, can result in physical and mental symptoms of stress, increasing the likelihood of burnout.¹ Burnout resulting from the presence of stressors

overwhelms one's coping ability.

The Interplay Between Interpersonal Mentalizing and Burnout

Interpersonal mentalizing involves "putting yourself in the shoes of others" in order to understand their points of view.² A global entrepreneur and Shark Tank panelist, Mark Cuban, highlights the role of interpersonal mentalizing in dealing with customers: "It is much easier to be nice, to be respectful, to put yourself in your customers' shoes and try to understand how you might help them before they ask for help, than it is to try to mend a broken customer relationship." The preliminary research on interpersonal mentalizing suggests that those with stronger interpersonal mentalizing skills may cope with stress better by managing their social environment, operating with better self-awareness, and regulating their own emotions.³

People who have stronger interpersonal mentalizing skills anticipate others' behaviors and read their intentions because information is less ambiguous and better managed. Stronger interpersonal mentalizing skills help salespeople offer and receive social support from colleagues, which reduces work-related stressors. Thus, we argue that salespeople with better interpersonal mentalization skills are better able to reduce the level of stressors that exist and the level of strains that they feel in their environment, which in turn reduces the chances of burnout occurring.

Coping Responses

Two broad categories of coping strategies to minimize stress are *active coping* and *avoidance coping*. Avoidance coping involves efforts to avoid experiencing the negative emotions associated with the stressful event and can involve actions such as distractions (e.g., watching TV or playing video games), distancing, wishful thinking, tension reduction (e.g., consuming alcohol), self-isolation, and denial.⁴ Avoidance coping is defined as diminishing stressors by avoiding dealing with either the problem situation or the associated negative emotions arising from the problem situation. Active coping strategies focus on actively resolving stressful situations and/or minimizing the harm that stressful situations cause.

Scholars have discussed another approach to coping, *oscillation*, which appears to shape employees' responses to negative situations in the workplace.⁵ Specifically, *oscillation* involves moving between active and avoidance coping strategies, which allows employees to secure the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of each coping strategy. Those with a strong oscillation orientation can switch between active and avoidance coping strategies and use the increased capacity to problem-solve more effectively.

Our theoretical framework predicts that a salesperson's interpersonal mentalizing skills have a direct negative effect on burnout (reducing it), and an indirect effect, mediated by the greater use of *active coping* strategies and the lower use of *avoidance coping* strategies. In the long-run, after working through a thought process and coming up with a plan, the salesperson may feel "back in control" and more able to move forward with this situation as well as other situations on the job.⁶

Research Process

To test our hypotheses, we completed two studies. In Study 1, we collected data from 149 business-to-business salespeople from a U.S. *Fortune* 500 transportation services company operating in both business and consumer markets. When we collected the data, the economy and industry were in a major downturn, reducing the opportunities to escape to a less-stressful job. In Study 1, we tested the direct effects of interpersonal mentalizing on active and avoidance coping and burnout and included a non-self-reported measure of sales performance. We also tested the indirect effects of interpersonal mentalizing through active and avoidance coping on burnout.

In Study 2, we retested the Study 1 model with the addition of oscillation coping. To expand the generalizability of our results, Study 2 involved 215 B2B salespeople representing a broad cross-section of U.S. industries: Financial Services, Health Care, Information Technology, Retailing, Food/Beverage, Manufacturing, Construction, Electrical, Advertising, Automotive, Consulting, Apparel, Engineering, Entertainment, Telecommunications, Energy, Real Estate, Government, Transportation, Chemicals, Careers, Maintenance, Non-profit, Office Equipment, Scientific Equipment, Travel, Education, Furniture, Marine, and Sports.

What We Found

Unexpectedly, in Study 1 we found that interpersonal mentalizing skills had a positive effect on avoidance coping but that avoidance coping had a non-significant effect on burnout. These findings may, however, be indicative of emergent theory that suggests that avoidance coping might not be a universally maladaptive coping strategy. While adaptive coping is likely to be maladaptive if used as a consistent, dominant strategy, when one is overwhelmed with negative emotions and/or ruminating excessively on negative thoughts, temporarily escaping from those negative emotions and/or thoughts may help individuals calm down and keep themselves from otherwise being overwhelmed.⁷ Thus, a more adaptive strategy could be to oscillate between active and avoidance coping strategies, actively working to reduce stressors when coping resources are high, but avoiding those negative thoughts and emotions when individuals become overwhelmed. Thus, we posit a positive relationship between salesperson interpersonal mentalizing skills and the practice of oscillating between active and avoidance coping strategies.

Thus, in Study 2, we also measured the level of oscillation between active and avoidance coping strategies to test this novel theory. The empirical findings from Study 2 support this theory, finding that the relationship between interpersonal mentalizing and avoidance coping is fully mediated by oscillation.

Study 1 reveals that the mechanism by which interpersonal mentalizing skills reduce burnout appears to be both direct and indirect (being mediated through active coping). As we expanded this research in Study 2 to incorporate oscillation (dual-processing coping), we found that the impact of interpersonal mentalizing on burnout is mediated entirely by active coping, avoidance coping and the oscillation process.

We found support for the logic that interpersonal mentalizing helps salespeople cope more effectively with stress, and reduce burnout. Our theory posits that this is the case because interpersonal mentalizing skills help salespeople to better regulate their emotions and have a better understanding of what others think.

Implications for Practice

Hiring salespeople is an expensive proposition. Because burnout can increase turnover, when burnout and therefore turnover are higher, hiring costs occur more frequently. Moreover, when there is turnover, sales territories may be unserved for long periods of time, resulting in higher opportunity costs. In addition, burnout leads to lower levels of customer-oriented selling and lower sales performance. Burnout also takes a harmful mental and physical toll on salespeople causing personal anguish and suffering; thus, burnout is harmful even when it does not lead to turnover. Consequently, hiring salespeople who possess individual characteristics that make them less susceptible to burnout is valuable to sales-based organizations.



Because our study finds that salespeople with better interpersonal mentalization skills experience lower levels of burnout, firms may wish to assess the level of interpersonal mentalization skills that prospective hires possess during the hiring process. Assessing interpersonal mentalization skills is relatively easy since Dietvorst et al.'s (2009) measure has been well validated across a number of studies and is available to be used freely (see end of article reference for access to the scale items). Including the assessment of interpersonal mentalization skills may be important for many sales positions, and particularly important in very high stress selling environments, like residential and commercial real estate.

Sales training programs also have high direct costs and require a significant investment of time by participants. Given that salesperson interpersonal mentalization skills are positively related to the practice of adaptive selling and resulting sales performance, training programs centered on improving one's interpersonal mentalizing skills may have a double benefit: helping salespeople perform better within the buyer-seller interaction and helping salespeople to better cope with stress and reduce burnout. Thus, our research suggests that these types of training programs are likely to be even more beneficial than previously anticipated.

The impact of purposefully oscillating between active and avoidance coping strategies has interesting implications for sales managers. When sales professionals are dealing with stressful selling situations, sales leaders may need to recommend that salespeople actually avoid dealing with some situations for a short period of time. By allowing these representatives to replenish cognitive and emotional resources, they are then better prepared to actively cope with such

situations later. Increased use of “mental health” days among practitioners, coupled with the findings of this research suggests that practitioners may already be signaling the importance of oscillation strategies for coping with work-related stressors.

Recommended Reading

McFarland, Richard G. and Andrea L. Dixon (forthcoming), “The Impact of Salesperson Interpersonal Mentalizing Skills on Coping and Burnout: The Critical Role of Coping Oscillation,” *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*.

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About the Authors

Richard G. McFarland, PhD

Professor and Department Head, ESSEC Business School (Paris)

Dr. Richard G. McFarland (PhD – Georgia Institute of Technology) is on the permanent faculty as a Full Professor of Marketing at ESSEC Business School. Previously, he was a tenured faculty member at West Virginia University and at Kansas State University where he held the L. L.

McAninch Endowed Chair of Business Administration. His research and teaching interests focus on inter-organizational relationship and marketing strategies. More specifically, his research focuses on the role of institutions in driving marketing channels relationships and behaviors; influence tactics and persuasion in personal selling and business-to-business contexts; building trust and trust recovery in business-to-business relationships; and the role of emotional intelligence within sales organizations. His research has appeared in a number of leading journals, including *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, and *Marketing Letters*. He also serves on the editorial review boards of the *Journal of Retailing*, and the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* where he was twice awarded the best reviewer of the year award.

Dr. McFarland has won numerous awards for his research and teaching, including the Ralph Reitz award for the single best teacher of the year in the Business College at Kansas State University, the best single researcher award in the Business College at Kansas State University on two occasions, The Louis Stern Award in 2016 for the most long-term, impactful research in inter-organizational research, the 2020 James M. Comer Award for best contributions to selling & sales management theory, among other awards.

Andrea L. Dixon, PhD

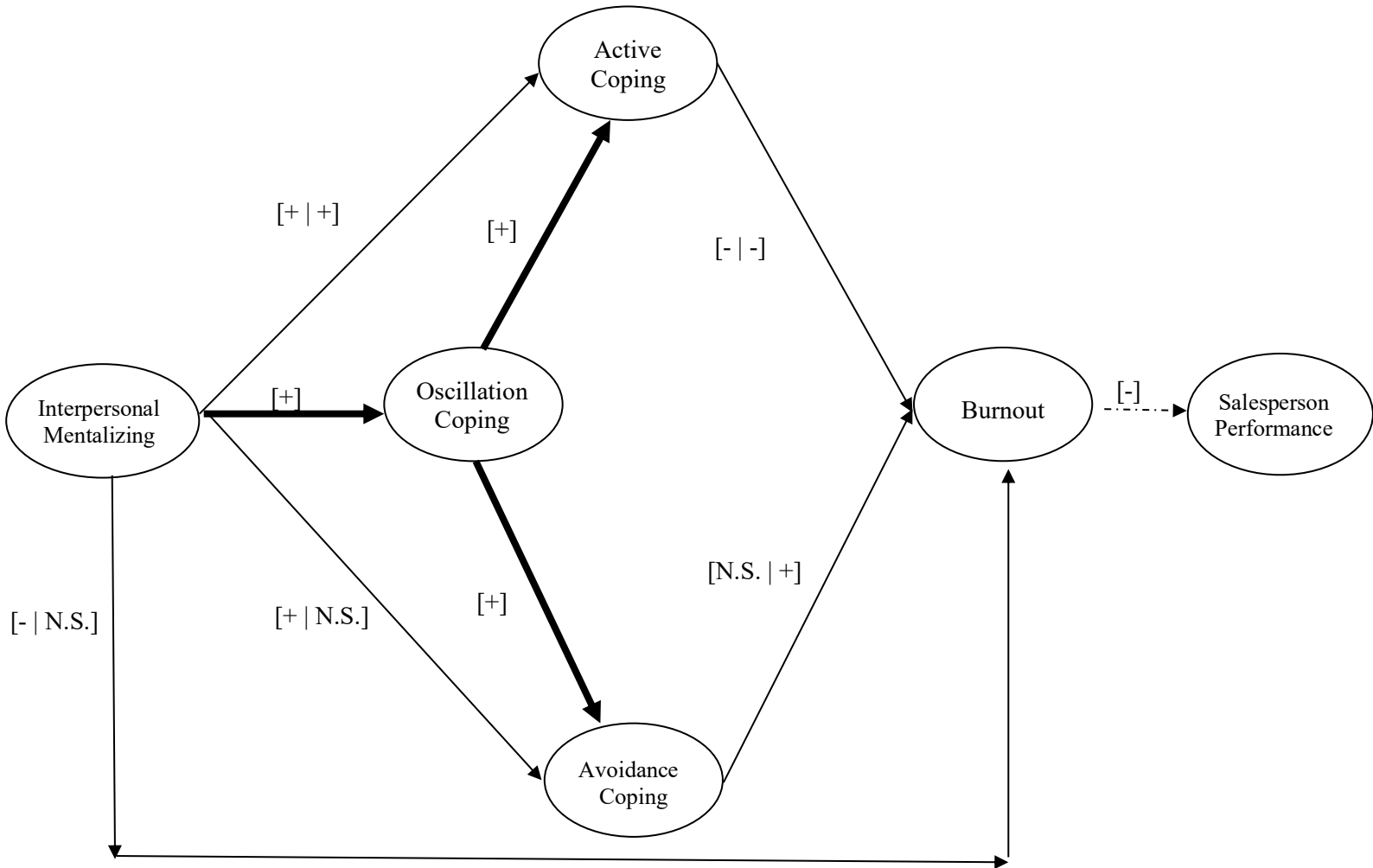
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Dr. Andrea Dixon (PhD – Indiana University) has an industrial background in research, planning, and advertising, and her research interests embrace behavioral issues related to sales, service, and client satisfaction. Dr. Dixon has published in the *Journal of Marketing*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Organizational Science*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *European Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, and other journals. Dixon's research in the *Journal of Marketing* was the 2002 award-winner. She co-authored *Strategic Sales Leadership*, and her work on customer selection appears in *The Oxford Handbook of Sales Management and Sales Strategy*. Dr. Dixon serves on the Editorial Review Boards for the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, the *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* and the *Journal of Marketing Education*. She is also an Ad Hoc Reviewer for the *Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.


Dr. Dixon has won numerous teaching awards, including the Excellence in Teaching Award from the American Marketing Association Sales SIG, the Hankamer School of Business Teaching Excellence award, and Baylor University's Cornelia Marschall Smith award. In addition to teaching PhD, master- and undergraduate-level students, she shares her research


through both keynote addresses and executive trainings. As a member of Duke University's Global Learning Resource Network for Executive Education, Dr. Dixon has addressed executives in London, Hong Kong, Mumbai, Mexico City, Dubai, Hyderabad, Paris and throughout the United States. Dr. Dixon currently serves as President of the University Sales Center Alliance.

Visual Summary of Study Relationships
(Study 1 & Study 2)



Study 1 and Study 2 Hypothesized relationships 

Study 1 only relationship 

Study 2 only Hypothesized relationships 

[Study 1 Std. Loading | Study 2 Std. Loading; N.S.=Not Significant]



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