

Rampe? Reicht! Season 1 Episode 7: Disabled through (work)stress

SR: ramp?

tier: enough!

SR: 20 minutes podcast about ..

tier: how work can make you sick and disabled

SR: I'm SchwarzRund and am currently writing on a book where that is also a theme that occurs with a protagonist

tier: i'm simo tier and work made me sick and disabled (laughs) but i also do other things, no paid work anymore, but I'm working on my art and crafty things

SR: nice! Yes, exactly our topic today is stress in professional life and how stress can be the trigger for disabilities, restrictions, mental illnesses and so on. we're going to talk a lot about our own lives today, but of course the whole thing also has a higher level, maybe we'll talk about it at some point, but I still want to start with a little quote in order to warm us up for the topic. it's from the book Grenzenlos und Unverschämt (Limitless and Outrageous) by May Ayim. she writes: "Racism is often a direct, more frequently even a subtle stress factor for people of African origin. In the old like in the new states of Germany discrimination and violence against migrants and Black Germans has become meanwhile so common and obvious that nobody can see past it. violent clashes are but only the tip of the iceberg. no less dangerous and deep are the more subtle forms of disregard and exclusion."

tier: wow!

SR: yes! that is from the essay "White Stress and Black Nerves", but she talked about discrimination, social exclusions and how they represent stress in general. yes, that as a little introduction. we want to talk little more about you, simo.

tier: yes, we can do that.

SR: tell us what you used to do professionally.

tier: yes not many people know this, but i am actually a trained cook! Even before my training I used to work a lot in gastronomy, as like a waiter and also in the kitchen and then I attended a gastronomy school and got educated there.

SR: in which country was that?

tier: that was in finland, not in germany. and then I worked several years in several different countries as a cook and then and yeah, that pretty much drained me, I always call it that i basically had a burnout ..

SR: before we go there, only briefly, because many don't really know, could you tell us what a day or a week as a cook looks like?

tier: (laughs)

SR: yes, I think we all only know the tv-chefs and think everyone is wearing fancy clothes and cooking a few hours a day and then eating good leftovers

tier: nope, that would be nice! well sometimes you do eat tasty things. but I tried not to work full-time for most part, and my non-full-time jobs were 50 to 60 hours a week.

SR: OMFG! ok .. then what is working full time? the full time? so all the time? (laughs)

tier: yes, i know that people work around 70 to it's totally ... (the dog Monkey barks)
yes exactly, Monkey, it is completely inhumane and that is ... (Monkey gets upset and SR tries to persuade him to lie down)

tier: yes, the absurd thing about this job is that it is celebrated the way people work an incredible amount of 13, 14 hours a day. bing, completely like drained in the end, or that's never really shown that one's exhausted, but that one is like super cool and able to do it all! and that didn't work for me at all although I partially used to really enjoy doing my job, the problem is just that... depending on where you work, but in the restaurant it can get very stressful. like I was really timed by my bosses how fast i was doing different things. and where I worked the longest, it was also a very very .. that was a successful restaurant which was very, very well attended and it was mainly on the weekend really really busy and everything had to go super, super fast and that was very exhausting. the work is not just that one's working in the evening when the restaurant is open , but you start working in the morning to do all the preparations, so you kind of work for a whole day, seven, eight hours to prepare to then go into the hot phase where you work for several hours super fast under extreme pressure. we had to work super-precisely and that all the time while standing!

SR: And the cleaning also had to happen sometime, right?

tier: yes exactly, at the end of the evening everything is tidied up and cleaned and washed and that all is part of it.

SR: and so what I know from friends who have also worked as cooks - absolutely using the past tense here for sure - is that the consumption of alcohol and drug is not quite so ..

tier: (laughs) yes, that's no news for most, people know that I or I always say it, so if you didn't know then you'll know now that I'm a recovering alcoholic, or that I've struggled with drug addiction and that was just in the high phase. at that time without alcohol and weed, which was especially my problem, i couldn't work! somehow you have to try to come down from such a work day as soon as possible in order to sleep in order to be able to manage the next day.

SR: yes, of course that makes total sense! first one would mybe not think about weed because it doesn't push, but you probably get the push through the work itself.

tier: yes exactly! well i know that amfetamines and things like that ar also common in gastronomy. I don't know any person who didn't develop some kind of drug problem in this job.

SR: wow! okay, so the setting is practically you have done this training in finland, where your parents are from, you were born in Germany, but didn't have the german citizenship for a long time.

tier: no, exactly!

SR: you did your training in finland and then you worked in different countries in the kitchen.

tier: yes, exactly.

SR: ok! and you worked twelve hours a day or something

tier: yes, exactly, I also think it's important to say that I didn't work in germany as a cook, because the payment in germany is much worse, So that adds up to that, people won't get rich from it. in the countries, I only worked in the Nordic countries, the pay

was much better, so that was also, that was also a conscious decision, because I had already worked in Germany in gastronomy before the training and I knew that the payment is so much worse (laughs), so at least I had that, at least I had dough (laughs). enough money but zero time to do anything with it except buy drugs.

SR: .. except buying drugs

tier: yes

SR: okay okay okay, I think that was important to briefly explain because not everyone knows cooks in their lives and..t

tier: yes

SR: I think we all have a very nice conception of the profession that has little to nothing to do with reality.

tier: mhm, right, yes.

SR: a screaming Gordon Ramsay is not an exception, but the result of a culinary culture, cooking culture.

tier: yes!

SR: yes exactly, Thanks a lot for this. and how did it continue then with this stress in your life?

tier: oh yes, then at some point it just, at some point I stopped, then i moved to Germany and then it became clear: I can't do job no longer. I was totally burned out! then I stopped completely to drink and doing drugs too, but I was mentally, physically, emotionally completely completely burned out and what's added is that before I got into this profession, I already was having many physical problems and limitations and illnesses, i was constantly sick, even during this phase where I was working as a chef I was often sick, that was also a problem then because "cooks shouldn't be sick", So I had a lot different things..

SR: So by "cooks mustn't be sick" you mean you were allowed ... in the office you can go in with a cold, so in the current corona times we don't like to hear that, but let's be honest

tier: (laughs) exactly, yes

SR: as a cook that was simply a .. a no-go!

tier: yes, if you have a cold or especially if you have any stomach problems and so on you can't go to work, first of all, then everyone else gets sick and, secondly, what is more important, that you are working with food. it's a good thing, but it is not perceived well by the superiors if someone is sick frequently. and then there is this psychological stress that you actually .. you have to, your body has to constantly function.

SR: with a 100-hour work week, of course! (Irony) and then you had several more serious illnesses and now you have arrived at a completely different diagnosis.

tier: exactly, so my diagnosis is ME (myalgic encephalomyelitis), I also believe that I had this disease already or disability much longer and that it has now gotten worse, because it's an illness that gets worse with time, or it can get worse. but a lot of these things contributed.. so i have a super super super bad immune system and through the stress the immune system could also never recover and is still super broken. and the interesting thing is not only the physical, but also this trauma. I am, which partly has very shame-filled side because it is so absurd and sounds trivial: I'm traumatized

because of stress! so when i experience stress in life, I get physically much worse and then I will get totally triggered. a good example was a few weeks ago when I helped you with a thing, SchwarzRund wrote a text and I translated it into English. and it should all go very quickly, which was okay, more time would have been better, but I can help with short notice. so then i did the translation quickly and it was not exhausting or anything, but I got somehow triggered because it had to be done quickly. I had to get up at a certain time to get it done, and then I was feeling very very bad for several days simply because this work stress was somehow triggered.

SR: I think that's important for you to say what you mean by "you felt very bad", because everyone might feel a bit bad after a little stress, one lies on the couch to rest, it's a regular reaction of the human body or of an animal's body or .. erverybody!

tier: yes, exactly, and i think that describes this disability I have really well, what this stress triggers is first of all this traumatic reaction: nightmares, headache, just .. depression, physically it does that I feel really nauseous, I've had some problems for several years with my digestion and I havewhat is that called .. irritable bowel syndrome, and so, my digestion is totally down, then i have chronic pain, all of those things are triggered, I could almost not use my hands anymore and so on. I'm just so drained that I actually just want to sleep but sleep is not restful. therefore it always takes several days

SR: or weeks

tier: or weeks for me to recover from it. and that was now a small job that took three hours!

SR: yes and that shows how stressful work is also so continuously and always ... it didn't just destroy this one job for you and you couldn't change for another job but the illness has made work in general and anything that feels like work, no matter how much you like or hate to do something, it's made it something that triggers your flair ups.

tier: exactly! yes, that also has something to do with it, I haven't been able to work anymore, since over five years now, I am also classified as unable to work and so, but also when I do things like I co-organize the queer zinefest berlin, or I'm working on a new zine or something, that's all work and that can also trigger all of that and maybe it's interesting to say that it has been almost ten years now that I stopped working as a cook, so this time .. so it's not a few years ago, but it's really .. next year it will be ten years.

SR: And before now, all left-wing potatoes enthusiastically clap their hands and think to themselves: "yes, work is stupid anyway, whoo!"

tier: laughs

SR: It's not that simple! So from a cultural studies perspective capitalism is shit, but work, in the sense of "I do something and through it there is a result that I can look at or can imagine, and I did it and possibly that other people may notice it and say thank you for doing this thing" is yes, something really great for creating an identity and contributes to one's self-esteem!

tier: yes

SR: It's very difficult to create self-worth for yourself without a strong monotheistic faith. so there is a god, and he thinks it's really great when I cook this soup or so. or

not having sex or having sex or whatever.., so from such everyday decisions it's made into something that has incredibly moral overall social value and then I 'm not working, because it means two systems that people have created to generate value for themselves which are very difficult to replace fall away. And that's something about what we talked a lot at the beginning, that you also .. that it's not just nice that you're not able to work anymore.

tier: no, exactly

SR: but you should find it nice and actually be grateful for it and ... (irony)

tier: (laughs) yes, I'm also always saying that I do find it politically and so on very, very good and also that .. yes, what I always say: migration also plays a role in that. A couple of years ago I applied for german citizenship and it worked out and that has helped a lot in the sense that I am more or less socially taken care of in this country and ... somehow it is something that I fought for: that I even though I'm not being productive, eben though I'm this disabled person who isn't able to do all the things, I can anyway feel valuable and good. and another thing is that I have this other "lovely" diagnosis of self-hate, I hate myself quite a lot and I'm working hard on that, but all of this together feels sometimes really insurmountable.

SR: yes. and it's hard to try to trick these issues, because they're all mutually obstructing each other.

tier: exactly, yes!

SR: yes, thanks for sharing that. that is definitely .. the problem is: we get to know people only in just that moment

tier: yes

SR: and people who know you now don't necessarily know all these other things. and we'll talk about that later in other episodes, or we may have already talked about it, depending on how we'll put the season together, but your diagnosis falls also in this cluster of hysteria-diagnoses

tier: exactly

SR: and yes ... exactly

tier: yes, because the people simply don't believe that this illness exists and that one can't be so so very disabled ... (irony)

SR: yes and that also means that people don't ask themselves "who were you actually before?", but if you now are hysterical, you must have always been a little hysterical

tier: yes exactly (laughs)

SR: and I'm always thinking a little that there is a version of you that i I never met.

tier: yes!

SR: So a person who would have said "oh come on, Melin@, you're working from home, that sounds really comfortable" and I would have thought "oh my god shut up" (both laugh)

SR: or would have brought me soufflés from work.

tier: hmm, exactly, yes .. (both interrupt each other)

SR: go ahead!

tier: (get's choked up, annoyed) oh god! do you have anything from .. oh god, sorry. puuuuh. do you have something to tell? your experiences with stress or work stress, has that changed something in your life?

SR: yes but with me it has a lot to do with migration together with a sense of work ethic and that is very difficult to decide anything self-determined. I think meanwhile everyone knows the narrative that you as a migrant have an unbelievable burden to achieve things that your parents couldn't have, especially if you have a poverty gap between your country of origin and where you migrated to, right? and the dominican republic was a then, that was before the economic boost when i was born. at that time the dominican republic was incredibly poor. so back then haiti was the poorest country in the world, we share an island, our .. of course, the dominican republic always sucked historically, that's why we had more money. because being shitty is rewarded with money in capitalism. (sarcasm) but it's still an incredibly poor country and my dad belongs to the second poorest class in that country. and that just put pressure on me: I'm the one child who has a white parent, he has two other children, he was together with a Black woman. i'm that one kid what grew up in the west, they must really achieve something, right? and that never pronounced so blatantly, but it was always there somehow. and then I started this training program at airbus to become an aircraft builder

tier: wow

SR: against everything that I was good at, already in the seventh, eighth grade my first short story was published. I'm very glad we can't find it now, because (both laugh) i don't think it was good! I already wrote volumes of poetry back then which I somehow printed myself on the printer and forced on people, but then I figured out that I was also otherwise good enough at school to be admitted to the airbus program and there i noticed that you can stretch how far your job is from who you are, but you can't stretch whether your psyche can take it and my very traumatic childhood had, i had no foundation, so I didn't have any basis on which I could stand on in order to endure the stress.

tier: yes

SR: at home was absolute horror for me and then my training was absolute horror.

tier: mmhm

SR: and in between there was no time because aircraft builder: massive emotional stress! you just talked about accuracy, that's in aircraft, well spacecraft construction it is even more precise, but there is nothing else in the world what is more precise than us in mechanics, so everything else works with higher tolerances, you can google that if you find that interesting, otherwise don't (both laugh), we work very precisely! and then your instructor always stands behind you. I say yes extra instructor (male form) because didn't have one non-male instructor, and he says basically "if you don't choose the correct screw now, then people will die!"

tier: oh, wow (laughs flabbergasted)

SR: so you're basically 16 and it's your first real job.

tier: that sounds actually terribly stressful (both laugh)

SR: it's really awful! the training used to be a lot longer, but then it became broken down to three and a half years and that's the consequence. well anyway: after a year I quit the whole thing because I was so extremely depressed that even the bosses told me "we thing you're terribly nice, but you won't be happy here."

tier: yes

SR: I left then. Abitur (graduating from high school was also super stressful but at some point I have just learned that work is always both for me: I can find myself at work because I really like to structure things myself and I like to decide things by myself and get myself to achieve things, because I have always done well. I had no parents at home who would have done those things for me, I don't even know what it's like when your homework is checked. I only experienced later as an adult that it's a thing that people do. it means I always sorted all my things by myself and if that's how I'm allowed to do my job, I'm incredible happy. no matter how stressed I am. but I can practically all the time revalue, re-evaluate what I do why and how and why I definitely would never do it again (laughs) and can almost always learn something out of my stress now. and that's why I think SchwarzRund works meanwhile really well for me, because I put a lot of work into it in order to cope with it. and that has been a long journey, I am very easily stressed, I just am severely traumatized. therefore university is really difficult for me.

tier: yes

SR: because it's a totally disempowering one space is where I have very little influence. Exactly and that's just ... yes, that's my experience with stress and work! and otherwise I now always insist on surcharges! I got that from a great activist at some point, whose name I won't name now, because it maybe not be good advertising.. just add a stress surcharge! white people want to get advice on racism? nice! 50 euros more! an offer was poorly structured and is therefore unnecessarily labourious? nice! so and so much extra euros! so just that in the moment when I have stress, if I know in the moment "you have this stress now, but that brings you so and so many euros and that enables you to do this and that? immediate stress reduction! I don't know why, but it's okay! let them pay!

tier: no, I believe you and I think that's a very, very good intervention in the small form.

SR: yes, definitely!

tier: so that one gets that for themselves, and I think that is also the frustrating thing that I'm noticing when you are at university that you don't get that.

SR: nope!

tier: you're exposed to the stress and the Yes..

SR: stress is practically part of the "good tone"

tier: oh god yes! yes I think that would be a plea, not to glorify wage labor, or to glorify productivity, I have less and less of a problem with that, I have the problem with the glorifying of how stressed and how busy people are. to always say "ah, I have no time, oh I am so stressed I'm so .. so busy" that that is somehow seen as a good value. I get co-stressed rather quickly and then I feel sorry for the people when they are very stressed, like I see it more as something, really not something worth striving for!

SR: yes. I have an idea who we can recommend today, we struggled a bit with that, but I thought of someone!

tier: ok?

SR: so on the one hand we of course of course May Ayim's book Grenzenlos und Unverschämpt, simply because she has researched a lot on the subject of stress and

you should definitely read it. it was published by Orlanda and costs I think 16 euro 50, although my copy cost too much, I don't know what that means now because I bought it in 2002. (both laugh)

SR: Maybe the cost und publisher has changed!

tier: who knows? Yes OK.

SR: but I have another recommendation: we both like the great british bake-off a lot, but there is even a lot about it to hate and that, but also other things in the food industry a former participant criticizes. you can find her at @rubyt.tandoh, but we'll also put it in the show notes. Ruby Tandoh. and she has written two books and various great articles on the topic food industry, the chef culture, but also in general food production laws and so on. and how that together with capitalism doesn't get so nice.

tier: very interesting!

SR: a very very cool person, she also writes a lot on the subjects of racism and classicism and eating disorders and food culture

tier: wow, I'm looking forward to it!

SR: that was our episode on work and stress, stress and illness and how disability later can get marked by work stress!

tier: yes! and so we won't get too stressed out by this podcast, you can suport us on patreon.

SR: in case that doesn't financially stress you.

tier: (laughs) exactly!

SR: and the next episode comes out in two weeks

tier: you can find out about that on youtube or via social media

SR: you can find me everywhere as SchwarzRund, @SchwarzRund

tier: and you will find me as @simo_tier, sometimes still with an underlined behind it. (note: now everywhere as @simo_tier)

SR: we are: crazy

tier: disabled

SR: sick

tier: stressed

SR: deeply relaxed

tier: queer

SR: pan

tier: migrated

SR: Black

tier: and this podcast

SR: it is as well!