

**PSYCHOSOMATIC CONSEQUENCES OF TEACHERS' OCCUPATIONAL STRESS**

Anna Romanowska-Tołoczko

University School of Physical Education, Wrocław, Poland

**Annotation.** The need to adapt to the ever-increasing socio-professional requirements carries many risks to human health, both in somatic and psychological aspects. Strong stress associated with work leads to the occurrence of burnout syndrome. Persons performing so called aid professions, where teachers belong to a special group, are usually vulnerable to this syndrome. The aim of this paper is to present the causes, course and consequences of teacher burnout and to highlight the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon, indicating possible corrective and preventive actions. Among the that contribute to burnout important are environmental , organizational and subjective factors. Subjective factors like professional training and personality dispositions, are treated as the primary determinants of resistance or susceptibility of individuals to stress. They can intensify or protect against burning out. The lack of ability to counter stress is considered crucial in the formation and accumulation of burnout symptoms.

**Keywords:** teachers, stress, burnout, health, prevention.

**Introduction**

The need to adapt to the ever-increasing socio-professional requirements carries many risks to human health. Both in terms of somatic and mental, additionally it has a negative impact on humans' social relationship with the environment.

Strong stress associated with work leads to the occurrence of burnout syndrome. Persons performing so called aid professions, including teachers are a special risk group are usually vulnerable to this syndrome.

According to Maslach burnout is a sequential process. It begins with emotional exhaustion resulting from aggravating the recipients requirements, and also from excess of duties and poor working atmosphere. With inadequate attempts to deal with this burden, it comes to a depersonalization with a defensive character, increasingly interferes with interpersonal relationships. In result leading to further failures, giving a feeling of professional worthlessness [1].

Another way to define this phenomenon is the concept of Kędracka, which states that burnout is a process of inevitable destruction that takes place in the psyche of people excessively exploiting their strength in their professional relations. It appears suddenly or slowly as physical and emotional exhaustion, the symptoms are noticeable not only in the workplace but also by family and social situations [2].

**Aim of the study**

The aim of this paper is to present the causes, course and consequences of teacher burnout and to highlight the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon. It presents the opportunities to help, but also points out the need for prophylaxis, because there is a real chance to prevent burnout. This is particularly important in the individual and social context. For the individual and social environment it is preferable to take preventive then remedial actions.

**Causes of burnout**

Unfavourable, stressful working conditions are considered one among many direct and indirect causes of burnout. Nowadays, professional work combines the execution of tasks, problem solving, and other duties inscribed in a given profession. No wonder that stress is a common phenomenon. It is important, to take into account the role of subjective factors, especially the proper professional training and appropriate disposal of personality, in addition to organizational environmental factors [3].

Psychosocial factors are also mentioned as determinants of burnout, which include socio-demographic features like age, experience, gender, education, marital status and personality dispositions. These are often regarded as the primary determinants of the resistance or susceptibility to stress. Personality dispositions may intensify or protect against burnout [4], therefore, it is extremely important to choose the right team and prepare it to fulfil professional roles. In addition to the expertise, personal and social ability that is currently defined as competence or emotional intelligence is needed [5].

Thus, in the genesis of burnout increasingly emphasizes the subjective factors. The most important is considered the lack of professionalism, weak interpersonal and organizational skills. According to Tucholska [3] personal features and social skills in a particular way determine the teachers good fit for the job, protecting against burnout. Lack of those skills carries a risk of exhaustion, discouragement, disappointment, or excessive distance themselves work, accompanied by the whole variety of psychosomatic symptoms and consequences in social relations.

There are two types of burnout - active and passive – showing opposing symptoms. Active type is manifested by an increase in aggressiveness and anger, a tendency to annoyance and motor restlessness, while the second is characterized by a decrease in activity, social isolation and withdrawal.

### **The course and symptoms of burnout**

Symptoms of professional burnout is cumulative in nature, therefore, it can be subdivided into three stages:

**The first stage** - the stage is a warning, in which the symptoms chronic flu, headaches, sense of irritation etc. Getting back to the proper functioning is not very difficult, often just a short break or a temporary reduction in workload is enough.

**The second stage** - occurs when the syndrome lasts longer. The characteristic symptoms include irritation outbursts, derogatory referring to other, poor performance. Overcoming these symptoms requires a longer rest and support from other people (friends, family)

**The third stage** - occurs when the syndrome is chronic and physical, mental and psychosomatic symptoms develop (described below). The therapeutic help is difficult and not always give positive results [6].

Symptoms and behaviours resulting from the increasing burnout have been separated into the following groups: emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioural.

Frequent somatic symptoms include headache, dizziness, nausea, muscle pain, sleep disorders, loss or excessive appetite, chronic fatigue, general weakness, frequent and long colds, digestive disorders (peptic ulcer disease), hypertension, heart disease, exacerbation of pre-existing ailments.

Emotional symptoms include depression or mood swings, increased tension, anxiety, fear, decreased emotional control, increased annoyance and anger, sensitivity, emotional coldness, lack of empathy.

Cognitive symptoms include: hopelessness, feelings of powerlessness and failure, low self-esteem, inability to concentrate, forgetfulness, difficulty decision making, stiffness and schematic thinking, decreased tolerance, guilt, cynical and hostile attitude to the people, suspicion, pessimism.

Behavioural symptoms include: impulsiveness, a tendency to aggressive behaviour, interpersonal conflicts, social isolation and withdrawal, continuous complains, abuse of sedatives, alcohol, cigarettes, malnutrition or overeating, slowing the pace of work, resistance to change, poor management, sometimes reduced efficiency. These symptoms appear on an individual level.

Another group are the symptoms on the interpersonal level, including: annoyance, sensitivity, coldness and lack of emotion, low empathy, cynical and dehumanised perception of the recipient, negative and pessimistic view of the recipient, identifying them as insulting and degrading, aura of grandeur, aura of equity, suspiciousness, projection.

The list of burnout symptoms identified by the Burisch is somewhat different. It focuses on the description of the following categories:

1. Warning signs of the initial phase.
2. The reduced level of commitment that exists in relation to others, in relation to the work, and as increased claims.
3. Emotional reactions - guilt, depression, feeling of emptiness, aggression, inability to compromise, negativity, mistrust.
4. Reduction in mental abilities, motivation, creativity.
5. Shortness of emotional and social life.
6. Psychosomatic reactions.
7. Negative attitudes towards life, existential despair [7].

Analysis of the interaction of school teachers diagnosed with burnout shows that they much less frequent enter into close relationships with pupils, provide them with a smaller pool of knowledge, praise much less, and accept their ideas to a lesser extent. The behaviour of teachers with severe burnout syndrome appear to reduce the tendency of direct contact with students, aversion to extra-curricular activities and providing assistance to students, impatience, lack of tolerance. Limitation of dialogue and discussion, the tendency to supervising students, and not cooperating with them. There is also a reluctance to contact the parents and formalization of parent teacher meetings which provokes parents to criticism and contribute to increased stress and tension of teachers.

In relations with co-workers people with burnout syndrome exhibit different ways of withdrawing from work, from its roles and social life. They may take the form of absenteeism, reduced working time, low efficiency and performance. Fulfilling duties the teacher takes a minimalist approach - doing just what is currently required. Shows a reluctance toward novelties and requirements. One does not feel connected with the workplace, or with colleagues. The relationship with them can be hurtful, which largely determines inadequate emotional control. Resulting in increased irritability, impatience and hostility. Such a person plays a disintegrating role in a team clearly due to a larger conflictuality, but also because of the negative attitude towards work and responsibilities, showing a increase in demanding attitude. The presence of people with burnout symptoms may contribute to adverse changes in interpersonal relations within the team [8].

Burnout also has an impact on personal and family life of the people in this condition. The feeling of exhaustion and discouragement combined with increased irritability and of conflict, negatively affects the interpersonal relationships within the marriage and family.

### Ways to help people with burnout syndrome

The intervention strategies that can be used to help people with the burnout syndrome include measures arranged on three levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal and organizational.

**Intrapersonal strategies** are designed to even out the stress. That goal is achievable inter alia by learning and using the various relaxation techniques and good leisure management. Continuous training is also recommended in order to improve professional skills, thus increasing competence. It is also important to formulate realistic goals and focus on the task, rather than focusing on emotions, especially when the source of stress has an external source.

**Interpersonal strategies** use professional support groups, as well as the help of family and friends. Emotional support, although its efficiency may vary, is considered to be an important part of cancelling a high level of stress.

**Organizational strategies** are efforts to change the situation at the workplace. The process is rather difficult and mainly depends on the employer, which, through proper team management can make beneficial reorganizations [6].

### **Summary and conclusions**

The burnout leads to adverse consequences of mental, physical, interpersonal skills. It also has a much wider socio-economic impact. Therefore, it is important to develop a system of preventive measures against the occurrence of this phenomenon and deploy it to professional teachers' education.

In the occurrence and accumulation of burnout symptoms it is essential how a person perceives professional reality and what preventive actions are taken. Because it not so much burns out the professional role, but the way one operates within it. This way is defined on the one hand by the perception of duties and commitments, and on the other by an assessment of the abilities to meet them [3].

Ability to cope with difficult situations is, on the one hand, determined by individual predispositions and its resistance to stress, but on the other hand, one can also impact his improvement. Therefore, the system of teachers' education should include workshops for dealing with stress. Their main objective is to enrich the internal resources and improving the preventive skills of the future teachers. It is vital for the students to teach them relaxation techniques, assertiveness, social and emotional skills. The academic education, in addition to learning about the causes of burnout should also cover essential practical activities, such as training and exposure, so that future teachers will be able to improve their countermeasure skills.

However, polish pedagogical colleges lack this type of activities what proves that there are no opportunities to develop personal predispositions of students. In the study conducted by the author of this publication we can see that colleges realize psycho-social preparation of students in insufficient way. The effect of this is, among others, insufficient educational competencies which are necessary in this profession [9]. Lack of abilities in the area of interpersonal relationships causes inability to deal with difficult situations with pupils what gives teachers feeling of their own inefficiency making stress even worse. It is acknowledged that frequent dealing with difficult situations and high levels of frustrations that accompany everyday duties in connection with inability to overcome stress are basic symptoms of primary professional burnout.

### **References**

1. Zimbardo Ph. *Psychology and Life*. Warsaw, 2002, pp. 512-513.
2. Kędracka E. Occupational burnout of teachers. *Vocational School [Szkoła Zawodowa]*, 1998, vol.4, pp. 40-45.
3. Tucholska S. *Occupational burnout of teachers*. Lublin 2009, pp. 222-224.
4. Tucholska S. The risk of burnout in the teaching profession. *School of Psychology [Psychologia w Szkole]*, 2004, vol.2, pp. 95-108.
5. Goleman D. *Emotional intelligence in practice*. Poznan, 1999, pp. 47-50.
6. Sekułowicz M. *Occupational burnout of teachers working with people intellectually disabled*. Wrocław. 2002, pp. 47-48.
7. Gaida W. *Mental fatigue in context of occupational burnout*, Zielona Góra 1998, p. 167-178.
8. Sęk H. *Occupational burnout of teachers*, Torun 2000, pp. 99-114.
9. Romanowska-Tołłoczko A., Kajdan-Kosiorek K. Preparing teachers in the area of social skills as a factor that lowers the risk of professional burnout. *Pedagogics [Pedagogika]*, 2011, vol.3, pp. 14-21.

---

**Information about the author:**

**Romanowska- Tolloczko Anna:** anna.romanowska-tolloczko@awf.wroc.pl; University School of Physical Education ; Banacha 11, 51-617, Wroclaw, Poland.

---

**Cite this article as:** Anna Romanowska-Tolloczko. Psychosomatic consequences of teachers' occupational stress. *Pedagogics, psychology, medical-biological problems of physical training and sports*, 2013, vol.6, pp. 74-77. doi:10.6084/m9.figshare.715703

The electronic version of this article is the complete one and can be found online at: <http://www.sportpedagogy.org.ua/html/arhive-e.html>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en>).

---

Received: 28.04.2013  
Published: 30.06.2013