



PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING, Vol. 2, (2), pp.29-37 (E), April 2016

(International Refereed Journal of Education)

E-ISSN: 2395-7344, P-ISSN: 2320-9526.

Abstracted and **Indexed** in: Google Scholar, ResearchBib, International Scientific Indexing (ISI), Scientific Indexing Services (SIS), WorldCDRJ; **Impact Factor: 0.787**, Web: <http://pedagogyoflearning.com/>

Recommended Citation:

Panda, S. (2016). Occupational stress among teachers: understanding its causes, effects and some coping strategies. *Pedagogy of Learning*, 2 (2), 29-37.

Occupational Stress among Teachers: Understanding its Causes, Effects and Some Coping Strategies

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Abstract: *A growing body of evidence links job-related stress to mental ill health. Its symptoms contribute to absenteeism, lost productivity, and physical ill-health, including particularly coronary disease. Though the study has found that teachers and professors had significantly lower rates of arteriosclerotic heart disease than physicians, lawyers, pharmacists, and insurance agents, recent studies suggest that teachers face high and perhaps growing levels of occupational stress. The burnout syndrome is described as emotional exhaustion which is the result of chronic stress and particularly occurs in people who are in contact with other people professionally. The most frequently stated causes of stress that have been found are working with national curriculum, teacher appraisal, lack of authority and sanctions for disciplining students, threats of school closure, media portrayal of teachers and inability to reconcile different roles i.e. of teacher, guide, counselor and social worker, conflict at home and work, attack on pride by rude pupils, financial pressures, and declining status in the community. It has been found in several studies that stress and illness have a direct relationship. In order to prevent them from dire consequences of stress they must be trained to cope with it through exercise, meditation, walking, listening to music, yoga, social networking, etc. The policy makers, stake holders, educationists, administrators, managements must provide congenial working environments, less work load, job securities, maximum provision of facilities, etc.*

Keywords: *Occupational Stress, Burnout, Absenteeism, Deep breathing, Yoga, Meditation, Time Management*

Introduction

Marked increase in competition throughout the world has resulted in work pressures in all professions. These work pressures in different occupations create stress in employees and stress related with job or occupation is called occupational stress. It can be defined as harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirement of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or need of worker. It is a chronic disease caused by conditions in workplace that negatively affects an individual's performance and over-all well being of his body and mind. These effects include irritability, anger, fatigue, anxiety, depression, headaches, loss of concentration, sleep disturbances, persistent negative thoughts, low

appetite, gastrointestinal problems, musculoskeletal problems, blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, cancer, suicide, etc. to highlight a few from the exhaustive list (Nagra & Arora, 2013).

Teachers are expected not only to work as pedagogues but they also need to perform duties of an administrator, resource person, innovator, counselor, facilitator and manager of knowledge which leads to high level of stress. A growing body of evidence links job-related stress to mental ill health. Its symptoms contribute to absenteeism, lost productivity, and physical ill-health, including particularly coronary disease. Though Kasl (1984) found that teachers and professors had significantly lower rates of arteriosclerotic heart disease than physicians, lawyers, pharmacists, and insurance agents, recent studies suggest that teachers face high and perhaps growing levels of occupational stress.

The burnout syndrome is described as emotional exhaustion which is the result of chronic stress and particularly occurs in people who are in contact with other people professionally. It comprises three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack of personal accomplishment/achievement (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). According to stress and coping model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), when a person is confronted with a stressful event he/she is involved in a process of primary appraisal. Whether the state will be considered as stressful is dependent on the person and the situation. Then, the person makes a secondary consideration. In this process, the individual engages in a cognitive assessment of personal and environmental reserves to cope with the stressful event. In other words, the primary assessment refers to assessing the stressor of the situation, while the secondary refers to assessing the ability of individuals to cope with the situation. Both types are cognitive assessment procedures which rely heavily on personal assessment.

Chan (1998) found that the type of coping strategies affects teachers' emotional health. Similar results were reported in Sweden, where the use of active coping strategies seemed to mitigate the negative effects of teacher work stress (Brenner, Sorbom, & Wallius, 1985). The social and emotional support by significant others has also been shown to benefit teachers under pressure (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996). Instead, the avoidance of the problem can aggravate pressure (Chan, 1998). A survey of Griva and Joekes (2003) showed that the use of problem-oriented strategies was associated with lower levels of depersonalization while high levels of meaning, problem-oriented strategies and environmental risk were associated with high levels of personal achievement.

Causes of Occupational Stress

In a Swedish study, Wahlund and Nerell (1976) found that the most frequently stated causes of stress were large class size, incompatible and excessive demands on teachers, and frequent school reforms. From the outside, teaching seems all together a different job with summer vacations, winter vacations and spring breaks. But considering everything that a teacher has to go through everyday all these days off do not do much to get a teacher back in the right frame of mind. According to a research, the major causes of teacher stress are:

General Factors

The most frequently stated causes of stress that have been found are working with national curriculum, teacher appraisal, lack of authority and sanctions for disciplining students, threats of school closure, media portrayal of teachers and inability to reconcile different roles i.e. of teacher, guide, counselor and social worker, conflict at home and work, attack on pride by rude pupils, financial pressures, and declining status in the community.

School Policy and Ethos

Lack of consultation, fear of speaking one's mind, no clear boundaries of responsibility, adopting to change, fear of abuse from parent, break, lunch and after school duties, covering for absent colleagues, fear of losing your job, etc.

The Role of Management

Feeling of being used or manipulated, being seen as willing workhouse, lack of flexibility in times of need, too much emphasis on paper work, lack of support from management, sexual discrimination and not knowing if you are doing a good job, lack of good pay and promotional aspect, etc.

The Pupils

Lack of co-operation from pupils, racial problems, pupils using bad language, pupil answering back, verbal abuse from pupils towards staff and attitude of pupils towards authority, attack on pride by discourteous students, etc.

Working Conditions

Large classes, crowded staff areas, poorly lit rooms, lack of resources, working on school matter during vocations, rewards don't match efforts.

Other Causes of Stress

Excessive working hours; Excessive work-load; Changes in curriculum and courses; Changes to assessment and testing requirements; Workplace bullying; Crumbling schools; Risk of violence from pupils, parents and intruders; Lack of job security due to redundancy and fixed term contracts; Lack of control over the job; Burden of providing cover; Threat to early retirement arrangements; Denigration of profession by politicians and media; Lack of public esteem.

Effects of Stress

It has been found in several studies that stress and illness have a direct relationship. Dunham (1992) has identified four kinds of stress effects: (1) behavioural (e.g. heavy smoking, absenteeism and turnover); (2) emotional (e.g. nervousness, anxiety and depression); (3) mental (e.g. inability to concentrate); and (4) physical (e.g. headache, gastro-intestinal problems and palpitations). Stress is considered as an involuntary response to a dangerous situation. When we face a situation which our brain is incapable of handling, it puts the body on alert by producing hormones which are required in fight or flight situation, are: increased blood pressure; rapid heartbeat; reduced blood supply to the skin; cessation of digestive activities; increase perspiration; additional release of sugar and fat into the system to cope-up with the additional energy requirement; decrease in immune system's functions to preserve it for later action.

All these actions are a perfect requirement if we come across a physically stressful situation, like being attacked by a large predator, but most unbecoming in a classroom scenario. All these actions have a very long lasting negative effect if these stressful situations are to become frequently occurring feature. They may lead to the serious and even fatal conditions like depression and anxiety; alcoholism; drug dependency; congenital heart diseases; stress related diabetes, etc.

Coping Strategies of Occupational Stress

Kloska and Ramasut (1985) study showed the most effective coping actions were: “lead as fully / varied a life as possible outside school”, “look forward to holidays / end of the day”, “talk with husband/wife/partner/friend”, and “talk to other members of staff about it”. In this study, the third and fourth top coping strategies were related to social support. Jenkins and Calhoun (1991) categorized those methods that have a direct impact on the source of stress, such as improving teacher - administrative relationship, job redesign, staff development, and improving teacher status.

Some elements of stress are intrinsic while others are situational in the profession of teaching. The teacher has to understand how to cope with those which are intrinsic, while the situational ones can be managed with experience and common sense.

Individual Measures

When a person decides to adopt the teaching profession, he or she during the training phase must realize the demands of this profession in terms of effort involved and in terms of time investment. The workload on a teacher will always be great and everything will always be bracketed by a very tight time schedule. A teacher has to be punctual and able to meet the deadline without fail. A teacher will have to always face the criticism of parents of the weak students and face the school board with a different set of problems. A sensible teacher must know where to draw a line to prevent his social and personal life from being absorbed by his professional life. Though it is very difficult to leave the stresses of the school in the office and not let it affect their personal life, but there are methods which can help a teacher to reduce these effects.

Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress

It may seem that there is nothing we can do about stress. The bills would not stop coming, there will never be more hours in the day and our career and family responsibilities will always be demanding. But we have more control than we might think. In fact, the simple realization that we are in control of our life is the foundation of stress management. Managing stress is all about taking charge: of thoughts, emotions, schedule, and the way we deal with problems.

Identify Sources of Stress

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in our life. This is not as easy as it sounds. Our true sources of stress are not always obvious, and it is all too easy to overlook our own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We may know that we are constantly worried about work deadlines. But maybe it is our procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that leads to deadline stress. Identify the true sources of stress by looking closely at habits, attitude, and excuses. Until we accept responsibility for the role we play in creating or maintaining it, our stress level will remain outside your control.

Learning Healthier Ways to Manage Stress

If one’s methods of coping with stress are not contributing to his greater emotional and physical health, it’s time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they all require change. One can either change the situation or change his reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it is helpful to think of the four As: Avoid, Alter, Adapt, or Accept.

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no “one size fits all” solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes the person feel calm and in control.

Foster Positivity

Instead of focusing on the negative, turn your negative thoughts into positive ones. Every time you think a negative thought reword it in your own mind. Even though this might seem silly, it is the core of internal happiness. No one wants to be around a negative person 24 hours a day. If you are always thinking negative thoughts that is just what you are doing to yourself. Therefore, to avoid stress and teacher burnout, you really need to examine the messages you are sending yourself about the job. If every day you are saying, “This job is so hard. There are just too many demands”, then you really are not giving yourself any reason NOT to burn out.

Try Something New

This might be something you do different during your classes or it could be something in your personal life. Burnout can often be caused by getting caught in a rut. While on the Internet, search for new lessons or materials to help you teach an upcoming topic. Outside of school, find something that you have always wanted to try but have not done yet. This might be something as simple as enrolling in a cooking class or more ambitious like learning to fly an airplane. You will find that these experiences outside of school will also transform your day-to-day teaching.

Leave Your Teaching at School

While this is not always possible, try not to bring home work every night. You might want to consider going into school early so that you can complete your paperwork. Then you will be able to leave as soon as your workday is done. Every person needs that mental break from their work, so use the time in the evening for you and your family.

Talk to Someone Positive

Sometimes we just need to talk through issues we're dealing with at school. This can be very helpful when trying to understand difficult situations or when trying to figure out solutions to problems. However, you must be careful who you speak with. There is nothing that can drag someone down faster than a group of disgruntled individuals. If every day you go to the teacher's lounge and join a couple of teachers complaining about their jobs, you will not be able to fight teacher burnout. It would be better to stay away from those who are disgruntled. Instead, find someone who has a positive outlook on life and talk about teaching with them.

Celebrate What It Means to Be a Teacher

Think back to why you became a teacher. You can refer to top ten list of why teaching is an awesome profession, if it might help. Always remember that teachers are important and valuable to society. Remember and cherish any time that a student gives you a compliment or writes you a teacher appreciation note. One way to celebrate the high points in your teaching career is to create an 'I Make a Difference Scrapbook'.

Create Realistic To Do Lists

Some people put everything including fixing the kitchen sink on their to-do list each day. There is a point where there are just so many things on a list that there is no way all of them can be accomplished. Therefore, you would be wise to create an overall task list that you need to accomplish and store this someplace where you can check it over each week. Then

make yourself a daily to-do list that is reasonable and doable. Try to limit yourself to 3-5 tasks that you can accomplish in one day. Then when you mark them off the list you can feel a sense of accomplishment, and you will have something to celebrate.

Learn to Relax

Many find relaxation through meditation, yoga, or exercise to be the perfect anecdote to a stressful day. When your workday is done, you need to leave the stresses of it and the rest of your life behind, even if only for fifteen minutes. Relaxation and meditation can rejuvenate the body and the spirit. Right now you can begin by just closing your eyes and telling each of your body parts to relax as you sink further into your seat. Then focus on your breathing. If you only did this for five minutes each day, you would see a big difference in your own stress levels.

Avoid Unnecessary Stress

Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

- **Learn how to say “no”:** Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.
- **Avoid people who stress you out:** If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.
- **Take control of your environment:** If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic has got you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online.
- **Avoid hot-button topics:** If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.
- **Pare down your to-do list:** Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts.” Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

Alter the Situation

If you cannot avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the problem does not present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- **Express your feelings instead of bottling them up:** If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you do not voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- **Be willing to compromise:** When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you will have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.

- **Be more assertive:** Do not take a backseat in your own life. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. An assertive person stands up for his rights in ways which do not violate the rights of others.
- **Manage your time better:** Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you are stretched too thin and running behind, it is hard to stay calm and focused. But if you plan ahead and make sure you do not overextend yourself, you can alter the amount of stress you are under.

Adapt to the Stressor

If you cannot change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.

- **Reframe problems:** Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about teaching overload, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite music, or enjoy some alone time.
- **Look at the big picture:** Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
- **Adjust your standards:** Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with “good enough.”
- **Focus on the positive:** When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

Accept the Things that cannot be Changed

Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You cannot prevent or change stressors such as the evaluation of huge number of answer-sheets, examination duty, or some administrative job. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change. Each time something happens beyond your control, you can just ask for the courage to change the things you can, the strength to accept the things you cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference. While teachers often have a greater degree of control within their own classrooms, real stressors come from the outside. These might be in the form of high stakes testing, educational reforms, or professional development requirements. While teachers cannot change much of what is thrown at them, they can change their own attitudes towards these challenges.

- **Don't try to control the uncontrollable:** Many things in life are beyond our control- particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- **Look for the upside:** As the saying goes, “What does not kill us makes us stronger.” When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
- **Share your feelings:** Talk to a trusted friend or colleague face to face or make an appointment with a therapist. The simple act of expressing what you are going

through can be very cathartic, even if there is nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. Opening up is not a sign of weakness and it won't make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your bond.

- **Learn to forgive:** Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

Make Time for Fun and Relaxation

Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you will be in a better place to handle life's stressors.

Healthy ways to relax and recharge:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Go for a walk• Spend time in nature• Call a good friend/ colleague• Sweat out tension with a good workout• Write in your journal• Take a long bath• Light scented candles• Perform Yoga and meditation• Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play with a pet• Work in your garden• Practice Jacob's Progressive Muscular Relaxation (JPMR)• Get a massage• Curl up with a good book• Listen to music• Watch a comedy• Deep breathing exercise• Autogenic exercise
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Do not get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

- **Set aside relaxation time:** Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Do not allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries.
- **Connect with others:** Spend time with positive people who enhance your life. A strong support system will buffer you from the negative effects of stress.
- **Do something you enjoy every day:** Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano, or working on your bike.
- **Keep your sense of humor:** This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Conclusion

It appears that the sources and the consequences of teachers' occupational stress and burnout and the adoption of specific strategies for dealing with stressors in the workplace are complicated. For this reason, it is necessary that all parameters to be taken into account in the design and implementation of primary and secondary prevention programs addressed to teachers with the aim of preventing or reducing teacher stress. Teachers' effective use of coping strategies could serve as a factor which helps prevent work-related stress and burnout.

Further research is needed to identify more specific factors that lead to occupational stress and burnout and to investigate the coping strategies that teachers use and their relation to occupational stress and burnout. Occupational stress is quite a personal matter and that the perception of the situation enables one to cope with it effectively, being aware of the causes of occupational stress and monitoring properly.

Educational Implications

Stress among teachers has become an inescapable issue which if not managed properly can lead to distress or burnout. Consequently their physical and mental well being will be affected as well as will lead to detrimental impact on their performance and personality. In order to prevent them from dire consequences of stress they must be trained to cope with it through exercise, meditation, walking, listening to music, yoga, social networking, etc. The policy makers, stake holders, educationists, administrators, managements must provide congenial working environments, less work load, job securities, maximum provision of facilities, etc. Teachers need to be involved in skill development programmes focused on emotional intelligence, time management, positive thinking, sharing of feelings, problem solving, cognitive training, etc.

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