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## Possibilities for coping with professional stress in teachers

**Annotation**

The dynamics of contemporary life combined with the nature of a teacher's profession result together in an impact on physical and mental wellbeing, caused by professional stress. This article's purpose is the analysis of the essence and the symptoms of the "Burnout" syndrome, observed in teachers - a profession which is among those at the highest risk of it. Techniques for coping are presented. The emphasis falls on inner strategies - an individual relying on their own resources.

**Keywords**

teachers, stress, professional stress, syndrome "Burnout", techniques, strategies, coping

The dynamic changes in our contemporary society and the innovations of the educational process set together more complex requirements for the professional knowledge, skills and competences of teachers. An important personal quality of a pedagogue's professional characteristic is emotional stability. It contributes for the preservation of physical health and psychic stability and prevents professional disappointments and demotivation. For those reasons the professional stress in teachers and pedagogic specialists who are practicing in educational institutions is a theoretic and practical problem of high importance. Many researches and practical seminars have been studying this problem committedly. The relevance of that topic has set the goal of the present research - analysis of professional stress in teachers and presenting possibilities for coping with it.

The term "stress" is often used in everyday speech and in scientific literature. The word is of English origin - stress means pressure, push, deformation, tension. It is first been used in the areas of Psychology and Medicine in the beginning of 20th century. Canadian physiologist and psychologist Hans Selye states that the effort which our organisms make is in order to adapt to constantly changing conditions i.e. for surviving and for adequacy in a given environment. The aggregation of the observed reactions of the organism is called "mutual adaptational syndrome". The term stands for an effort of the organism, as a whole, in order to adapt to the changing settings (Selye, 1982).

The term "stress" is most commonly used to describe a condition connected to the accumulation of negative emotions experienced by a human in situations which require the adaptation to certain facts, factors and settings of the environment. Stress is a normal and natural reaction of a person in the face of physical or emotional challenges. It is a physiological and psychic process. It is an individual's reaction toward events or situations connected with increased requirements and pressure on him/her.

Several types of stress are distinguished in specialized literature. In the article we are focusing on professional stress - observed in the interaction of people with their professions. The sources of professional stress can be connected to: organizational characteristics and processes; the conditions of labor; interpersonal communication; the requirements of the working environment and the specific professional characteristics.

Signs of different types of stress are observed at the professional activities of teachers. However we

emphasize on the kind of stress which results from conducting professional obligations. That frequently monitored condition is referred to with the term "Burnout" in scientific literature. The word "Burnout" is of English origin and means to burn / burning. It is introduced as a term by the American psychiatrist H. Freudenberg. It is used as a designation of the aggregation of symptoms which are experienced by people who are working in a narrow professional relationships with other people, to whom they are helping and are therefore dependent on. (Freudenberger, 1974).

The syndrome of professional "Burnout" is an inability to function effectively in one's own profession. It reflects the internal connection of a person to his/her work and is shown when that connection is been impaired. At psychological literature it is stated to be a defensive mechanism of a person, which warns and signals for the upcoming problems and therefore helps to maintain psychological and physical health by giving the possibility to the professional to spend their potential in a more reasonable and measured manner.

Professional "burnout" threatens teachers and pedagogic specialists because:

- when occupying their minds with problems faced by their students and with solving them, teachers are not always capable of distancing themselves from them. The responsibility which their professional occupation requires costs them high levels of concentration and energy;
- they are constantly being in a close contact and a mutual activity with other people which leads to not expressing their own emotions by suppressing them in order to always appear affable and in a positive state of mind;
- complex relationships are built up between the helper and the help receiver, such which require patience, love and psychic sustainability.

As it is stated in scientific literature, professional "burnout" is "an individual experience in the context of one's work" and is shown with the following signs (Kochunas, 1999):

- A sense of emotional exhaustion, indifference, depletion, chronic fatigue. In teachers it is expressed with the feeling that one can no more "give" of themselves to the students, that one is jaded of the constant immersion and solving others' problems.
- Dehumanization - it manifests itself in the form of negative attitude toward the subjects surrounding one (students, parents, colleagues, management).

- Negative self perception in professional aspect - a feeling that one is not managing successfully any more, that one is not proficient at their work and failing.

What is characteristic for the syndrome is a strongly expressed emotional tint. However there are additional components to it - cognitive, physiological, behavioral (Yanakieva, 2009). Cognitive displays are connected to alienation from professional problems, apathy, lack of new ideas, routine conduction of obligations, etc. Physiological displays are fatiguability, frequent illnesses, decreased immunity, change of appetite and respectively in weight, insomnia, etc. Behavioral changes are usually displayed in decreased performance and effectiveness, frequent not-showing at work, an inclination toward extreme forms of behavior, discontent, risky behavior - excessive consumption of alcohol, aggressiveness, etc.

The presented negative consequences determine the necessity of contemporary teachers and pedagogic specialists to be familiarized with the symptoms of professional stress and most importantly - to be familiarized with techniques for overcoming it.

Coping with stress is defined as a cognitive and behavioral effort for minimizing the negative consequences for a person and also for managing (controlling, overcoming, reducing, etc.) the discrepancies in the type of interaction "person-environment". Coping with any situation is a cognitive activity which combines: the assessment for the looming danger (initial assessment) and the assessment of the consequences of each action for coping (secondary assessment). In psychologic-pedagogic literature coping is described as an activity of a person via which he/she maintains and preserves the balance between the requirements of the environment and the resources of the person. (Isaeva, 2008).

In scientific researches there are two approaches for preventing and for handling the "Burnout" syndrome:

- Internal strategies - a person is trying to cope by using, changing and mobilizing their own attitudes, resources, competences, own characteristics.
- External strategies - they are connected to the inclusion of resources for coping with stress outside of the individual and with the resources of the environment. Such are the social support (family or friendly circle) and professional support by specialists (managers, colleagues, psychologists).

For effective coping with stress at the working environment it is important that both groups of strategies are combined: the individual personal resources with the resources of the environment via interaction between the individual characteristics such as capabilities, personal features and organizational characteristics as a structure, conditions of labor, remuneration, policy of the organization.

We present techniques which rely on the internal resources of personality for coping with professional "burnout". They include actions for reducing the level of stress and are connected to: expression of emotions; acceptance of the situation; beginning of a new activity; assessment of the problem; searching for help.

Contemporary teachers and pedagogic specialists can direct their efforts toward the development of appropriate skills with the goal of coping, some of

them include:

- To analyze their professional activity by formulating both shortcomings and strong sides, perspectives, possibilities for development. This can be done via different techniques, as an example via SWOT analysis. It is recommended that the accent is placed on strengths and opportunities and not on weaknesses and threats.
- To discover new possibilities for expressing themselves and for satisfaction from their profession - via participation in qualification programs, professional unions, etc.
- To plan their career development via setting short and longterm goals.
- To develop skills which are relieving them both physically and psychically of their multiple obligations.

Identifying stress is an important starting point for overcoming it. It is necessary to find the most appropriate for one's own personality way for coping with it and for achieving emotional sustainability. Emotional sustainability is a personal quality which is shown in situations of pressure and provides a capability of self control in conducting professional obligations. Furthermore it has a defensive function and increases the success rate when conducting professional activities (Hristova, 2015).

Based on a summarization and systematization of the diverse approaches for prevention and coping with professional stress described in the specialized literature, we propose the following techniques and practices. These do not require a specially organized environment for their application:

- **Technique "Know yourself"**

**Task:** The technique requires of the participant to write a short fairytale about their life. Both the hard situations and the successful outcomes should be included. The goal is to draw the morale of the story.

At the foundation of that technique lies the idea that before the realization of any change in one's behavior, it is necessary to analyze previous experience and based on it to arrive to a state of awareness of the essence of current events. Knowing one's own personality is the first step necessary for behavioral change.

- **Technique "Weather forecast"**

**Task:** The technique requires a description of the present emotional state of a person as if it is metaphorically presented as a weather forecast: naming the season, the part of the day, sunny/cloudy, quiet/windy, temperature.

The two techniques described above are connected with introspection, with contemplating on one's own self. That is a necessary beginning for coping with stress. The first technique requires a short retrospection of one's living and professional path. The second one is an actual picture of the emotional state at the moment.

- **Technique "What stresses us"**

**Task:** The technique requires the preparation of a list with the times the participant has felt stress and to put them in order based on an evaluation system. E.g. strongly stressing - 3 points; moderately stressing - 2 points and slightly stressing - 1 point.

In order to begin to cope with stress, it is necessary to analyze the participant's professional environment, the stressing factors which he/she is facing and the way by which he/she reacts to them both physically

and emotionally.

- **Building up a physical reserve**

The state of stress can be reduced if a person enhances his/hers physical resource. By taking into consideration one's individual peculiarities the individual has to choose appropriate physical exercises, e.g. walking, swimming, bicycling, jogging, yoga, etc. For the preservation of physical condition are required balanced nutrition, avoiding nicotine, moderate consumption of caffeine and enough sleep time are necessary. Insomnia is one of the strongest factors to have a negative impact on organism.

- **Maintaining an emotional reserve**

The emotional one should be handled with the same level of carefulness and caution as the physical one.

- **Provision of support**

**Task:** The individual prepares a list of the people to whom he/she can reach for support and help in a critical moment.

Preparing a list with people to whom one can reach in a critical moment - relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues increases the chances of adequate support. Based on the intensity of the critical situation only sharing the problem, or directly asking for help would be more appropriate. The number of the people in the

circle providing support is not of such an importance as is the quality of the communication process with them.

- **Communicating**

The ability to listen, to share feelings, to stand for rights without a display of aggression are social skills which reduce the probability for stress emergence. The skill to clearly place requirements, to explain problems and to inform of an individual's needs have the role of tools which lead to social interactions with low probability of stressful situations' occurrence too.

- **Reorganization of our life both professional and personal**

E.g. discovering of hidden talents, new interests. Special attention should be spent on leisure time and changing the environment. Relaxation techniques are recommended - meditation, reading or listening to music. The creative beginning is a remedy for burnout.

Knowing the syndrome of professional burnout and the application of techniques for coping with it will maintain the health and emotional stability of teachers, will assist for a successful display of their professional qualities and will increase the effectiveness of the educational process.

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