

EMPOWERMENT OF LECTURERS FOR WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *Empowerment is a process that enables lecturers to participate in student teaching activities in an autonomous and independent way. The management of university institutions often impose teaching obligations related to meeting the teaching norm, which leads to burnout in the workplace for some lecturers. During the Covid pandemic, online learning emerged as an alternative form of teaching. Online learning required a change and adjustment of the entire teaching process, and it increased the pressure and stress on all stakeholders and led to more frequent burnout syndrome. Burnout syndrome is a state of mental and physical exhaustion, characterized by fatigue, increased anger, a tendency to feel frustrated and suspicious of colleagues, reduced motivation at work and a tendency to depression. The paper presents an overview and teaching of emotional regulation techniques through learning practical skills such as mindfulness (breathing methods, guided imagination, progressive muscle relaxation and other methods for relaxing the body and mind) that can contribute to better coping with stressful situations and reducing burnout at the workplace.*

Key words: *Lecturers, workplace, burnout*

Introduction

The Corona virus epidemic imposed new rules in the teaching process, whereby the traditional model was replaced by the introduction of a hybrid model, which was a very high challenge for the academic community. Physical distancing, avoiding crowds, maintaining the recommended distance, and avoiding activities that tend to larger gatherings, such as conventional learning that gathers many students in one room, were recommended. During the Covid pandemic, learning had to be carried out in accordance with the given recommendations through the interruption of physical contact between students, and lecturers. Online learning has emerged as an alternative form of teaching. The new way of teaching presented a problem for students and lecturers, not only in terms of skills in using technology, but also due to the increased burden of material acquisition. Online learning required a change and adaptation of the entire teaching process and increased the pressure and stress on all stakeholders. In recent times, at the level of educational institutions, lecturers in higher education are exposed to increased stress, while some are increasingly experiencing workplace burnout. The concept of professional burnout at work (burnout) was introduced in the mid-seventies by Farber [1] and describes it as a loss of motivation and commitment in the work of people who are exposed to frequent and long-term stress. Burnout syndrome is a state of mental and physical exhaustion, and it often appears among lecturers. Burnout syndrome is characterized by fatigue, increased anger, a tendency

to feel frustrated and suspicious of colleagues, reduced motivation at work and a tendency to depression in jobs related to direct work with people. The three main characteristics of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or negative and cynical feelings towards others, and low self-esteem or a tendency to give negative self-evaluations, especially in relation to work. This condition often occurs in people who are too dedicated to work and do not pay attention to their own needs [2,3]. Very often, lecturers complain about emotional exhaustion, which refers to an individual's assessment that his emotional and physical strength has been exhausted beyond the limits. The occurrence and level of burnout varies regarding biographical characteristics: age, gender, work experience, level of initial/professional education [4]. From lecturers, students expect not only answers to questions related to learning processes, but also to provide them with support, to understand them and to be sensitive to their life situations (e.g., work, family, health) [5]. Precisely because of all the mentioned specifics in working with students, lecturers are exposed to increased negative stress at work, which ultimately leads to burnout at work.

Stress of teaching staff

Stress is common among European teachers, but not equally in all countries. Somewhat paradoxically, Croatian teachers are far below the European average in this area. More precisely, Croatia, along with Romania and Turkey, is among the European countries whose teachers experience the least amount of "quite" or "a lot of stress" at work. At their workplace, they are far less "stressed" than many of their colleagues from developed or less developed European countries. The situation is worst in Portugal, where almost 90% of teachers declare that they are under stress at work, while in England and Hungary it is almost 70%. In all three countries, the share of teachers experiencing "a lot" of stress is twice as high as the European Union average. On the other side of the spectrum, in Croatia, less than a third of teachers, or 31.2% of them, struggle with stress in the workplace (of which 23.7% experience "quite a bit" of stress, and "a lot" of them only 7.4%), in Turkey, a total of 23.4%, and in Romania, 22.2% of teachers [6]. Nasser Abu Alhija (2014) states that the teaching profession is recognized as stressful and demanding, and teachers experience stress when the complexity of a situation exceeds their ability to cope with these demands [7]. When a teacher begins to teach, certain personal stressors appear that arise from teaching and that affect the teacher on a personal level. Personal stressors depend to some extent on the situation within the school/college, but it also stems from their own views on the world and how teachers deal with success and failure. This stems from the idea of "locus of control", which can be internal or external. Individuals who feel in control of their lives and can influence outcomes are better able to cope with stress and believe that they are essentially responsible for what happens. This is known as having internal control. On the other hand, individuals with an external locus of control believe that they have less control over any situation and that much of what happens is out of their hands. Since this idea involves how one deals with stressful situations, research shows that the above two ways of looking at the world can be applied to the teaching profession and can influence the extent of individual burnout factors that a teacher experiences. If a teacher believes that he cannot control the

negative aspects of his career, he in turn feels hopeless about his achievements and increased stress [8]. This mindset can be toxic for teachers and undermines any kind of success a teacher experiences. When we allow negativity to accumulate it is difficult to overcome it. Burnout on a personal level can best be overcome by self-esteem, happiness within the school environment and satisfaction with the work they do [9]. NIOSH (2001) describes that the concept of stress at work is often confused with challenge, but these concepts are not the same. The challenge stimulates us physically and mentally and motivates us to learn new skills and master our work. When we achieve a goal or, rather, meet a challenge, we feel relaxed and satisfied. Therefore, the challenge is an important segment for a healthy and productive business. The importance of challenges in our business life can be related to the saying "a little stress won't hurt you". However, when challenges grow into demands that we cannot meet, relaxation turns into exhaustion, and the feeling of satisfaction turns into a feeling of stress that we find difficult to deal with [10]. More recent research indicates that teachers show some form of stress caused by workplace stressors. According to NIOSH (2001), workplace stressors are divided into physical, organizational and social. There are seven main physical stressors that we can find in a workplace, namely: extreme heat or cold, i.e. temperature changes, excessive noise, unlabeled toxic substance, dangerous work, inadequate ergonomic adaptation of the workplace, poor lighting and poor ventilation. The main organizational stressors that can be found in a workplace are: lack of control over the work situation, lack of opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and abilities when solving work-related problems, inability to make decisions related to the way of doing business: when, how much, etc., conflicting business demands, insufficient recognition for work performed, disrespect or lack of recognition from supervisors or managers for work performed, shift work, insufficient pay and isolation from other employees. And the main social stressors that can be found in the workplace are: insecurity related to the workplace, unemployment, sexism, racism, prejudices related to age, employment of external collaborators, insufficient solutions related to maternity leave, annual vacations and family support, and other benefits related to the position.

Support methods through mindfulness

Mindfulness

Caring for teaching staff requires continuous investment in the well-being of each person. Psychosocial education and teaching of emotional regulation techniques through learning practical skills such as mindfulness can contribute to better coping with stressful situations and reducing burnout at the workplace. The term mindfulness appeared in the nineties of the last century, and has been used more intensively in the last decade. Mindfulness stems from centuries-old meditative traditions and is taught in a secular way, associated with increased activation in brain regions responsible for regulating attention and positive affective states including empathy and other psychosocial emotions. Emotions, attention and introspection are permanent and labile processes that can be understood and studied as skills that can be trained, similar to other human skills such as music, mathematics or sports. Mindfulness is a mental

skill that can be defined as a type of meditation in which a person focuses on an intense awareness of what they feel in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. The goal is to feel and become aware of every single emotion. Practicing mindfulness includes breathing methods, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation and other methods for relaxing the body and mind with the aim of reducing stress and ultimately bringing the body into balance. Mindfulness can make individuals less reactive to negative experiences and more likely to notice a positive experience, resulting in a range of psychological and physiological benefits. Today, there are many formal programs based on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a standardized program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the late 1970s. Through MBSR, participants learn the practice of mindfulness in a didactic, experiential, discussion-based format, typically over the course of 8-10 weekly group sessions. According to Gold et al. (2010), an MBSR course for elementary school teachers resulted in improvements in anxiety, depression, and stress. Mindfulness adapted to teachers promotes aspects of awareness and self-feeling, reduces psychological symptoms and burnout, increases effective teaching behavior and reduces attentional biases [11].

Deep breathing exercises

One of the simplest and most effective techniques for combating the effects of stress is a deep breathing exercise that promotes the relaxation response. We start practicing mindfulness with a breathing exercise because breathing is common to all of us, it is inevitable and we use it constantly. The goal of breathing exercises is not breathing per se, but practicing being present in the moment, without interacting with your own thoughts, without analyzing and judging, being kind and empathetic towards yourself. Breathing exercise is used in various relaxation techniques and is an effective way to relieve stress and anxiety attacks. In addition to its calming physical effects, research shows that it increases energy, fights disease, relieves pain, increases problem-solving ability, and boosts motivation and productivity. Relaxation with breathing exercises is useful in preventing stress that ultimately leads to teacher burnout. Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic system, which results in reduced heart rate and blood pressure and brings the body back into a healthier balance. Practicing deep breathing techniques lowers blood pressure, improves digestion, increases alertness, reduces fatigue, tension headaches and migraines, and generally improves the quality of life. Breathing exercises refer to slow deep breathing exercises with a focus on controlled breathing during the inhalation and exhalation process. Negative emotions such as anxiety, anger and depression can be controlled through breathing. A study conducted among 190 female students in the USA compared the effect of mindful breathing with alternative stress management techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and meditation, and found that mindful breathing significantly reduced stress [12]. Deep breathing has also been shown to be a useful cognitive intervention for reducing stress. Breathing exercises should be performed in a quiet environment in a sitting position, allowing the person 10 minutes of complete peace and devotion to himself. Implementation is simple, about 10 minutes once or twice a day. At the beginning, the person takes a comfortable sitting position (spine as straight as possible), closes his eyes and focuses on breathing.

It is essential to become aware of how the breath enters and leaves the body and the own existence in the body that breathing causes. Although it seems simple, we will soon realize that it is not like that at all. The person will become aware that a part of him no longer wants to stay in this position and breathe. Very soon after starting to breathe, the mind or body will decide that it has had enough and will demand something else (this is inevitable and completely normal). Every time the mind moves the body will follow. If the mind is restless and the body is restless. If the body is restless, the mind finds either a new pose or a new occupation for the body. It is logical that a person will wonder why the mind and body are so restless and unable to be "alone with themselves" for just a few minutes, and why they constantly feel the need to fill every moment with some action or thought.

The fact is that every person will think at least once during the exercise that they are doing something wrong, or that this is not going well for them, so they will conclude that something is wrong with them. That thought itself belongs to the category of criticism and condemnation (towards oneself), and this is exactly what we try to avoid with mindfulness. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the point is to observe the impulses that a person feels and the thoughts that come to him. It is necessary to gently but decisively return the attention from every thought to the breath and to the moment in which the person is. The point of mindfulness is not to stop thoughts, but to give them space and accept them as they are, while developing the capacity to understand that we are not our thoughts and that there is no reason to allow them to rule our life and decisions (especially when they cause us suffering). By practicing breathing, we train the mind and its innate stability, develop the natural ability to concentrate, create inner strength that helps us solve even the most difficult life situations, and develop patience and acceptance without judgment [13].

Progressive muscle relaxation technique

In everyday life situations, people have to fight with various burdensome thoughts or clear physical dangers, which often puts them in a state of tension or stress. Namely, when people find themselves in a potentially dangerous situation, the muscles tighten, which activates the stress system and enables the body to prepare for flight and fight. In addition, the same physiological reaction is activated for real or potential danger. It is an interesting finding that even after the perception of danger, the organism retains information about it, which contributes to even greater tension of the skeletal muscles [14]. The pioneer of progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), Edmund Jacobson (1938), developed this technique at the beginning of the 20th century. He emphasized that physical and psychological experiences can be effectively influenced by PMR. The author based PMR on the assumption that when the body is relaxed, the mind is also relaxed, that is, an anxious mind cannot exist in a relaxed body. PMR reduces the intensity of mental stress through gradual reduction of muscle tension, which also explains the close connection between mind and body [15]. PMR tries to explain that the mind does not have to be acted upon exclusively by cognitive interventions, but it is possible to act on it indirectly, through the body. The main goal of PMR is physical stress and how to reduce it, and that is why PMR

is one of the easiest methods to apply [16]. PMR is cheap, accessible, self-induced and without side effects. The goal of this technique is to consciously produce tension in isolated muscle groups and to feel and recognize the difference between contracted and relaxed muscles in order to practice the feeling of relaxation. Also, the goal of PMR is to contract only those muscle groups that are needed to perform a task, because other activities use up energy reserves unnecessarily.

When a person learns the procedure and how to recognize the feeling of muscle contraction in large and small muscle groups, he can apply it in everyday life. At the beginning of the treatment, each muscle or group of muscles is tensed for 5-7 seconds, and then relaxed for 20-30 seconds. During each time, the individual focuses on the difference in feelings between the two states. Awareness of the feeling of relaxation is one of the greatest gains achieved by PMR [17]. The PMR technique has proven to be very effective in reducing depression, anxiety and stress. It contributes to a feeling of relaxation, reduces the severity of negative emotional states and returns to a normal state of emotions. When PMR is practiced and included in the daily routine, it helps alleviate negative emotional states and better cope with the daily difficulties of all stakeholders in academic life.

Visualization techniques

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation of traditional meditation that involves imagining a scene in which a person feels calm, free, free from all tension and anxiety. It is a powerful technique that helps relieve stress symptoms caused by anxiety. The technique involves using mental imagery to achieve a more relaxed state of mind. Similar to daydreaming, visualization is achieved through the use of imagination. There are several reasons why visualization helps with stress. When feeling anxious, thoughts wander, the mind focuses on worry and the worst things that could happen, and other cognitive distortions that increase feelings of fear and tension. Visualization expands the ability to rest and relax by focusing the mind on calmer and more peaceful images. There are unlimited ways to practice visualization. What you choose to imagine in your mind varies from person to person. The most famous visualization technique is guided imagery, and beach scenes are especially popular because of their calming effect. Guided visualizations such as beach scenes are used to relax and escape from everyday stressful situations and tasks. Forest visualization is also often used, where a person imagines walking through a beautiful forest in the mountains. Visualization by relaxing by a candle, visualization by imagining rainbow colors, visualization of floating on a cloud and other techniques can also be used. The next visualization technique is "goal visualization", in which the achievement of goals is imagined. For example, athletes often use this visualization. Research shows that this type of visualization helps improve performance under pressure. If a person suffers from symptoms of anxiety, he can imagine how he would feel without anxiety or what positive feelings he wants to embody while getting rid of tension and stress [18]. Visualization techniques are an effective way of empowering teachers to face the challenges of their already stressful workplace.

Conclusion:

Empowering teachers for the challenges of the workplace is one of the imperatives of recent times. The demands of the academic community are increasing from year to year, in addition to direct work with students, teachers need to update the teaching content daily in order to adapt to accelerated computerization and new knowledge. The daily exposure to stress of the teaching staff due to the increasing number of obligations results in burnout at work for most teachers. In order to protect mental health, every teacher should continuously invest in mental health protection. By mastering various relaxation techniques, the effects of chronic stress can be prevented and the consequences of burnout at the workplace can be reduced at the level of the individual and the entire academic community.

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OSNA  IVANJE PREDAVA  A ZA IZAZOVE RADNOG MJESTA

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Sa  etak: *Oсна  ivanje je proces koji omogućava predava  ima sudjelovanje u aktivnostima podu  avanja studenata na autonoman i neovisan na  in. Rukovodstvo znanstveno nastavnih ustanova   esto name  e nastavne obaveze vezane uz ispunjavanje nastavne norme   to kod nekih predava  a dovodi do izgaranja na radnom mjestu. Tijekom Covid pandemije kao alternativni oblik podu  avanja nametnulo se online u  enje. Online u  enje zahtijevalo je promjenu i prilagodbu cijelog nastavnog procesa, te je pove  alo pritisak i stres na sve dionike i dovelo do u  estalijeg sindroma izgaranja. Sindrom izgaranja je stanje psihi  ke i tjelesne iscrpljenosti, karakterizira ga umor, pove  ana ljutnja, sklonost osje  aju frustracije i sumnji  avosti prema suradnicima, smanjena motivacija na poslu te sklonost ka depresiji. Rad prikazuje pregled i podu  avanje tehnika emocionalne regulacije kroz u  enje prakti  nih vje  tina poput mindfulnessa (metode disanja, vo  ene imaginacije, progresivnu mi  i  nu relaksaciju i druge metode za opu  tavanje tijela i uma) koje mogu doprinijeti boljem savladavanju stresnih situacija i smanjenju sagorijevanja na radnom mjestu.*

Ključne rije  i: *zdravo starenje, radna terapija, promocija zdravlja, osobe starije   ivotne dobi*