

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE MENTAL HEALTH AMONG TEACHERS

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Teaching is one of what researchers call “at risk professions” - where individuals are prone to stress and burnout which affects their mental health.

Teaching is normally characterized by long working hours, a lack of job security, and constant complaint of low wages and demands of the parents, management and students. Some of the common reasons that affect a teacher are, student indifference, discipline problems in classrooms, overcrowded classrooms, excessive administrative tasks and excessive testing and correction work. Additionally teachers burn out when they feel they are no longer educating and inspiring students.

Thus, three main reasons for a teacher to feel stressed and burst out are when,

- a teacher lacks recognition
- a teacher is overworked
- a teacher does not see the possibility of a change or improvement.

Research shows that the Mental Health of Teachers is affected and greater when people workers are young and lower for older staff. A younger staff usually has less experience than the older one. (Maslach 2003)

Research findings also indicate that the demands of being a professional educator in the 21st century is stressful. The 21st century expects teachers to be critical thinkers who have good problem solving skills. The teacher is expected to collaborate and have good leadership skills. The teacher is expected to have good communication skills, and also good analytical skills. More than one third of the teachers leave the field within the first five years according to Educationworld.com

Understanding Mental Health and how it affects Teachers

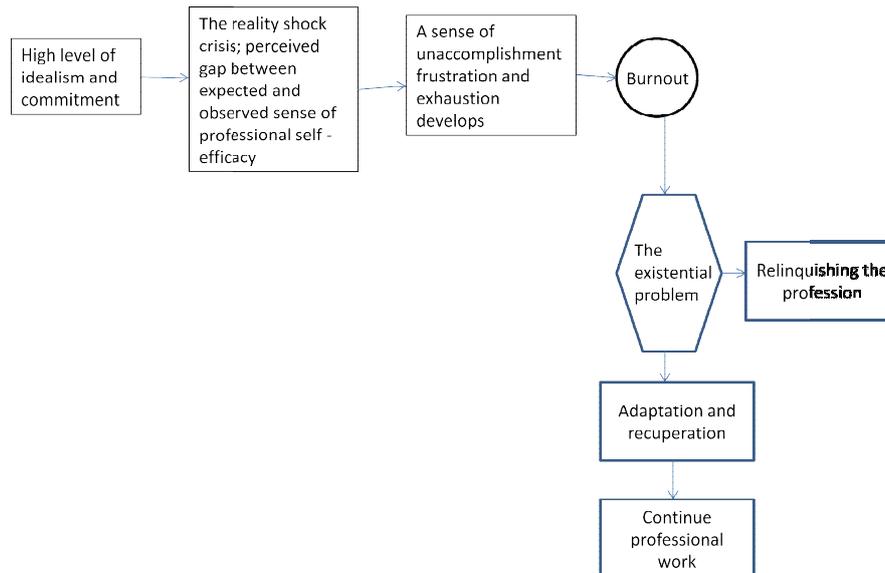
Mental health and wellbeing is about thoughts, feelings and relationships. Mental health is a continuum, ranging from a state of optimal health, to having an illness which might affect our thoughts, feelings or behavior.

Mental health problems occur when someone’s thoughts or feelings are troubling them, to the extent of affecting their day to day activities or relationships. Some people with an unresolved mental health problem might go on to develop a mental illness.

A **mental illness** is a more serious or long-lasting problem, which can be diagnosed by a doctor or mental health professional, and may require medical treatment as well as support.

Understanding Stress among Teachers

According to Isaac A. Friedman, burnout is usually conceptualized as a work related syndrome rising from an individual's perception of a gap between expectations of a successful professional performance and a less satisfying reality.



The figure above explains the clash between the teacher and the school. During a teachers professional career, a staff realizes that it is not possible to live up to the objectives planned. There are 4 areas where a teacher has difficulties

- Tasks pertaining to students - educational and social objectives
- Rapport with the students - the formal and informal teacher student relations. Eg. Maintaining a professional distance with students, effective classroom control and handling discipline problems
- Tasks related to school functioning
- Tasks related to school admin and colleagues

Thus, teachers are forced to lower their expectations. All their efforts are initially focused towards goals - like achieving good academic results, based on official syllabus and curricular. Creative, quality teaching and taking care of slow and special needs of differently abled children are often neglected. Teachers become frustrated and exhaustive, they feel non accomplished in other words burned out.

Research findings amongst school teachers in a Public School in Maharashtra, indicates that teachers are among the professions reporting the highest level of work related stress. The scores from the study gives, one a general idea regarding the various factors resulting in stress

Figure 1: Job Related Stressors (%)

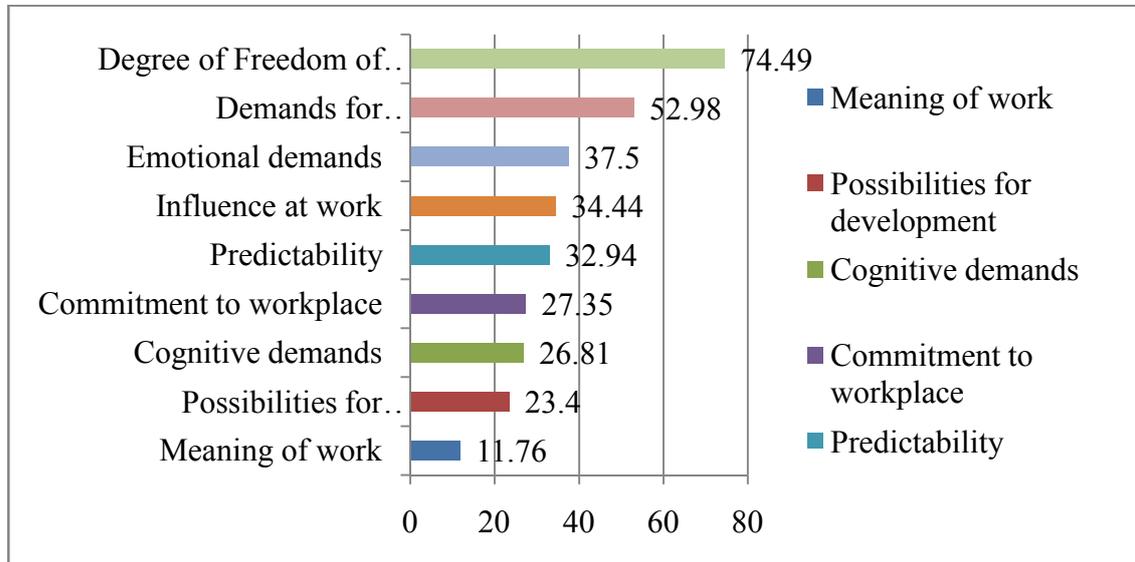
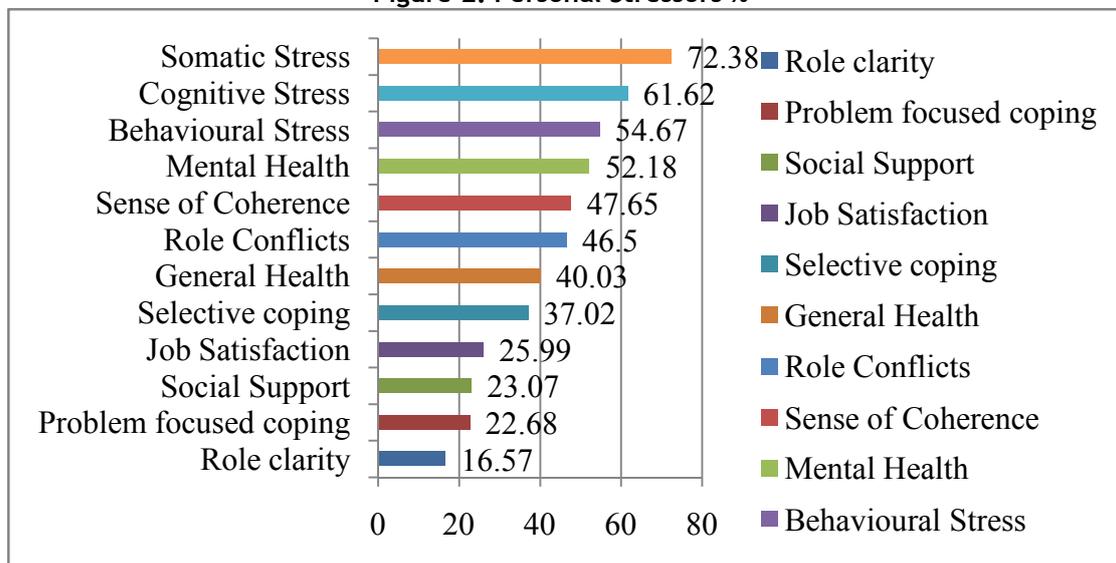


Figure 2: Personal Stressors %



Among all the Job related stressors mean score for meaning of work possibilities of development are Grade I stressors always causing stress. Teachers were of the opinion that possibilities for development were very less and were worrying them the most. The school

authorities should give emphasis on understanding the importance, meaning and clarity about the job and work so that the teachers can give their best for the school.

Many of the teachers were not clear about their own role and revealed an inability in coping day to day problems resulting in stress. There is consistent evidence that teachers with more support from others experience lower strain and burnout and teachers facing potentially stressful demands, conflicts and problems in the workplace, having support from others may reduce the impact of the pressures on the individuals well-being.

Thus from the above we are able to see that the factors always causing stress like job related clarity, ability to cope with problems, inadequate social support should be tackled by various measures at the individual and institute level.

Intervention and Assistance

Early intervention means picking up early signs of a mental health problem and providing support before the situation worsens.

Identification of Mental Health Issues

Feelings: some of the commonly evident feelings, that can be identified are

- Frequently feeling anxious, afraid or guilty
- Having bouts of depressions and deep sadness
- Being unable to enjoy things usually likes doing one
- Often feeling bad about oneself or ones appearance
- Not wanting to do anything, go anywhere, see anyone
- Feeling distant, wooden, operating in 'slow motion'
- Being overly irritable, angry or aggressive
- Feeling tired and lacking energy much of the time
- Feeling extremely positive and full of energy
- Swinging between positive and negative feelings
- Reduced personal accomplishment when one devalues one's work with others
- Emotional exhaustion - when one feels emptied of personal emotional resources

Burnout and stressed mental health can also be identified through the expressed thoughts of individuals, examples are:

- Thinking about dying, suicide or harming oneself
- Having frequent negative or worrying thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Very rapid thoughts and ideas
- Hearing voices or seeing things that aren't there
- Thinking you're someone else

- Believing without reason that someone is spying on you, plotting against you, or trying to harm you
 - Believing you're being harmed or controlled against your will
- In any Institution, behaviours of individuals can also help identify, burnout depression or stress related to work some behavior patterns may be
- Becoming withdrawn, avoiding social contact
 - Crying easily and frequently
 - Changes in behavior, such as drug taking, alcohol abuse, aggression, crime, risk taking, promiscuity
 - Depersonalization - when one distances oneself from others
 - Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
 - Going to extreme lengths to avoid certain situations
 - Dieting all the time, refusing to eat in public
 - Neglecting responsibilities or personal appearance
 - Being very lethargic, or having a lot of energy
 - Speaking rapidly and incoherently
 - Spending extravagant and unrealistic sums of money
 - Talking or writing about things that don't make sense

Why Teachers leave?

A major cause of teachers leaving the profession is that the job is demanding, with piles of note books to correct, lessons to plan, and parents to contact. A committed teachers list of things to do is never complete. Teachers are also responsible for time consuming tasks that are data driver, which are normally completed outside a typical day. Many teachers leave the profession because of lack of communication and support.

Strategies for Teachers

Albee (2000) one of the pioneers of prevention research, points out that, "it is better if the roots of teacher burnout are identified and treated, rather than treating it after its existence

Strategies recommended avoiding stress and burnout

Reducing work is one of the logical decisions to be taken, wherever possible. It is often seen that there is a positive correlation between the quantum of work an individual undertakes and stress. Changing assignments or approaches is also an effective method that helps deal with stress. Related to this, is developing one self, by doing courses, reading, in order to qualify oneself to adopt and adjust in different levels of working. Exercising is a fool proof strategy to overcome stress. Regular exercise releases tension and helps

maintain a healthy life style. Eating habits also has a significant role to play. Limiting caffeine, avoiding alcohol abstaining from smoking also helps. Yoga and meditation helps to release tension, and provides deep healing sitting quietly, breathing deeply and thinking peaceful thoughts for 15 to 20 minutes daily is also an effective way to overcome stressful thoughts. Developing positive, mind set helps to focus on the good instead of the bad in situations. Anger management is also very essential to avoid stress and burnout. Developing good hobbies helps one to be engaged and relieve stress, like music, gardening, volunteering in various social activities. Fostering positivity is an effective tool to combat teacher burnout. Reinforcing negative thoughts with positive thoughts is very important. Setting realistic, "to do lists" helps one accomplish tasks that need to be done. Limiting the day with 3 to 5 tasks that can be accomplished gives one the sense of accomplishment. Accepting things beyond one's attitude towards challenges. Research has proven that laughter often is the best medicine. The natural endorphins that are released while laughing, brings relief from the stresses of the world. Trying something new, can bring relief from the monotony of work. Teachers must avoid taking home, work every day. This will give the teacher a mental break. Sleep studies indicate that everyone needs a good night's sleep to function properly the next day.

Primary preventions, goal is to reduce the incidence of new cases of a disorder. Affected teachers may consult with other teachers on curriculum development or institutional planning which directly impacts classroom. Providing adequate resources and facilities to support teachers teaching. Staff should be provided with clear job descriptions and expectations to address role of ambiguity and conflict. Schools must establish and maintain open lines of communication between teachers and administrators. The management and leaders must allow and encourage professional development activities - i.e. mentoring, networking - to promote a sense of acceptance. Identification of mental health issues can be categorized as identification of feelings, thoughts, behavior and situations.

Detection of problems before they emerge as full blown disorder is called secondary prevention of teacher burnout. Some early symptoms are - feeling like not going to work, difficulty in concentrating on tasks, feeling overwhelmed by the workload and withdrawal from colleagues. Some other symptoms are engaging in conflictual relationships and having a general feeling of irritation regarding school. Finally experiencing in some digestive disorders, headaches and heart palpitations are some common symptoms experienced by individuals resulting in difficulty to function professionally. Extreme stress resulting to burnout also can be assisted by.

Tertiary prevention steps, such as should the teacher continue the job. Research findings indicate that most teachers when experience extreme symptoms of burnout, end their careers as educators. Some educators down shift and take less prestigious jobs or

even part time jobs. Some teachers reframe their sense of identity as educators and develop other interests. Some even develop themselves, get more qualified. Some common strategies that can help individuals are, exercising regularly, practicing yoga and meditation. Diet also has a bearing on stress, limiting caffeine, alcohol and not smoking offers substantial relief. Changing one's attitude to life can help play a major role i.e. "learn accept things you can't change, focus on the good instead of the bad in situations this learning to develop a positive attitude. Developing hobbies and volunteering also plays a significant part in reducing stress of individuals.

Mental health promotion describes how people can encourage mental health. Teachers and school management promote emotional and social well being by creating policies which promote health and well being of educators. They ensure an environment is provided with space for physical activity and facilities for learning.

Staff must nurture close supportive relationships with colleagues for support. School campus must also ensure the services of a professional counselor and psychiatrists for counseling and consultation. Healthy school policies which promote health and well being of individuals is very important. The school's physical environment like building designs, location, amenities provided all lend itself to the overall positive ambience provided for working staff and students. The school's social environment no doubt is a major factor that influences a Teaching staff's mental well being. Healthy relationships between staff and students, parents and the wider community certainly facilitates a positive mindset.

Thus teaching requires educators to tap into their inner resilience on a daily basis, which is the capacity to bounce back and keep going during different times. This helps educators and students to adapt and protect themselves against developing emotional and mental health problems. Finally to sum up the three key factors that foster resilience in people are a caring relationships, high and achievable expectations and opportunities to participate in their social community be it the home, school or the larger social network

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