

OVERVIEW ON TEACHER STRESS MANAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract: *The aim of the article is to give a theoretical and practical overview of occupational teacher stress interventions or programs, their objectives, applicability, and their effectiveness. The paper demonstrates that the lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of interventions for teacher stress management is caused by a limited number of studies and especially by the considerable heterogeneity of the existing ones, which makes it difficult to compare various empirical results. There is a need for better conceptualization and theoretical reflection on stress management interventions, the type of effects that could be expected under which conditions and for what length of time.*

Keywords: *teacher stress management; interventions effectiveness;*

1. Introduction

The profession of teaching is recognized as one of the most stressful occupations. Studies have found that almost 25% of teachers frequently experience a great amount of stress in their job (Kyriacou, 1998). Teacher stress is defined as the experience of negative, unpleasant emotions (such as tension, anger, or depression) that teachers feel as a result of some critical aspects of their work (Kyriacou, 2001). The stress experience is very common and it seems to be universal across cultures (Harney, 2008). Teachers' stress is related to negativism, absenteeism, and turnover, which negatively affect the climate of the classroom and lead to both academically and behaviorally poor outcomes for students.

While a significant part of the research has focused on understanding teachers' stress – sources and consequences (Montgomery and Rupp 2005), few professional interventions have been tested in order to support teachers' stress management and wellbeing. Stress management intervention is defined as techniques and programs that are designed to help employees modify their appraisal of stressful situations or to deal more effectively with the symptoms of stress, or both (Murphy 1996). The stress management literature categorizes the interventions designed to reduce occupational stress according to the *focus* of stress management and according to the *level* at which the intervention takes place (DeFrank, Cooper, 1987; Cooper, 2001; de Jonge, Dollard, 2002; Holman, Johnson, O'Connor, 2018). Regarding the *focus* of stress management, interventions are classified as *primary*, *secondary* or *tertiary*. *Primary interventions* aim to prevent stress from occurring by removing the sources of stress and enhancing the causes of well-being. *Secondary interventions*, the most widespread form of stress management within the organization (Dewe, 1994) aim to reduce the severity or duration of stress once it has occurred and to prevent the level of stress becoming problematic (Holman, Johnson, O'Connor, 2018). Secondary interventions focus on developing in employees stress management skills designed to diminish the impact of stressors exerted on the individual, aiming at raising awareness among individuals about the pressures exerted on them and enhancing individual coping strategies. This category provides employees with opportunities to engage in stress reducing activities and it includes techniques such as relaxation, meditation, cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness training, and exercise programmes (fitness, jogging, excursions), as well as other techniques such as training and interpersonal skill development (time management, conflict

resolution strategies). *Tertiary interventions*, which take the form of employee assistance programs (counseling) aim to rehabilitate and maximize functioning for individuals who are already experiencing or suffering from psychological ill-health. Regarding the *level* of the interventions, the most common distinction is between individual and organizational levels, including a third category, individual-organizational level interventions (De Frank și Cooper, 1987). Individual-level interventions focus on helping employees to develop skills to manage, cope with and reduce stress, whereas organizational-level interventions make more systemic changes to organizational practices that either target all employees or a specific group of workers (Holman, Johnson, O'Connor, 2018). Classifying stress management interventions according to their focus and level implies that both individual and organizational-level interventions can be primary, secondary and tertiary in nature (Holman, Johnson, O'Connor, 2018).

Arikewuyo (2004) classifies the stress management strategies depending on two types of parameters: active or passive strategies and behavioural or cognitive strategies. Combining the two criteria, the author describes four types of strategies: *inactive behavioural strategies* that involve escape and avoidance behaviours; these strategies include physical and recreational activities - practicing a sport or watching a good film; the individual also tends to be isolated from people who could create stressful situations; *active behavioural strategies* refer to confronting or attempting to change sources of stress; these strategies assume that the stressed individual imagines himself as a person who always succeeds, in any situation and under any circumstances, who is mentally organized and devoted as time and energy to his profession. By doing so, individuals try to cope with stressful situations. *Inactive cognitive strategies* imply the individuals' compliance with any of the superiors' expectations, even if they perceive their own helplessness, a state that causes mental tension and discomfort. Thus, the individual is at the disposal of the superiors, accepts any type of task he is trained for, working to fulfil all his responsibilities and the fixed deadlines. Individuals play the role of helpless actors in their workplace, accepting anything even when conditions are inconceivable. It is the case of those organisations that offer employees stress reduction services while subjecting them to demands that cause pressure and mental tension. *Active cognitive strategies* involve assessing problems, analysing stress sources, and searching for information and solutions. These strategies involve identifying stress sources in order to annihilate them, re-prioritize, and clarify the individual's situations in order to identify the most appropriate methods of managing and reducing stress. No method proves its effectiveness in successfully managing stress alone. Rather, a combination of these approaches can be effective. And this is due to the subjective way in which each individual reacts in stressful situations.

2. Synthesis of research on stress management interventions in the teaching profession

2.1. Difficulties in assessing teacher stress management interventions in terms of effectiveness and efficacy

One of the major drawbacks of studies on stress management interventions is primarily their low number, most of them being descriptive and correlational studies that provide consistent information on the causal factors of stress. Another significant limitation is related to the lack of a systematic and real evaluation of the effectiveness of the proposed programs, with very few studies providing empirical data demonstrating the effectiveness of the intervention. The vast majority of studies is unsystematic and provides only professional opinions (their impartiality can be questioned) to generate positive results. On the other hand, the lack of well-designed empirical research based on theoretical conceptions about the

effects of different type of interventions, the lack of longitudinal research design, the lack of a wide variety of research methods to measure the impact of interventions, are all difficulties associated with assessing the effectiveness of stress management programs.

Beehr and O'Hara (1987) also raise criticism of the validity of the results obtained from the evaluation of stress management interventions. The authors highlight the problems generated by internal, construct, and external validity. In terms of internal validity, the authors note that a number of factors (such as events occurring between measurements of a variable made before and after a training program, changes in the respondents due to the passing of time, but also personal characteristics of individuals, such as robustness) may influence the results of an intervention, these characteristics not being taken into account when assessing such a program. Regarding construct validity, an essential question that arises is whether the indicators under assessment (psychological, physiological, somatic or behavioural) really reflect levels of pressure experienced by participants in an intervention program. The solution to such a problem is the use of research procedures involving various investigative methods. In terms of external validity, the controversy may arise in relation to the capacity of an intervention implemented in a given context and within a certain period of time to produce similar effects in another context or under other circumstances, the generalization power being an important criterion in assessing the validity of a stress management program.

The authors describe three situations that may threaten the external validity of an intervention. The first is the *subject-treatment interaction* that occurs when an intervention is effective for a group of participants but not for other groups. A second situation is the *interaction treatment - context* in which intervention gives results in one context but not in another, aspect that can be found even within the same organization (there are major differences between departments in terms of culture or the organizational climate). Finally, there is a situation of *interaction between treatment and history* which suggests that an intervention can be effective in a time period, but not in others (Beehr and O'Hara, 1987).

Ivancevich et al. (1990) highlighted the difficulty of preventing a return to stress levels before the implementation of a stress management program. The recidivism appears especially in situations where the intervention does not bring changes in the environment or working conditions, thus not producing a real change in the stress level of the stressors exerted on the employees. A stress management program can tell people about the presence of stressors and provide them with a range of management skills, but there may be some stressors (excessive workload) that cannot be managed by the individual, but requires a wider change at management level.

2.2. Teacher stress management interventions/ programs

Stress management has been studied in various manners: a) some studies propose only measures to prevent or reduce occupational stress, general measures not addressed to a certain class of teachers with some particularities and specific needs involved in a specific professional context; these measures are either the consequences of complex organizational diagnoses (Travers and Cooper, 1996), or the result of existing research in the literature of occupational stress (Kyriacou, 2001; Maag, 2008), the authors not implementing any of these suggestions; so they cannot assess their impact on the level of stress experienced; b) other studies propose different stress management programs without assessing the impact of these interventions, only asking the participants' more or less objective opinions (Cinamon and Rich, 2005); c) the fewest of them develop, implement and evaluate intervention programs, the research design being an experimental one, including measurements of associated stress-related variables both before and after the intervention (Shimazu, Okada, Sakamoto and Miura, 2003).

This paper synthesizes some examples of intervention that have been proposed or implemented in the educational environment, while analysing the effectiveness of these programs in successfully managing the occupational stress.

In a complex research among British teachers, Travers and Cooper (1996) propose a series of measures to prevent and reduce occupational stress at three levels: individual, organizational (school level) and general (social policy level and educational policies). The first category of measures aims to raise awareness among individuals of the very important role each person plays in managing their own responses to stress. The results of the study have shown that a large number of teachers report symptoms of mental health deterioration and very high levels of anxiety. Physical exercise is one of the solutions proposed by the authors to alleviate the symptoms of those stress-related illnesses. Physical exercise is beneficial as it causes the release of hormones, glucose and lipids naturally released by stress response. This, because the exercise itself is a stressor - causes changes in blood flow, oxygen consumption, blood pressure, heart rate, breathing and metabolism. Physical activity reduces mental stress, acting as a mechanism of mental diversion - release of emotions or physical tensions (Travers and Cooper, 1996).

Many of the participants in the Travers and Cooper study have recorded high values for A-type personality variable, with broad implications in stress response. Consequently, the authors proposed, as part of a personal optimization program implemented at school level, to reduce this individual tendency through four ways of intervention: reducing hostility (which implies a change in lifestyle, because it is manifested especially when the individual is under the time pressure, is in a competitive situation, or when he/ she feels that his/ her self-esteem is threatened); stimulating relaxation (because these people appear to be permanently alert as if their well-being is constantly threatened, resulting in a chronic increase in sympathetic nervous system activity); stimulating physical exercise (thus reducing the risk of coronary artery disease) and reducing the psychomotor characteristics of A-type behaviour (with reference to those coronary risk indicators specific to personality type A - reduction of speech speed, reduction of statements involving self-references, etc.).

Another measure at the individual level proposed by Travers and Cooper refers to the improvement of time management skills, especially because professional activity is also influenced by the activities at home; the authors also list a number of advantages in developing these abilities: increased efficacy and efficiency, increased productivity, increasing leisure time, increasing professional satisfaction, reducing stress, increasing relaxation time opportunities, increasing planning opportunities and identifying long-term solutions, stimulating creativity (Travers and Cooper, 1996).

With regard to organizational stress reduction measures (school level), Travers and Cooper (1996) underline the need for counselling and establishing within the school of support groups for teachers, improving organizational support (qualitative and quantitative improvement of resources, reducing the administrative responsibilities which teachers are charged with, improving working conditions), adopting clear measures and drastic sanctions for students with disruptive behaviour, increasing the quality of school management (in terms of efficient use of human resources, creating a real organizational culture, the appropriateness of the leadership style to the particular context of the school).

Kyriacou (2001) believes that organizational stress reduction is correlated with the concern to identify those features that indicate a “healthy” organization and then to develop and implement organizational policies in line with these characteristics. The author lists some features of a “healthy” school organizational climate: good communication between the members, a strong sense of collegiality, management decisions based on consultation, a consensus on the key values and the standards pursued, the clear definition of roles and

expectations, positive feedback from the management, sufficient and quality material resources, availability for support and problem-solving, clear and easy to follow policies and procedures, building a pleasant working climate, providing career development counselling (Kyriacou, 2001).

A series of research in the stress field has shown that a major source of stress is the interaction between teacher and students (Maag, 2008). Also, the students' behaviours most likely to induce stress among teachers are: lack of respect, lack of attention, poor motivation for learning, poor performance, apathy and social incompetence of students (Hastings and Bahm, 2003). Therefore, Maag (2008) proposes an intervention program (without its implementation), based on the principles of rational-emotive therapy, in order to help teachers to manage the disruptive behaviour of students. The premises of the program are: a) some teachers find it difficult to keep their self-control when they have to deal with disturbing behaviours of students; b) the more emotional the emotional response to such behaviours is, the more likely it is for teachers to manage inefficiently the situations generated; c) high-stress teachers access less effective behaviours in managing student-generated situations; d) experiencing stress is the result of how individuals judge, assess or interpret situations or events, the consequence being the existence of irrational beliefs about students and the educational environment. The rational-emotive therapy (developed by Ellis in 1962) offers teachers the ability to manage the stressful situations generated by the disruptive behaviour of students. Following a program based on the principles of rational-emotive therapy, teachers can effectively control their own emotions and reactions and can easily access effective ways to respond to student behaviours.

Maag's approach is inspired by Miller's research (1986), which has developed an innovative way of recognizing and combating the most common styles of irrational thinking among teachers, styles that cause exaggeration and engaging in counterproductive behaviours. Miller states that, from the multitude of irrational thinking styles, four are most problematic: *demandingness* (the imperative *must*), *awfulizing* which refers to the conviction that a situation is more than 100% worse than it really is, *lack of tolerance* which implies a state of unhappiness for somebody, and *condemning* which refers to the tendency to be excessively critical with one's own person, others or the world at large. Ellis (1980, apud Maag, 2008) argues that the essential way through which teachers can manage their irrational beliefs involves three phases: a) identifying or recognizing irrational beliefs, b) explaining their irrational character, and c) reformulating them in rational beliefs, a process that is not easy, because these beliefs have become unconscious because of their repeated activation.

The program proposed by Maag (2008) requires teachers to be aware of how they interpret and experiment their interactions with students, each of which following the same pattern: *the events* (any situation the individual is part of, interactions with others), *the belief* (the interpretation or significance the individual gives to the situation or event), *the emotional reaction* (the emotions experienced as a result of interpretation – happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, guilt, etc.) and *the behaviour* (the verbal and nonverbal reaction to the situation, based on the conviction and feelings attached to it). The described aspects demonstrate that teachers can always choose what kind of response to act out to students' disturbing behaviours: they can use a rational interpretation that allows them to effectively control their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours, or they can allow students to control their behaviour because of an irrational interpretation of what they are doing or saying. As regards the first irrational style of thinking, *demandingness*, or that imperative (*not*) *must*, the author argues that it is the most difficult to fight to, because the necessary strategies go beyond social conventions. The imperative (*not*) *must* reflect a series of requests addressed to others, indicating that there is no alternative, the individual being forced by forces beyond his control to act in one way or another. In fact, the individual using these

words, and implicitly this style of thinking, does nothing but attempt to magically change reality instead of describing it and accepting it as it is. The reason, the author explains, is that when assessing behaviour, people tend to confuse the idea of accepting that behaviour with the idea of agreeing with it. In reality, these two notions have to be considered separately. An individual tends not to accept a certain behaviour if he does not agree with it. It is possible, however, to accept that behaviour has occurred, not necessarily agreeing with it. Once the individual accepts that behaviour has occurred, thus accepting the reality of a situation, it is possible to properly assess that situation and to identify effective ways to manage the event. Otherwise, it only wastes time and emotional energy. To combat *awfulizing* or turning things into real catastrophes, the individual must understand and accept that negative events can happen to them and that they can interpret them as either terrible (irrational) or simply unfortunate (rational). In order to avoid *awfulizing*, the author recommends that teachers evaluate the negative events in comparison to other types of events (death, paralysis, etc.) found in the instrument called *the bodily damage scale*. The idea of this tool is that when the individual is able to compare a negative event with a physical injury, a tangible, palpable situation that anyone who is avoiding, he will be emotionally affected proportional to the gravity of the event in question. *Lack of tolerance* and *condemning* are irrational responses easier to combat when the first two irrational thinking styles are controlled. Looking at events in the right perspective (by placing them on the scale of bodily affections), teachers realize that if they can withstand physical pain, they can also manage the event. If the other irrational thinking styles control the individual, it is more likely that he condemns others, the world or himself (Maag, 2008).

The author's conclusion is that when teachers avoid irrational thoughts about disruptive student behaviour, they automatically lower the level of emotional discomfort, being able to effectively manage these behaviours. Consequently, teachers feel they have control, they feel they master the situation, and so the level of the perceived stress is considerably reduced.

Cinamon and Rich (2005) propose a comprehensive organizational program designed to facilitate the overcoming/ solving the "work-family" conflict, a major source of stress, directly related to a number of workplace dysfunctions such as absenteeism, delays, poor performance, but also with increased levels of marital dissatisfaction, a poor performance of the role inside the family. Using an interdisciplinary approach, based on the theoretical models of the "work-family" conflict, on the socio-cognitive career theory (centred on the concept of self-efficacy) and on the literature on the promotion of health in organizations, the proposed program combines primary and secondary intervention strategies, focusing on two target audiences: school managers and teachers, especially debutants female teachers.

The general objectives of the program were: raising awareness among educational managers about the causes and consequences of the "work-family" conflict as an important source of stress; increasing understanding of the need for family-friendly organizational policies; increasing the understanding of the risk group on the structuring of the role identity associated with the profession and the family; improving the skills and attitudes of the risk group regarding the harmonization of the two types of roles; increasing the self-esteem of the risk group in managing the "work-family" conflict. The program was structured in two parts, the first being addressed to school managers (directors, heads of departments, coordinators, etc.), people with direct influence on organizational culture and policies; this component intended to develop managers' awareness on the needs of employees related to work and family life. The second part targeted the teachers vulnerable to the negative effects of conflict role, especially young beginners, with emphasis being placed on the development of coping abilities. Both interventions involved three types of activities: a) exploring personal identity to help participants assess their social identity and personal significance associated with their

professional and family roles; b) information on the various labour policies, the “work-family” conflict and on a series of individual and organizational conflict-reduction strategies; c) development of multiple role management skills, as well as managerial skills in general. The training strategies involved in the program were based on diverse methods such as role-play, collective discussion with feedback, case studies, presentation and analysis of models or examples of good practice, sharing of personal experiences.

The impact of the implemented program is described by the analysis of the answers given by the participants in an interview. They reveal a series of benefits: a) the importance of sharing experiences, which had as a secondary effect the consolidation of the personal and professional relations between the teachers; b) developing skills related to effective conflict management, addressing conflict situations, providing feedback; c) self-awareness in clarifying the personal meanings given to the different roles, identifying their own style of coping with the stress generated by the role conflict. The authors emphasize the importance of some principles in the development and implementation of the intervention program, as follows: ensuring the confidentiality of the participants, respecting the values and culture of each participant, approaching the program as a possible example of intervention and not as a generally valid model. Although it is a program addressed to educational actors, its implementation needs to be adapted to the particular circumstances and specific needs of individuals in different schools.

The experimental research conducted by Shimazu and his collaborators focused primarily on examining the effects of a stress management program for Japanese teachers on their responses to stress factors, social support as a stress moderator, and coping mechanisms of stress (Shimazu et al., 2003). The program combined cognitive-behavioural training to improve coping skills with relaxation training to reduce stress response. After the program implementation, the main consequence identified by the authors was an increase in the level of social support from the fellow teachers participating in the intervention. Researchers also identified a number of possible explanations for improving social support, as follows: interaction with other colleagues through group discussions and role plays has led participants to be aware of the existence and importance of social support, issues that they had not perceived prior to the intervention; participation in the program has facilitated the opportunity to interact with other members of the school, which has led to an increase in the perception of social support from colleagues. The results also suggested that a program for a particular group may be more effective than for a general one, intervention producing a decrease in the anger level in the subgroup with acute stress reactions and an increase in the use of the coping mechanism (re-prioritization of tasks, renunciation of minor pressure-generating problems) for those with very high level of control of their job. The intervention did not produce any change in coping and stress responses for the entire group of participants. The explanation offered by the authors is that many of the participants (64.7%) joined the program at the direct suggestion of the manager rather than a personal need. Thus, teachers were much less motivated by the program. The involvement of participants in the design and implementation of a program is one of the success factors of any interventions. In this case, the resistance of the participants to the proposed program is also explicable. In addition, the school’s schedule made it difficult for teachers to participate in the program, affecting systematic learning (the interval between sessions being two or even four weeks). In addition to the difficulties outlined above, the authors also state that the program was not designed based on the real, particular needs of a school, which led to a decrease in the expected effects. Thus, the more variation in the workload of individuals is, the less likely the program will respond appropriately to individual needs (Shimazu et al., 2003). A general constraint identified by the authors, which applies to any stress management program, is that it takes time for the

participants to transfer the skills of coping in real life, being thus difficult to assess the long-term effects of the intervention.

3. Conclusions

Providing stress management interventions for teachers addresses individual needs and creates a culture of caring and relatedness that has a positive impact on the education general process. Stress management programs provide opportunities for teachers to experience supportive activities and to gain new knowledge about stress, coping skills, and psychological and physical distress, knowledge and skills for managing the increasing demands in their roles.

Ivancevich and Matteson (1987) highlight a number of key principles in developing valid intervention programs on stress: accurate diagnosis of stressors specific to the work context and the extent to which employees experience stress (the level of stress experienced); the use of experimental research design to identify the effects of a specific intervention; the use of longitudinal assessments to examine the long-term effects of the intervention and test their persistence over time; stress assessment through several research methods to avoid the bias generated by the uniqueness of the method.

Similarly, Cooper and his collaborators (2001) propose a series of steps to be taken to enhance the impact and effectiveness of organizational stress reduction efforts: a) identify factors that can be potential sources of stress; b) rigorous assessment of the stress level experienced by employees; c) implementing interventions that focus on problem solving and not just on managing stress symptoms; d) the use of evaluation criteria that examine a variety of outcomes after the intervention, not just an improvement in the general well-being of the individual.

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