#42 PAPER 57 -
BURNOUT SYNDROME AT THE EMPLOYEES IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Mihaela Rus, Mihaela Luminita Sandu, Mihail Gheorghe Banariu
Ovidius University of Constanta, The Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences

Abstract
The concept of "general adaptation syndrome" is based on Selye's observations on the patients suffering from mild medical conditions, that manifested many symptoms similar to those of the subjects who had been subjected to the effort to respond to various stressors. The "burnout" syndrome is an advanced stage of stress at the workplace and may cause the total and/or permanent failure of returning to work. The abnormal structure of the working program and of the working tasks at the workplace, with a negative climate may cause depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, sleep changes, frustrations, the development of pessimistic attitudes and, in extreme cases, it can even lead to panic attacks (Singh, 2000).

Keywords: syndrome, exhaustion, reduction, public institution

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress is a major problem in most countries. Besides the fact that it is responsible for many diseases, it also causes much suffering.

Stress occurs as an adaptive response of the body to those external factors perceived as aggressive and it often induces a state of alarm felt at both psychological (tension, fear, anxiety) and physical levels (increased levels of adrenaline, the intensification of heartbeats, sweating).

Some authors consider that the etymology of the word "stress" is partially derived from the abbreviation of the English word "distress" and from the word "estrece" in the old French language, both in the sense of constraint and suffering (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001).

Considered the "father of the concept of stress," scholar Hans Hugo Bruno Selye has studied various aspects of the impact of the organism’s adaptation to the environment and established the basis of the general adaptation syndrome.

The concept of "general adaptation syndrome" (GAS) is based on Selye's observations on the patients suffering from mild medical conditions, that manifested many symptoms similar to those of the subjects who had been subjected to the effort to respond to various stressors. Thus, there appeared the idea of studying the physical effect of the exposure to stress, in the laboratory, on guinea pigs. The scientist believes that "completely different diseases, beyond their specific manifestations, have a common corollary of manifestations: malaise, loss of appetite, digestive disorders, painful joints and muscles, fever etc."(Singh, 2000).

Also known as "the invisible disease", stress is usually the result of the adequacy of the professional life pace to the one of the private life. The most destructive and dangerous events are those involving conflict or loss. It may be the loss of a person or of an important thing; a physical suffering may affect one’s self-image and self-confidence if his/her normal life cannot be continued.

Suffering due to stress is not a sign of weakness. Stress arises from the responsibilities that overwhelm us, to which there may be added the lack of support from our colleagues and family (Zapf, Seifert, Schmutte & Holz, 2003).

1.1. The burnout syndrome

One of the most significant discoveries made by EWCS (European Working Conditions Survey) is the increase in the relative work patterns in the last 15 years. A large number of EU workers have reported that they work at high pace or at tightened deadlines. It is important to note the substantial reduction of the persons who

Corresponding author. E-mail address: psiholog_m@yahoo.com
reported that they do not work at a very high pace (from 36% to 21%) and at tightened deadlines (from 31% to 19%) (Zerbe, 2000).

The burnout syndrome – the syndrome of complete exhaustion - is a pathology arising from the individual’s interaction with certain adverse psychosocial working conditions.

When we talk about psychosocial risks, we refer to "those conditions met in a work situation, which are directly related to the organization of work, to its content and tasks and which also have the ability to affect both the worker’s health and the conduct of his/her work activities" (Gil-Monte, 2005).

The complexity of psychosocial factors is mainly due to adding to these variables in the work environment the perceptions and experiences of the worker/workers who act as mediators.

The "burnout" syndrome is an advanced stage of stress at the workplace and may cause the total and/or permanent failure of returning to work. The abnormal structure of the working program and of the working tasks at the workplace, with a negative climate, may cause depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, sleep changes, frustrations, the development of pessimistic attitudes and, in extreme cases, it can even lead to panic attacks.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Objectives:

1. Identifying the degree of emotional exhaustion

2.2. Hypotheses:

HS1: Most human resources in public administration feel emotional exhaustion;

2.3. Research Methodology

The MBI-GS (by Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach & Jason 1996), questionnaire traditionally includes three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (five items), cynicism (five items) and reduced personal accomplishment (six items). The questionnaire constructed for the purpose of this research included both items ranging from the MBI-GS category (variables: cynicism, emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment) and items with the purpose of quantifying the additional variables (satisfaction, organizational climate, the conflict between the work environment and the family environment, organizational commitment).

Participant: Employees (N=50) in public institutions

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Emotional exhaustion

In terms of this variable, we started our scientific approach from the hypothesis that the majority of human resources in public administration felt a sense of emotional exhaustion.

Thus, the respondents have this sensation and state that they felt depression at the workplace once a week. A significant number of respondents (8) stated that the frequency of this feeling is of several times a week or several times a month. The majority of respondents (21) considered that they have this feeling at the workplace several times a week. A significant number (17) assessed this frequency at once a week (Figure 1).
Most respondents (18) assessed the frequency of experiencing fatigue at work, associating it with number 5 - once a week. A significant number of respondents (11) stated that they had this sensation several times a week. Most respondents (14) stated that they feel fed up with their professional activity once a week; a significant number of respondents (13) consider that they have this feeling every day.

Given the interpretation of the results of the questionnaire for this item, the proposed hypothesis is confirmed - the majority of the human resources in public administration felt the sensation of emotional exhaustion.

3.2. Cynicism

In this case, cynicism hides an impersonal and unfriendly response to the customers/ users of the public service. The depersonalization that quantifies this variable is a problem in the institutions that value the personal sensitivity to the needs of the customers/ users of the public service.

By making a correlation with the previous items, we find that the frequency of the respondents who feel a sense of hopelessness at the workplace is quite high (16); a sense of indifference towards the customers/ beneficiaries of public service is felt to the same extent (Figure 1.2).

3.3. The reduction of personal fulfillment

Professional effectiveness is linked to the sense of competence and success in doing the job. The sense of personal achievement is transformed into success and efficiency, in having a beneficial impact on other people.

Our hypothesis, in this case, is that the majority of respondents lack the sense of personal achievement in connection to their work.

The respondents have the feeling of doubt in connection to their organizational role, the majority (14) considering the frequency of this feeling as several times a week. A significant number of respondents (13) consider the frequency of this feeling as being once a week. The feeling of interest in professional development is felt very little, which is why more and more respondents are increasingly less interested and enthusiastic about their work and consider that there are few important things related to their work (Figure 3).
Most respondents (19) stated that they lack the feeling of affiliation in connection to the achievements of their organization; they associated it with number 4 on the frequency scale – i.e. several times a month. A significant number of respondents (17) have this feeling once a week (Figure 4) and, quite often, they have a sense of professional failure (15 respondents).

Most respondents (23) assessed the sense of organizational affiliation, associating it with number 6 - several times a week. A significant number of respondents (14) have this sensation on a daily basis.

Considering the results of the questionnaire, we can say that our hypothesis – i.e. most respondents lack the sense of personal achievement in relation to their workplace - is confirmed.

3.4. The organizational climate

The climate reflects the employees’ shared perceptions on their organization, especially on policies, procedures, models of support and interaction.

In this case, we started our research from the hypothesis that most respondents have a shared negative perception on their organization, especially on policies, procedures, models of support and interaction.

Most respondents (18) assessed the organizational climate characteristic of their organizational affiliation, associating the feeling of absolute subordination with number 6 on the frequency scale - several times a week. A significant number of respondents (13) have this sensation on a daily basis (Figure 5). Considering the results of the questionnaire, we can say that our hypothesis – i.e. the majority of respondents have a shared negative perception on their organization - is confirmed.

3.5. The conflict work-family environment

The work-family conflict is defined as the point up to which the role at the workplace and the family role are incompatible.

In this case, our hypothesis was that most respondents perceive a conflict between their work and family environment, defined as the point to which their role at the workplace and their family role are incompatible.

Most respondents (18) assessed the existence of a conflict between their work and family environments, associating it with number 7 on the frequency scale – i.e. daily. A significant number of respondents (14) have this sensation several times a week. Their work becomes a disturbing factor in the relationship with their family members and intervenes in carrying family activities.

Considering the results of the questionnaire, we can say that our hypothesis - the majority of respondents feel that there is a conflict between their work and family environment, defined as the point to which the role of the workplace and the family role are incompatible - is confirmed.
3.6. Organizational commitment

The commitment reflects an individual’s emotional attachment to and identification with his/her organization (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001).

In this case, our hypothesis is that most respondents do not prove an emotional attachment to their organization, that they do not identify themselves with its procedures, models of support and interaction.

Most respondents (16) assessed the sense of commitment to their organization, associating the frequency of such a conflict with the number 2 on the frequency scale - a few times a year or less. A significant number of respondents (14) said that they had never felt this sensation.

Given the survey results, we can say that this hypothesis - the majority of respondents do not prove emotional attachment to their organization and do not identify themselves with its procedures, support and interaction models - is confirmed.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The work related stress is now recognized internationally as a major challenge related to occupational health and safety.

The scientific hypothesis we started from within our study was that most of the staff in public institutions experience high levels of stress; this hypothesis was confirmed, given our applicative scientific approach.

The study aimed to identify the burnout syndrome at the human resources in public administration, based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS) assessment questionnaire, which is relevant for all occupational groups.

The main conclusions arising from the interpretation of the case study are:

• The majority of the human resources in public administration have a sense of emotional exhaustion;
• Most respondents prove cynicism about their responsibilities at the workplace;
• Most respondents lack the sense of personal achievement in connection to their work;
• The general satisfaction level felt by most respondents is not low;
• The majority of respondents have a shared negative perception on their organization;
• Most respondents perceive a conflict between their work and family environments, defined as the point to which the role of the workplace and the family role are incompatible;
• Most respondents do not prove an emotional attachment to their organizational affiliation and do not identify themselves with the organization’s procedures, models of support and interaction.

Public sector organizations are populated by human resources presenting a number of symptoms that can be associated with burnout. However, this research is no more than a first step in such an endeavor.

The burnout symptoms have negative consequences on the individual’s life in general, diminishing the quality of life and enhancing the problems in the family and in the entire social network situated outside the worker’s professional life, because the interactions become strained and communication becomes deficient, tending towards isolation.

The consequences of the burnout syndrome on interpersonal relations, due to work activities, is associated with negative attitudes and behaviors and with the state of emotional exhaustion. This pattern of behavior and attitude induces a deterioration of relationships and an increase in interpersonal conflicts.

The burnout syndrome has negative consequences affecting both the organization and the work environment, and it is manifested by a progressive deterioration of communication and interpersonal
relationships (indifference or coldness); it reduces productivity and work quality and, therefore, the employees’ yield, which affects the services provided by the organization.

There appear feelings ranging from indifference to despair towards labor activity; high absenteeism with a high degree of demotivation is recorded; the desire to leave the workplace for another one appears, with an increased demoralization level, and it may even lead to professional reconversion or to leaving the work field by the person experiencing these feelings. (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma and Bakker, 2002)

Far from considering this topic exhausted, we mention that our approach aims to bring forth concrete ways to manage stress situations and the burnout syndrome applicable to the staff of public institutions.

In the specific conditions of a modern society, the emergence of stress and of the burnout syndrome is a problem that tends to turn into a global phenomenon, with the potential to affect all categories of employees. Therefore, the topic represents—in our opinion—an issue on which we want to make at least a minimum contribution, through this paper.

5. REFERENCES


