



Journal of Nursing

Revista de Enfermagem

UFPE On Line

ISSN: 1981-8963

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

REFLECTIONS OF THE BURNOUT SYNDROME IN PHYSICAL AND MENTAL BODY OF COLLEGE PROFESSORS

REFLEXOS DA SÍNDROME DE BURNOUT NO CORPO FÍSICO E MENTAL DE PROFESSORES UNIVERSITÁRIOS

REFLEJOS DEL SÍNDROME DE BURNOUT EN EL CUERPO FÍSICO Y MENTAL DE PROFESORES UNIVERSITARIOS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to analyze the impacts of the Burnout Syndrome in physical and mental body of college professors. **Method:** this is an exploratory and descriptive study, with qualitative approach, conducted with 17 professors from the Nursing Graduation Course of a public university at the municipality of Natal/RN/Brazil. The data collection was conducted between the months of April and June 2012, using the technique of semi-structured interview. The data analysis was performed through the content analysis technique. The project was approved by the Ethics Research Committee, under Protocol nº 0287.0.51.000-11. **Results:** After analyzing the interviews, the category following has emerged << *Everyday practice of professors and stress* >>, with three subcategories: << *Routine of practices/traineeships* >>; << *Distribution of activities in time* >>; << *Stress: beyond the classes* >>. **Conclusion:** the period of practical classes generates more wear to the professor and, thanks to the triad - teaching, research and extension-, he needs more time to meet the demand, thereby generating a high level of stress. **Descriptors:** Professional Exhaustion; Professors; Occupational Health; Nursing.

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar os reflexos da Síndrome de Burnout no corpo físico e mental dos professores universitários. **Método:** estudo exploratório, descritivo, com abordagem qualitativa, realizado com 17 docentes de Enfermagem de uma Universidade Pública de Natal/RN/Brasil. A coleta de dados foi realizada entre os meses de abril e junho de 2012, utilizando a entrevista semiestruturada. A análise dos dados se deu através da análise de conteúdo. O projeto foi aprovado pelo Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa, sob Protocolo nº 0287.0.51.000-11. **Resultados:** após a análise das entrevistas emergiu a categoria << *Prática cotidiana do professor e o estresse* >>, com três subcategorias: << *Rotina de práticas/estágios* >>; << *Distribuição das atividades no tempo* >>; << *Estresse: para além das aulas* >>. **Conclusão:** o período de aulas práticas gera maior desgaste ao professor e, graças à tríade - ensino, pesquisa e extensão-, ele necessita de mais tempo para cumprir a demanda, gerando assim estresse elevado. **Descritores:** Esgotamento Profissional; Docentes; Saúde Ocupacional; Enfermagem.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: analizar los reflejos del Síndrome de Burnout en el cuerpo físico y mental de los profesores universitarios. **Método:** estudio exploratorio, descriptivo, con abordaje cualitativo, realizado con 17 docentes de Enfermería de una Universidad Pública de Natal/RN/Brasil. La colecta de datos fue realizada entre los meses de abril y junio de 2012, utilizando la entrevista semi estructurada. El análisis de los datos se dio a través del análisis de contenido. El proyecto fue aprobado por el Comité de Ética en Investigación, sobre Protocolo nº 0287.0.51.000-11. **Resultados:** después del análisis de las entrevistas surgió la categoría << *Práctica cotidiana del profesor y el estrés* >>, con tres subcategorías: << *Rutina de prácticas/pasantías* >>; << *Distribución de las actividades en el tiempo* >>; << *Estrés: para fuera de aula* >>. **Conclusión:** el período de clases prácticas genera mayor desgaste al profesor y, gracias a la tríade - enseñanza, investigación y extensión-, él necesita de más tiempo para cumplir la demanda, generando así estrés elevado. **Descriptor:** Agotamiento Profesional; Docentes; Salud Ocupacional; Enfermería.

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INTRODUCTION

The human body responds in different ways when it is threatened or suffers an injury, and these responses might be adaptive or not, thus determining the boundary between health and disease conditions. This is what happens with stress. In reasonable quantities, it is necessary to the body, but when in excess, might bring up consequences for the body and mind of the individual.¹

Each person has an ability to adapt and respond to stressful events, which is expected, because it stimulates the growth and the life itself, in other words, it is a response that acts as protection to keep the body's balance.¹ The duration and intensity of stress are likely to cause adverse short or long term effects, culminating in a psychosomatic illness. The Burnout Syndrome also known as "Professional Exhaustion Syndrome" is a type of prolonged response to both emotional and interpersonal stressors in a chronic way at the workplace.² It is mainly experienced among professionals who constantly deal with extraneous difficulties and problems, care-related situations, who provide care and continuously deal with humans, such as teachers and healthcare professionals.³

The term Burnout is derived from the English "burn", which means burning, and "out", which means outside, exterior, and it might be understood as "complete combustion" or "be consumed from the inside out"; as syndrome, is characterized by a set of signs and symptoms, is a condition which begins and ends with psychological aspects and culminates in physical problems.²⁻³ The syndrome consists of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (emotional wear), depersonalization (negative reactions towards the work and the public with whom it works), decreased personal involvement in the workplace (feelings of incompetence).²⁻³

Burnout levels show variations based on culture, professional categories and inherent characteristics to each work.⁴ By being a subjective experience, it involves negative attitudes, whether for the client, the employee or the organization, which brings up prejudices to the worker, the employer and the society at large.²

Although any person be subject to occupational stress, professionals working both in teaching activities and in the direct care of the people end up getting a double load of stress due to the need for multiple skills, which facilitates the emergence of the Burnout Syndrome.³ Nowadays, the duties imposed on college professors are many,

among them, teaching activities, students mentoring, administrative tasks, attendance at meetings, councils, continued participation in courses and other resources, with a view to improving their professional qualification.⁵ In addition, we could mention: research activities, bureaucratic processes and supervision of students in theoretical and practical classes.

Thus, the reflections on how college professors are affected by stress at work have led to the question that has been configured in the following guiding question: What are the reflections of the Burnout Syndrome in physical and psychological body of professors from the Nursing Department of a federal and public university at the Rio Grande do Norte State?

The accomplishment of this study aims at helping professionals to identify, in their daily lives, the aggravating and triggering factors of stress and the influence thereof on their work and everyday lives, so that, identifying these hazards, they can develop tools and ways to prevent them and, consequently, achieve a better quality of life in the workplace.

Accordingly, this study aims at analyzing the impacts of the Burnout Syndrome in physical and mental body of college teachers.

METHOD

This is an exploratory and descriptive study, with qualitative approach. The exploratory researches have like objective to provide greater familiarity with the problem, with sights to make it more detailed or to enable the building of hypotheses. The descriptive studies have like main goal to describe the characteristics of a given population or phenomenon by means of standardized techniques of data collection.⁶

This study sought, from questionings towards the professors, describing the reflections that their daily activities entail for their own quality of life. The research subjects were 17 professors from the Nursing Department at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), among which there are professors in regimen of exclusive dedication (ED), 40 hours, or 20 weekly hours. We have included the effective professionals who already had at least six months of job in the institution at stake and who were not removed and/or vacation.

For the data collection procedure, we have used the semi-structured interview containing two questions with regard to the stressors in the teaching activity and their relationships, namely: 1) Describe your activities as a

professor in a normal working week 2) What do you consider as the most stressful action in class room? And, concerning situations of practical classes or supervised traineeships? The interviewees' statements were recorded on a MP4 audio device and, later, transcribed in their full versions. The data were collected from April to June 2012.

The study met the Resolution 196/96 of the Brazilian Ministry of Health, which governs the research involving human beings. The project was subjected and approved by the Ethics Research Committee of the UFRN, by obtaining approval protocol nº 0287.0.51.000-11. The anonymity of the subjects was preserved through identification with the letter "D", referring to the *docentes* (professors in Portuguese language), followed by a cardinal number (D1, D2, D3...).

Data analysis was performed through content analysis, specifically the thematic analysis, by virtue of being one of the best ways to assess qualitative researches in the health scope. In this type of analysis, there is the pre-analysis, in which a thorough reading of the interviews will be held, in order to seize their content; material exploration, through which the categories that will determine the specificities of the topics will be identified and, finally, the treatment of results and interpretation thereof.⁷

According to the mutual ideas of the studied subjects, it was possible to group them in the following category: Everyday practice of professors and stress, and this one was rearranged in three subcategories: Routine of practices/traineeships; Distribution of activities in time; Stress: beyond the classes.

RESULTS E DISCUSSION

From the collection of sociodemographic data, we have designed the profile of professors in relation to gender, marital status, titration, working arrangement, training time, teaching time in UFRN and working arrangement. We have also measured the frequency with which the socioeconomic variables are present in the studied sample, in this case, a total of 17 participants.

♦ Everyday practice of professors and stress

This category describes the daily life of college professors from the viewpoint thereof, describing the daily routine of the occupation professor-nurse, as well as the theoretical and practical activities that play influence in the body and mind of the professor and that can lead to the Burnout Syndrome.

♦ Routine of practices/traineeships

In the first category, the mutual speeches report that the daily practice of the college professor is focused on the development of theoretical activities at the beginning of the semester; development of researches, proofreading, elaboration of scientific papers.

Nonetheless, throughout the semester, the professor is responsible for conducting practical classes in traineeship fields, monitoring academic students in full-time; this factor was mentioned by professors as generator of stress and professional wear. As we can see in the speeches below:

[...] At the beginning of the semester, my weekly routine is a little lighter compared to teaching, because as we are nine professors, not every day we are in the classroom; then you have greater flexibility in the schedule, we become able to peacefully organize ourselves for preparing lessons, preparing exams, evaluations, check them; then the work flows in a very quiet manner at the beginning of the semester. (D13)

In practical classes is that the workload is longer for the professor, they last more than 20 hours for each semester of practice and at other times, thus only four remain; we hold activities of meeting planning, preparation of classes, mentoring students. (D14)

As seen in the speeches, the college professor has less free time to carry out other activities required by the university institution, unleashing some stress upon knowing of the many activities that have to be met, despite the limited workload.

Thus, the pressure/tension and the accumulation of activities lead to excitement and/or anguish, because the work is a generating source of resources for meeting their needs, however, many individuals do not work only for getting the wages that they receive, but rather to see the results of their efforts.⁸ In addition, the practical classes generate another aggravating factor, which is the excessive number of students per professor, who needs to follow-up all students during the accomplishment of procedures throughout the course of the entire workload of the traineeship, such as medications administration, vesical probing, gastric and enteral probing, dressings, assessing nursing notes and evolutions, among others, when it is practically impossible to follow-up five or even six students at once.

This entails stress for professors, taking into account the large number of activities to be held and all accountability that these

actions involve. This has been observed in the following stretches:

That is exhausting, because we are increasing the number of vacancies in the college admission exam, but the number of professors of the discipline does not follow the same proportion [...] then, groups of six people is a highly stressful factor for a professor on traineeship, practical. (D6)

The issue of the number of students per professor, I have five, six students, and I cannot stay with them all at the same time, so I think this is the most stressful issue, suddenly the student is unattended to perform a procedure, something, and we cannot be wasting procedures. (D8)

In some public institutions of the studied place, the number of students is restricted in their sectors, and, consequently, everyone wins: the professor has the opportunity to follow-up more closely that student, who becomes safer to have the professional by his side and by the side of the patient, who, in turn, receives a better quality service. Hence, the tension among everyone involved in the care is reduced.

In this context, the practical classes induce the professors to accumulate functions, because, in addition to the role of educator, they play the role of caregivers, thereby generating an overload of work and, therefore, become more susceptible to stress.⁸

Allied to this, there is the issue of the precariousness of services, which are usually attached to public hospitals suffering from the abandonment of government administrations and from the scarcity of resources, such as those exposed in the classroom, as can be seen through the lines below:

What really annoys me, is [...] the training field is not suitable to the teaching-learning process of the student, [...] and I'm always being placed in these training fields that have not the slightest physical condition, minimum condition of safety, minimal condition of respect for the human being. (D5)

This is a challenge for us, it is as if you had to say so: look, you saw now what is appropriate, you will now reach the inappropriate practice, now you will have to look away what could be done in a different manner, but it should not happen; then it is also a great wear for all teaching. (D10)

Other studies also highlight the division of tasks, hierarchy, command and lack of autonomy as factors of suffering at work.⁹ It should be emphasized that, to achieve the advancement of the professor's learning, it is required having a personal development coupled with the institutional support, given

that this is the actual challenge of professors in the higher education level.¹⁰

Occasionally, the professor is allocated on a traineeship field in which the low demand for services worries him by compromising the student's learning, especially when it comes to primary health care, where many of the services that should be offered cannot be performed, due to the lack of structure, materials and supplies. Hence, this demand that could be an opportunity to the student learns more, ends up being directed to other sites.

Although there are numerous laws, resolutions, decrees and opinions that regulate the teachers / professors' formation and profession, it was not possible to transform the reality of these professionals.¹¹ This makes clear the complexity of the profession, the numerous duties and requirements and the gap between what is needed to provide quality education and the lack of conditions for exercising it.¹²

♦ Distribution of activities in time

In this subcategory, the mutual speeches reported the activities of professors during the working week, since there are many tasks to which the college professor is submitted and the work routine ends up becoming extensive and exhaustive.

Among the activities, we should mention: classes planning, proofreading, students mentoring, elaboration of scientific papers, attendance at meetings and conferences, outreach projects, research groups, among others. We can visualize them in the cutouts below:

[...] When I'm not in the room performing tests, theoretical test, theoretical lesson, I'm in my room, right! Researching, writing papers [...] is [...] correcting the TP works (Term Paper), rearranging lessons, planning the semester. (D11)

When there is theoretical class, I am every day in theoretical class, lesson planning, correcting exams, is... And when you start the training, during the week at the traineeship place and [...] Making assessment of students too, guiding TP, which takes place in the entire semester. (D16)

All these tasks require a lot of time, and this is exclusively directed to the work. Usually, for meeting all activities, or by having to also hold the obligations of the personal life, professors end up compromising its mealtimes, which, in the long term, can cause serious health complications. Fact mentioned in the following speeches:

Usually, the afternoon activity is performed at early afternoon and there's no time for lunch. (D5)

I go out home about half past six, six and forty; the training ends at noon, half past noon and thirty, I come here and take my children; I come home at one o'clock, I have my lunch about half past one [...] soon, I got to return. (D17)

Inevitably, in the attempt to meet the obligations, the professor has to bring bureaucratic tasks, such as proofreading, attendance records and note registrations of students to its own home, requiring both physical and mental efforts in an even greater level.¹³

This physical and mental effort over time leads to stress-related disorders, including the Burnout Syndrome. Its main manifestations are: decreased self-esteem, emotional exhaustion, decreased productivity and self-realization at work and absenteeism.¹³

In the studied reality, practical classes take place from Monday to Thursday; the Friday, due to being a theoretically "free" day, ends up being, often, even more exhaustive, because of the fact that most of the activities are directed to this day. As mentioned by professors, they often have to be in two places at once, because in addition to their usual tasks, there are department meetings, research groups and personal activities

This also requires the use of schedules that theoretically should be for their family, leisure, self-care, which consequently generate stress, wear and lack of motivation to play work activities, which might be realized in the following stretches:

On weekends, it is [...] sometimes I have tasks too, preparing lessons, elaborating of some reports, finally, evaluation of students; then, it is difficult to get a weekend in which we do not have any working task, [...] my day is practically made to work. (D2)

The truth is, there are 20 hours in theory, because we don't work only in the morning. In that period I have to take classes, sometimes [...] I stay in the morning, afternoon, night, preparing lessons, correcting proofs, for example, because we cannot check them all at once. (D11)

This frequent need to use the extra-work time generates difficulties in performing daily tasks in a satisfactory way, causing a clinical picture of anxiety, tension and nervousness in these professors.¹⁴ When the working demands overwhelm the limit of the worker and the pressure on the time to perform the tasks, there is a great risk of reaching a state

of stress in which one cannot recover the energy, i.e., the Burnout Syndrome is raised up.¹⁵

Even if the professor fails to have his lunch, carrying his working activities to the home, the requirements inherent to the college professor are so many that, often, he becomes unable to meet the demand, as we can identify in the professor's speech below:

Ultimately, we have to do some planning and, most of the times, we cannot fulfill this planning because many demands are raised up, not only related to teaching activities, [...] and it directly interferes in the activities related to the teaching at large. (D10)

I already start the week knowing that I won't be able to meet the activities that are scheduled for that period, besides the things that will be emerging every day, which also are not being planned and end up interfering with the ones already planned [...] (D10)

The human being seeks to constitute itself as subject through the labor, at the same time as its productive activity is presented as a way of personal fulfillment, such that it becomes socially acceptable the fact that the professional feels itself exhausted in function of the working activities, as a symbol of dedication and commitment.⁵ This, coupled with the large volume of activities and the possibility to carry the working tasks to anywhere, with the aid of new technologies, provides an atmosphere of stress not only at work, but also at home.

Working conditions and all circumstances over which professors need to act can generate over-exertion or hyper-request of their psychological and physiological functions.¹⁴ Accordingly, it generates a high stress load that, when constant, causes the Burnout Syndrome, i.e., the exhaustion.⁸

Studies show that stress can cause signs and symptoms in the body, such as: problems with memory, tingling sensation in the extremities, constant tiredness, thoughts focused on a single issue, excessive irritability and emotional sensitivity, which are manifested depending on the stress phase in which the individual is going through.¹⁶

As if the duties required by the university institution were not enough, the college professor has yet to appoint a time for his professional upgrading, since that new nursing-related innovations are emerging at every moment, as respondents have highlighted:

I'm at my classroom, right [...] updating classes that I already have, ok! Doing updates and constantly studying. (D11)

Currently, I'm doing a doctorate, then, in some afternoons, I'm in the doctorate's activities, orientation activities, data collection; so, I'm there, I'm divided [...] (D14)

Another factor mentioned by respondents was the accumulation of working bonds. Professors working in labor regimen of 20 or 40 hours usually also have employment link with other institutions. The double working hours make the professor feels worn out, causing serious physical and mental problems. As we can see below:

I really was very exhausted, because I was working all days from seven in the morning until seven at night, except on Friday ... I was damaging me, even my health was being prejudiced. (D1)

For example, in the traineeship period, I work at night, I finish the duty and go straight to the training places, so I'm pretty much awake more than 24 hours, with no sleep periods. And on Monday, it becomes even worse, when I work on Monday at night. (D11)

The above mentioned statement has direct implications in nursing care, since the professional already gets the work shift exhausted, and the risk of performing a procedure incorrectly increases.

The double working hours are often related to the issue of low wages, which makes the professor-nurse seeks other employment bonds to meet his needs.¹⁷ Furthermore, the fact that the nursing professional has a life devoted almost exclusively to the labor activity significantly reduces its time for leisure, rest and sleep, which produces high levels of stress and affects both its relationship with co-workers and towards the patient itself.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

It is also important to highlight that the excessive workload in the nursing scope is not only linked the amount of activities that the professional has to perform, but due to the permanent and direct contact with other people, by being in a potentially generating environment of conflicts and diseases and continually deal with experiences of pain, suffering and death of patients.^{14,19}

◆ Stress: beyond the classes

In this subcategory, we will discuss the working conditions of professors, coupled with the stressing factors inside and outside the classroom, as well as the alternatives used by those professionals to deal with the teaching's adversity.

For the professor who works in a regimen of exclusive dedication, his work is really worthy of the name, because, aside from

teaching for the graduation, there are also classes designed for the post-graduation and research and extension activities, as exemplified below:

As I have an average of eight, six, eight master's and doctorate's students, it is a very large volume, which, in addition, you have to submit papers, right! Besides the disciplines that are taught in the master's level, planning of meetings, opinions to journals' papers, it has the web, right! Which has 200.000 things waiting it, the SIGAA (UFRN Web System), where you have to put everything (grades, notes and other college-related issues), right! As you are professor. (D7)

So, you got to hold the academic planning with [...] students, implementation and correction of activities. Preparation (?) you got to have material for research, extension, extension activities that often take place on Friday, meeting with the teaching staff, which is also on the Friday. (D14)

By considering that the labor consumes much of the routine of the human being, the quality of life also depends on the conditions of this labor. Studies have demonstrated that the occupational stress of professors is related to the excessive workload, the continuous search for improvement of curricula and accumulations of roles, as observed in the speeches of the interviewed professors.⁸

There are several factors, within the classroom, which can act as facilitators of stress. In the investigated reality, the following ones were perceived: requirements of coordination or leadership, when interrupting classes; noise inside and outside the classroom; lack of interest by students; lack of structure of equipment and laboratories.

Added to this, there is the issue of lack of occupational appreciation; disrespect by students; poor wage conditions and the need for increased working hours, as already mentioned; large amount of students per class and the struggle to remain in the employment, which directly interfere in quality of life of professors/teachers.¹³

Another observed element is that the amount of content that should be taught in a single semester, frequently, does not match the available workload, which makes the classes more loaded, monotonous and tiring, both for the teacher and for the student, as shown in the following stretches:

We have little time, [...] you end up having to give it (content) very theoretically played. (D4)

Throughout the discipline period [...] new contents are entering, [...] ultimately, you're being obliged to give many theoretical lessons, it becomes tiring, it becomes a traditional education, mercantilist [...] a sort of teaching that often does not induce the student to participate during the activities. This is what makes me exhausted. (D4)

To reduce the stress arising from these factors, during classes, some of the respondents report seeking in advance alternatives to deal with the difficulties in the classroom, such as: didactic preparations for the theoretical classes; dynamics aimed at holding the attention of the student; reviewing the content program; performing classes by means of methodologies that hold the attention of the student. Nevertheless, the professor is often unable to put into practice these alternatives, because of the physical structure of the classrooms, such as, for example, visual resource is not available, air conditioning does not always work and, furthermore, has yet to hear complaints from students in reference to such situations.²⁰

CONCLUSION

From the study, it was possible to perceive the reflections of the Burnout Syndrome in physical and mental body of UFRN professors, which is the outcome of a continuous process of submission to stressful situations listed by these professionals.

It should be observed that the period with regard to the practical classes generates greater wear to the professor, considering that the same has to follow-up the student in a full-time regimen, while, in theoretical classes, the meeting with the students is alternated among the professors of the discipline. Accordingly, there is a minimum time for the performance of other activities required by the university institution.

It should be also emphasized that the excessive number of students per professor in the practical field is a source of stress, since the professor assumes a responsibility for the actions performed by the students, when it is not possible to follow-up all of them at once. Allied to this, there is the issue of precariousness of services, which contradicts what the professor presents in classroom and is not compatible with an ideal context for holding the teaching-learning process.

Another wear factor is the fact that, to meet the triad teaching, research and extension, the educator ends up abdicating the time that theoretically should be destined for his family, leisure and self-care, which

consequently generate the lack of motivation to work, which is a characteristic factor of the Burnout Syndrome. It should also be noted the need for constant updating, which requires time intended for such a purpose.

Concomitantly, it should be evidenced the double working hours as a large impeller of physical and mental wear, because, cumulatively, in relation to the teaching activities, there are activities of assistance, in which, continually, the professor-nurse is subjected to deal with situations of pain and suffering.

In the classroom, the requirements of coordination or leadership, when interrupting classes; noise inside and outside the classroom; lack of interest by students and lack of structure of equipment and laboratories were listed as generating factors of stress. They were associated with the fact of having a large content of matters for a minimum workload, making the classes more loaded, monotonous and tiring, both for the teacher and for the student.

Given the results of this study, we hope to contribute to the health and quality of life of professors, so that it can emerge a debate about the stressing factors at the work environment and, from this, encourage the need to incorporate new ways of living into their daily lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the Foundation for Research Support from the Rio Grande do Norte State (known as FAPERN)

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Pereira MS, Santos NP dos, Martins CCF et al.

Reflections of the burnout syndrome in physical and...

Submission: 2013/03/23
Accepted: 2013/04/25
Publishing: 2013/07/01

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