

## Social Worker Burnout Syndrome

Mária Szegfüová

*St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work in Bratislava,  
Comenius University in Bratislava. Faculty of Law  
Slovakia*

---

**Abstract:** Burnout syndrome is a set of typical symptoms that exhibit in workers in the helping professions, which are often accompanied by a high psychological burden. The profession of helping worker requires constant supervision, which also serves as an effective prevention of burnout. In this contribution we examine the burnout syndrome in social workers working at the labour office who come into contact with clients and compare this phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Burnout syndrome. Supervision. Prevention. Social worker

---

### Introduction

Some professions also bring with them an increased risk of stressful situations, which can subsequently exhibit itself in various forms. If we do not solve the situation in time and do not give ourselves enough rest, it can easily lead to burnout. Burnout is a modern problem, it is not easy to recognize, it is slow and unobtrusive, so you need to pay close attention to the initial problem.

Till now, there is no generally accepted definition of burnout syndrome or unambiguous diagnostic criteria. It is characterized by exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced performance. It is considered to be a consequence of chronic stress, which has not been successfully managed.<sup>1</sup>

There are many professions where employees are exposed to long-term stress, one of which is the public administration sector. Public administration is defined as a service to citizens where high performance and expertise is required, covering various areas such as health, education, social services and other areas. Social workers at Offices of Labour, Social Affairs and Family come into daily contact with clients who have found themselves in an unfavourable period of life. The number of clients is increasing, the requirements for the professional work performance of the helper are increasing. At the same time, workers are burdened with disproportionate administrative activity.<sup>2</sup> Working in the field of severe disability compensation requires empathy and empathizing for the client's situation, where the social worker is looking for the best solution for a client with a severe fate. If a person works under pressure, his evaluation is not adequate to his efforts, and at the same time he does not take enough rest, he can easily develop a burnout syndrome.

As part of the research, we examined a narrower group of social workers working at Dunajská Streda Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family to determine the occurrence of this phenomenon. We were expected the situation to worsen during the COVID-19 pandemic, as long-term constraints and interventions in people's lives are also reflected in increased stress in the general population.

### 1. Burnt Syndrome - From Different Angle Of View

Burnout syndrome is a mental phenomenon that occurs most often in helping professions that are difficult to communicate and empathize. It is a set of symptoms, especially in the mental area and partly in the physical and social area, it appears as a reaction to work stress mostly. It is a consequence of work overload and inability to relax, one of the reasons is the intensive contact with people using social assistance.

Burn-out is a technical term that appeared in psychology and psychotherapy in the 1970s. This term was first used by Henrich Freudenberger. According to him, the burnout syndrome is the final stage of the process in which people who are deeply involved in something emotionally, lose their original enthusiasm and motivation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Corresponds to: WEBER, A., JAEKEL-REINHARD, A. Burnout Syndrome: A Disease of Modern Societies?, *Occupational Medicine*, Volume 50, Issue 7, September 2000, Pages 512. [online]. [2022.01.05.] <<https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/50.7.512>>.

<sup>2</sup> Corresponds to: LUKÁČOVÁ, S., PALEUN, M. Syndróm vyhorenia u sociálnych pracovníkov. In Podoby supervízie a prevencia syndrómu vyhorenia. Zborník medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie, Bratislava: VŠZaSP sv. Alžbety, 2018, s. 211

There is a higher incidence of burnout in those people who are intensively engaged in their work, constantly placing higher demands on themselves and expecting that only their work will give them meaning of life.<sup>3</sup>

Burnout syndrome occurs in people who are intensely passionate about their work, have high work and personal goals. Compared to stress, the difference is that burn out syndrome is much more serious, dominated by feelings of fatigue, aggression, depression, hopelessness.

Typical manifestations of burn out syndrome are, for example:

- Loss of the meaning of your activity,
- Loss of empathy towards the client,
- Cold approach to the client, perception of the client as a case or page,
- Prioritizing administrative activities before working with the client,
- Abuse of one's position,
- Common illnesses, feeling exhausted,
- Constant conflicts with colleagues, with superiors,
- Distrust of the client's abilities.

According to Dobříková, burnout syndrome is a state of total mental and physical exhaustion, which mainly affects people, who have been facing a stressful situation for a long time, while stressors significantly outweigh salutators. This most often concerns people with initial enthusiasm and an effort for excellent results, but also too stereotypical activity and the impossibility of sufficient personal and professional development can lead to burnout.<sup>4</sup>

The opposite of burnout is a feeling of flow, a sense of meaning, where people forget about fatigue, do not perceive time, achieve maximum concentration and creativity, and do not even feel overburdened.

Objective symptoms of burnout include: impatience, broken relationships with others, decreased performance, negativistic behaviour, no activity beyond duties, in helping professions minimizing time spent with the client.

Subjective signs of burnout include: negativism, fatigue, loss of meaning in life, decreased self-respect and self-esteem, decreased frustration tolerance, increased irritability.

Sometimes the term of burnout is mixed with the term stress. However, the stress is not the same as the burnout term. Stress may or may not lead to burnout. People are often able to work in difficult conditions and under high stress if they feel, that their work activity makes sense and have enough energy and motivation to continue. Work stress, at the end of which stands burnout, is associated with a decrease in the desire to perform with experiences of uselessness and hopelessness, with a gradual loss of personal strength, with an increase in feelings of helplessness expressed in attitudes "there is no point for me to try anything ... why try... let me do it anyway, it's still wrong ". Burnout syndrome exhibits itself in various ways, the energetic individual is tired, has reduced immunity, and is often ill. Mentally, the burnout syndrome is exhibited by disappointment, scepticism, disinterest, hopelessness, feelings that he has no control, feelings of loss of meaning.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. The Importance of Prevention**

Whether a person can prevent burnout depends on several factors, and it is important to follow proper psychohygiene. The methods of prevention include: enough rest, change of lifestyle, respect for oneself, knowing one's boundaries, cultivating one's own hobbies, taking care for oneself - for body, soul and spirit, good physical condition, regular walks, hiking, sports, self-knowledge and self-evaluation, learn to say no, have your supervisor, sense of meaning. Anyone who can find the meaning of their life and live a meaningful life is likely to be less at risk of burnout.

We encounter questions of meaningfulness in all psychological notions that deal with difficulty, stress, depression and burnout. Aaron Antonovsky writes that the component of meaningfulness in the concept of coping refers to how much a person feels that his life has a certain meaning, that some of the problems that life

---

<sup>3</sup> Corresponds to: MOROVICSOVÁ, E. 2011. *Komunikácia v medicíne*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského. 2011. s. 212. ISBN 978-80-223-3025-1.

<sup>4</sup> Corresponds to : DROBÍKOVÁ, P., *Zvládanie záťažových situácií : ako si zachovať duševné zdravie* . Bratislava: Vysoká škola zdravotníctva a sociálnej práce Sv. Alžbety, 2007. s. 56. ISBN 978-80- 89271-20-7.

<sup>5</sup> Corresponds to: VODÁČKOVÁ, D. *Krizová intervence*. Praha: Portál, 2002. s. 174. ISBN 80-7178-696-9.

poses for him are worth putting their energy into, and to devote himself to their solution, to see them as challenges and not as burdens.<sup>6</sup>

There is currently a growing trend to link stress and coping research with positive efforts. This is the direction taken by the salutogenetic approach, which focuses on what distinguishes "successful managers" even in the most difficult stressful situations from unsuccessful ones, thus looking for personality characteristics and factors that combine successful coping with challenging situations. A. Antonovský defines coherence as the cohesion of the overall life situation, as relying mainly on oneself in the control of events and on the fact that events will develop as expected.<sup>7</sup>

From the point of view of the prevention of mental exhaustion and burnout, ethics and faith deal with issues of meaningfulness in all its depth. Logotherapy, existential psychotherapy and spiritual care get in the field of therapy.<sup>8</sup>

The Viennese psychiatrist and philosopher V. E. Frankl was most responsible for extending the concept of the meaning of life. Central place to his logotherapy and existential analysis is the "will to make sense", which he sees as the human desire to find and fulfill a meaning in life. This desire is the main motivating force of a person and chronic failure in its implementation leads to an existential vacuum, which can be the cause of psychological pathology, especially depression.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. The Importance of Supervision in the Prevention of Burnout Syndrome**

Supervision should be part of the work of social workers. It provides professional support, also helps with protection against burnout, contributes to the protection of the client from harm, to increasing the status of the social worker profession and to a more efficient performance of social work.

The aim of supportive supervision is to develop a high level of self-knowledge, and thus empower the employee to act in relation to the client in a disciplined, prudent and conscious manner in order to provide the client with the most optimal form of assistance.<sup>10</sup>

In the area of social services, supervision obligations have already been introduced to improve their quality. The author points out the need to introduce supervision in other areas of social work at the employment office, for example in the field of compensation. Due to the complexity of the issue, due to the often mediated cases and due to the need to increase the quality of social work, we appeal to the need for supervision in this area as well.

Supervision can generally increase the social skills of the supervised, has an educational and strengthening character, can look for problems and solve them. In specific cases, it allows the employee to understand what hinders his understanding of the client and what can effectively protect him from burnout.<sup>11</sup>

"Social workers and other helping professionals are the group most at risk of burnout. This is mainly due to the constant contact with people who find themselves in a situation that is currently insoluble for them. It often happens that clients expect the employee to solve their problems immediately, which puts a great psychological burden on him. How a social worker responds to the stresses arising from the content of work, from the differences between one's own expectations and the reality of actuality, from the psychological burden of employment, etc., also has an impact on the possibility of a burnout syndrome."<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Corresponds to: KŘIVOHLAVÝ, J. Horiet' ale nevyhoriet'. Bratislava, Karmelitánské nakladatelství, s.r.o., s.2012, s. 123

<sup>7</sup> Corresponds to: RUISELOVÁ, Z. Štýly zvládania záťaže a osobnosť'. Bratislava. Ústav experimentálnej psychológie SAV, 2006, s.25

<sup>8</sup> Corresponds to: KŘIVOHLAVÝ, J. Horiet' ale nevyhoriet'. Bratislava, Karmelitánské nakladatelství, s.r.o., 2012, s. 126

<sup>9</sup> Corresponds to: ŽIAKOVÁ, E. (ed.) 2014. Ako nájsť zmysel života v sociálnej práci s rizikovými skupinami. 2. ročník Košických dní sociálnej práce. Košice: Katedra sociálnej práce Filozofickej fakulty UPJŠ, 349 s. ISBN 978-80-8152-140-9.

<sup>10</sup> Corresponds to: SCHAVEL, M. Význam supervízie na predchádzanie syndrómu vyhorenia v zariadeniach sociálnych služieb z pohľadu supervízorov. In Podoby supervízie a prevencia syndrómu vyhorenia. Zborník medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie, Bratislava: VŠZaSP sv. Alžbety, 2018. s. 11

<sup>11</sup> Corresponds to: BUJDOVÁ, N., HVIDZÁK, R. Ako sa žije na onkológii. In Supervision days in 2020. Užhorod: Liraprint, 2021, s. 6

<sup>12</sup> Corresponds to: SCHAVEL, M. Význam supervízie na predchádzanie syndrómu vyhorenia v zariadeniach sociálnych služieb z pohľadu supervízorov. In Podoby supervízie a prevencia syndrómu vyhorenia. Zborník medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie, Bratislava: VŠZaSP sv. Alžbety, 2018. s. 8

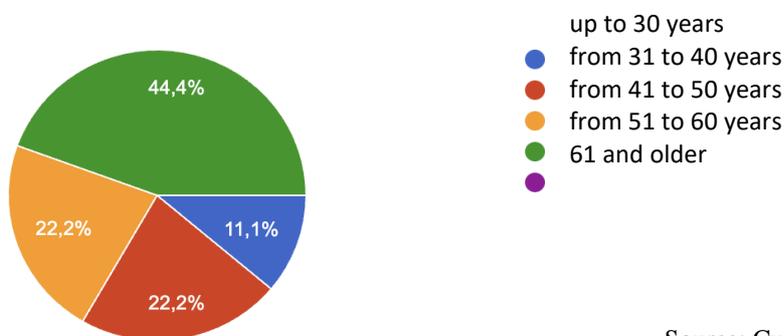
The role of the supervisor in recognizing the burnout syndrome is to have a general outlook, to provide supervision for different groups of supervisors, the ability to appreciate the creative activity of man and social morals. Apply in practice humility, self-management, self-awareness, self-control, motivation, empathy, self-reflection and self-development, initiative and active approach to creating the culture of the organization and its name, through which it ensures the best interests of the client.<sup>13</sup>

According to Matoušek, workplaces, where there are no personal development plans, where there is a lack of supervision, where the employee does not have the opportunity to confide in someone competent what problems he encountered at work and to consult with him about possible solutions, contribute to the development of the burnout syndrome.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Research Findings at the Labor Office

We focused our research on finding out the extent to which those social workers who come into contact with clients at the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in Dunajská Streda, Department of Social Affairs and Family, are exposed to burnout. We assumed that more years of practice would also mean an increased risk of burnout, this hypothesis was not confirmed.

Graph 1: Age of respondents

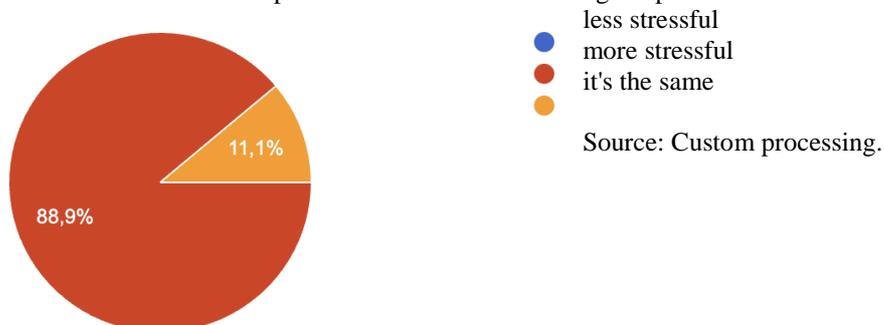


Source: Custom processing.

The majority of respondents were between the age of 51-60. The majority, up to 77.8%, were people with a university degree. The number of years worked at the employment office ranged from 8 months to 30 years. Most respondents stated that they were motivated by the fact, that they could help people, on the contrary, they were most demotivated, that their work was not sufficiently rewarded, they were also demotivated by insufficient financial reward. 44.4% of respondents are exposed to stressful situations several times a week.

With respect to current situation of COVID-19, we also examined the impact of the pandemic on the work of social workers.

Graph 2: COVID-19's work during the pandemic situation is



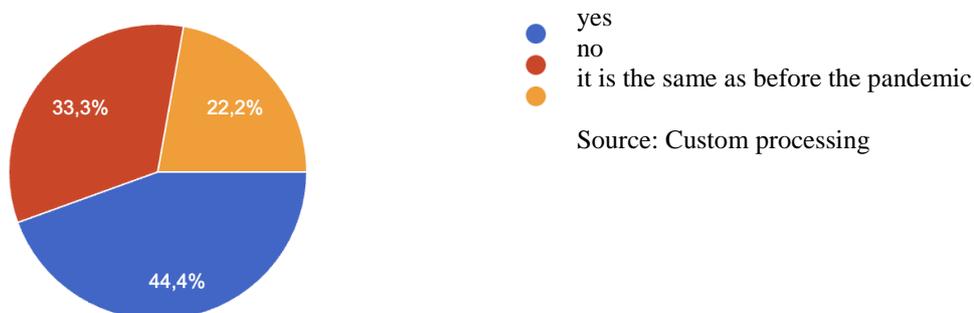
Source: Custom processing.

<sup>13</sup> Corresponds to: HUNYADIOVÁ, S. Techniky v supervízii pri syndróme vyhorenia zamestnancov v zariadeniach sociálnych služieb. In Podoby supervízie a prevencia syndrómu vyhorenia. Zborník medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie, Bratislava: VŠZaSP sv. Alžbety, 2018, s. 30

<sup>14</sup> Corresponds to: MATOUŠEK, O. Metody a řízení sociální práce. Praha: Portál, 2003. s. 57

As many as 88.9% of the respondents state that working during a pandemic is more stressful for them. When asked why they experience more stress, 66.7% stated that due to more administration, 55.6% stated more workload, 22.2% stated less personal contact and 11.1% stated that still more aggressive people are the cause of more stress. Another question focused on how social workers perceive the world around them during a pandemic:

Graph 3: Do you perceive the world around you more negatively than usually?



44.4% of the respondents state that they perceive the world around them more negatively during a pandemic, than usual. To examine the stress, we formulated questions that focused on whether they developed signs of burnout. From the available answers, it can be concluded that 55% of respondents have clear signs of burnout with varying intensity, with the pandemic also having a negative impact on social workers as well as on every human being. We were surprised that up to 75% of respondents suffer from insomnia and only 11% said they felt happy and full of optimism. 77.8% of respondents said that they can empathize with the client's feelings and look for the best solution for him, but 55% feel that they cannot do more for the client, even if he wanted to.

### Conclusion

The aim of the article was to draw attention to the fact that there is only a narrow line between stress and burnout syndrome, so increased attention should be paid to prevention in order to avoid the development of burnout syndrome and thus reduce the quality of social work or misjudgment of clients. The data obtained confirmed that supervision is equally necessary for social workers at the labour office - Department of Social Affairs and Family, as it can not only improve the quality of work and prevent harm to the client, but can also be an effective means of preventing burnout.

### References:

- [1]. BUJDOVÁ, N – HVIŽDÁK, R. Ako sa žije na onkológii. In *Supervision days in 2020*. Užhorod: Lira Print, 2021. s. 5-10. ISBN 978-617-596-337-1.
- [2]. DOBRÍKOVÁ, P. 2007. Zvládanie záťažových situácií: ako si zachovať duševné zdravie. Bratislava: Vysoká škola zdravotníctva a sociálnej práce Sv. Alžbety, 2007. s. 126. ISBN 978-80-89271-20-7.
- [3]. KŘIVOHLAVÝ, J. *Horieť ale nevyhorieť*. Bratislava: Karmelitánské nakladateľství, s.r.o., 2012, s. 214, ISBN 978-80-8135-003-0.
- [4]. MOROVICSOVÁ, E. 2011. *Komunikácia v medicíne*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského. 2011. s. 212. ISBN 978-80-223-3025-1.
- [5]. SCHAVEL, M. – KUZYŠIN, B. – HUNYADIOVÁ, S. (eds.) 2018. *Podoby supervízie a prevencia syndrómu vyhorenia*. Zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie. Bratislava: VŠZaSP sv. Alžbety. 2018. 247 s. ISBN 978-80-8132-193-1.
- [6]. MATOUŠEK, O. 2003. *Metody a řízení sociální práce*. Praha : Portál, 2003. s. 380 ISBN 80-7178-548-2.
- [7]. RUISELOVÁ, Z. *Štýly zvládania záťaže a osobnosť*. Bratislava. Ústav experimentálnej psychológie SAV, 2006, s. 128. ISBN 80-88910-23-4.
- [8]. VODÁČKOVÁ, D. *Krizová intervencie*. Praha: Portál, 2002. s. 543. ISBN 80-7178-696-9.
- [9]. WEBER, A., JAEKEL-REINHARD, A. Burnout Syndrome: A Disease of Modern Societies? *Occupational Medicine*, Volume 50, Issue 7, September 2000, Pages 512–517, [online]. [2022.01.05.] <<https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/50.7.512>>.

- [10]. ŽIAKOVÁ, E. (ed.) 2014. *Ako nájsť zmysel života v sociálnej práci s rizikovými skupinami*. 2. ročník Košických dní sociálnej práce. Košice: Katedra sociálnej práce Filozofickej fakulty UPJŠ, s. 349 ISBN 978-80-8152-140-9.

### **Author profile**



**PhDr. Mária Szegfüová**

– doctoral student - St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work in Bratislava - Institute of Social Work, Bachelor student - Comenius University in Bratislava - Faculty of Law, Slovakia.