

Teacher's Emotional Exhaustion: Self-Endangering Work Behavior as Novel Concept and Explanatory Mechanism

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Abstract

In a recently published article, Baeriswyl, Bratolic, and Krause (2021) introduced prolonging working hours as a coping behavior used by teachers, and using self-reported questionnaire-based data from 560 teachers in Switzerland, they demonstrated that it is related to emotional exhaustion—the core component of burnout. This Mini Review summarizes the most important findings from this focal article, embeds prolonging working hours into the concept of self-endangering work behavior (SEWB), and introduces the latest deliberations on SEWB. It outlines possibilities of measuring SEWB that may serve as a starting point for targeted activities in workplace health promotion in both schools and other occupational settings.

Keywords: Coping; Emotional exhaustion; Prolonging working hours; Self-endangering work behavior

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Introduction

In the field of work and organizational psychology, burnout is one of the most frequently used indicators of poor mental health [1]. It is defined as a syndrome composed of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of reduced personal accomplishment [2]. Empirical evidence suggests that variables of the working environment affect these three dimensions of burnout in different ways, and that each has a unique relationship to health-related, behavioral, and motivational outcomes [3]. Most experts consider that the key component or defining feature of burnout is emotional exhaustion [1]. A large number of studies have addressed this phenomenon in teachers, and indicated that a) a large proportion of school teachers present high levels of emotional exhaustion [4] and b) emotional exhaustion has adverse effects on numerous outcomes both organizational and individual [5,6]. This emphasizes how important it is to recognize the significance of its prevention. Nonetheless, such prevention requires an understanding of how emotional exhaustion emerges in teachers. For example, one major demand on teachers is imposed by their workload [5]. It has been confirmed repeatedly as the main antecedent of their emotional exhaustion [3]. Indeed, Baeriswyl, Bratolic, and Krause [7] reported a relation of $r=0.43$ ($p<0.05$) between workload and emotional exhaustion.

However, it is not just the actual work demand (i.e., workload) that induces stress in teachers and threatens their well-being. The ways in which teachers react and adapt to these stressors are also important. According to the transactional stress theory [8], the cognitive, emotional or behavioral response to a stressor is decisive for the actual effect of this stressor on an individual. In this sense, coping reactions mediate the effect of stressors on well-being. Lazarus and Folkman [8] define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” Two distinctions are commonly used in coping research: The first refers to the function of coping and distinguishes between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping [8]. Problem-focused coping strategies are strategies that address the stressor directly; they are appropriate when individuals believe that they will have an effect on the stressful situation. Emotion-focused strategies are intended to control emotions in situations in which individuals perceive that they have no control over the stressful situation. A second categorization describes coping modes. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub [9] distinguish between active/approach coping and passive/avoidance coping. They define active/approach coping as a form of problem-focused coping and as “the process of taking active steps to try to remove or circumvent the stressor

or to ameliorate its effects". Passive/avoidance coping is a form of emotion-focused coping and includes strategies such as behavioral and mental disengagement and denial [9]. Studies examining teachers' coping have indicated that active coping has a health-enhancing effect, whereas too much passive coping is harmful to their health [7].

Literature Review

In their focal article, Baeriswyl et al. [7] introduced prolonging working hours as an "active" [9] and "problem-focused" [8] coping strategy. However, contrary to the above-mentioned theoretical assumptions and research findings, they found that prolonging working hours related positively to emotional exhaustion ($r=0.33$, $p<0.05$). Moreover, Baeriswyl et al. [7] showed that prolonging working hours partially mediated the positive relation between workload and emotional exhaustion. Structural equation modeling revealed a statistically significant ($p<0.05$) standardized indirect effect of workload on emotional exhaustion ($\beta=0.21$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.11, 0.32]). The authors concluded that high workload might cause teachers to take work home and finish it in the evening or during other leisure time. Moreover, because of their high workload, teachers might ruminate on their tasks, and this, in turn, might lead to prolonged working hours [10]. By reducing leisure activities and sleeping hours, the corresponding coping behavior can lead to increased fatigue [11] and finally to emotional exhaustion [12].

However, prolonging working hours is not confined to the teaching profession, and it is just one within a whole set of strategies. Within the context of case studies in a considerable number of companies, we identified action strategies that can be characterized as self-endangering work behavior (SEWB) [13]. In the following section, we give an overview of these strategies and introduce the mechanisms underlying them as their common and defining feature.

Self-Endangering Work Behavior and the Underlying Psychological Processes

Self-endangering work behavior is when employees work extra hours: During leisure time, on weekends, and during holidays, they give up leisure activity or relaxation time and work instead; and they work despite sickness and without breaks [14]. Some

employees even take substances (e.g., neuro-enhancers) to improve performance [15]. Previously, these phenomena have been studied separately. Our aim is to detect and describe the common and conjunctive features and to bring these strategies together as SEWB.

Employees use these active and problem-oriented strategies to meet high and ambitious occupational requirements and challenging goals. On the one hand, SEWB is deemed to be functional because they successfully overcome stressful work situations and achieve work goals, thereby bolstering self-esteem, motivation, and satisfaction [16]. However, these positive outcomes are relevant for only a short time. In the medium to long-term, SEWB is deemed to be connected with disadvantages for health and recovery, and emotional exhaustion may emerge [17]. Under the heading of SEWB we differentiate six strategies that are shown and described in Table 1.

The common and defining feature underlying SEWB is the emergence of energetic costs: Goal attainment is possible only through the utmost effort and, thus, employees pursue their work goals in an intensive and persistent way. This boost in effort [11] causes energetic costs such as tension or fatigue. Accordingly, SEWB is characterized by a maximization of effort (i.e., an "active" coping strategy according to Carver et al. [9]) directed toward mastering work-related demands (i.e., a "problem-focused" coping strategy according to Lazarus & Folkman, [8]). However, given the limited capacity of human resources [19], corresponding coping behaviors can be maintained only over a restricted time span [11]. Moreover, the increased effort causes fatigue that elevates the need for recovery. If recovery activities (e.g., adequate rest periods during and after hours of work) are not adapted to fit needs, negative effects on health and well-being have to be anticipated [12,11].

How to Consider Self-Endangering Work Behavior in Workplace Health Promotion

Some of the job demands facing teachers such as a high workload are certainly difficult to prevent or to reduce at short notice. Therefore, more attention needs to be focused on handling and coping with such demands [20]. Strategies in terms of SEWB seem to relate to teachers' emotional exhaustion [7]. Thus, taking

Table 1: Strategies and descriptions of self-endangering work behavior.

Strategy	Description
Intensifying and prolonging work	Employees use their working hours particularly intensively. At the end of the working day, they prolong their working hours.
Working during leisure time	Employees carry on working during leisure time. This also includes extended work-related availability during leisure time.
Not recuperating during leisure time	Employees give up leisure-time activities in favor of work.
Not taking breaks at work	Employees reduce breaks at work in order to use their work time more efficiently.
Consuming substances for stimulation	Employees enhance their own productivity with stimulating substances (e.g., caffeine, energy drinks, Ritalin, cocaine).
Working despite sickness (sickness presenteeism)	Employees work despite sickness and desist from the necessary recovery. This corresponds to the European definition of sickness presenteeism [18].

SEWB into account in workplace health promotion may help to develop more timely interventions that will decrease the risk of emotional exhaustion and, as a consequence, decrease the risk of further serious health problems. Preventing SEWB and the adverse consequences associated with it requires actions on different levels.

Monitoring SEWB should be part of the school policy agenda. Currently, school policymakers do not necessarily see working extra hours or extended work-related availability during leisure time as a crucial concern. Those responsible need to recognize that this kind of coping behavior may constitute a risk to the health of teachers, and they should therefore provide funding to enable a productive debate in individual schools on coordinating teachers' willingness to contribute to school success beyond the call of duty with ensuring their well-being [7,21]. The same holds for the corporate culture in other occupational settings.

In individual schools, those in responsible positions could assist principals in implementing suitable prevention arrangements. It is crucial to enhance teachers' knowledge of the processes leading to the development of emotional exhaustion, and thereby to encourage them to reflect on how SEWB can actually be a critical coping behavior [7]. Within the private sector, Krause, Schwendener, Berset, Knecht, and Bogusch [22] have indicated that collective strategies such as setting priorities together had a buffering effect on the relationship between time pressure and exhaustion.

According to Baeriswyl et al. [7] individual teachers can become aware of this by taking part in trainings or workshops that first create an awareness for the topic. Then the teachers themselves should be allowed to determine measures or alternative ways of coping. The same might apply in other occupational settings.

To detect SEWB in teachers and in employees in general, those responsible need to be very attentive and raise their employees' awareness for corresponding behavior patterns. Additionally, SEWB can be integrated into employee surveys and thereby taken into account in subsequent workplace health promotion activities. Based on case studies [13], we have developed an applicable measurement instrument [23] that is currently being revised and will be republished in the near future [24]. Based on earlier versions, Deci, Dettmers, Krause, and Berset [25] demonstrated that SEWB explains a considerable amount of variance in the prediction of health and well-being over and above existing concepts and measurement instruments of coping. This once more emphasizes the value of SEWB in preventing (clinically relevant) mental health problems.

Conclusion

SEWB is a set of "active" and "problem-focused" coping strategies that mediates the effect of workload on emotional exhaustion in teachers. The knowledge on the prevalence of SEWB has important implications for workplace health promotion in schools. SEWB should be taken as an early warning sign for school administrators, indicating the need to decrease the risk

of emotional exhaustion (and related adverse consequences for teachers, students, and schools) by developing more timely health-promoting actions. The same might be true for other occupational settings.

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