

# Coping with difficult situations in the context of the teacher's managerial competences

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## Abstract

In this article, we deal with the issue of managing stressful situations in working life in the context of the teacher's managerial competencies. We draw attention to the importance of stress management strategies and challenging situations teachers have to face in their daily work. The teaching profession places significant demands on the teacher's personality, which also plays an important role in managing the workload. It is currently necessary to find out the overall level of stress and the ways in which teachers manage stressful situations. Knowledge of load management principles can be beneficial for everyone. They have the potential to significantly facilitate coping with challenging work and life situations. The more we learn about ways to handle difficult situations, the more we learn about the impact of stress and its effective management in the work environment.

*Keywords:* Stress Management, Stress Management Strategies, Stress Prevention

## 1 Introduction

Burden and stress are an integral part of every person's life from early childhood to death. In adulthood, when a person is usually actively involved in the work process, we can also encounter the problem of work stress. As working life and pace have changed significantly in recent years, much higher demands are placed on workers.

Ordinary life situations that a person encounters on a daily basis can never be described as purely positive or purely negative. In most cases, it is a mixture of favourable and unfavourable circumstances that a person experiences in his work and personal life. In the workplace they

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have to individuals face many serious or less serious problems on a daily basis and must effectively solve various intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts (Rozvadský, Gugová, 2010). According to Pašková (2022), the teaching profession belongs to those helping professions, which in our society are characterized by psychological demands, but on the other hand, relatively poor financial and social evaluation. The issue of managing the workload as well as the choice of coping strategies that teachers use when coping with challenging situations is therefore extremely interesting.

Every teacher encounters various stressful situations during their career, which can negatively impact their professional life. Throughout their teaching activities, teachers are exposed to a wide range of stressors, starting with a demanding workload, concerns about poor relationships at the workplace, fear of job insecurity, and long working hours. These hours often include morning teaching sessions, afternoon preparation, and the correction and assessment of students' work in the given subject. In class, teachers most often have to deal with common complications related to the developmental specifics of students. A certain amount of work stress is beneficial, it contributes to employees being able to maintain their attention, to remain alert, to be able to respond flexibly, appropriately and effectively to current challenges and new tasks. The problem arises when the load accumulates, in which case work productivity, overall work performance may decrease, and the decision-making processes of individuals may be weakened (Barnová & Krásna, 2018).

It is obvious that, for example, presenting one's thoughts and attitudes in front of students, resolving conflicts between students, conducting controlled conversations with students, ensuring the assessment of individual students, etc. it can be a normal routine job for one teacher, which he does not perceive as stress, a burden, an unpleasant situation. On the contrary, for the other teacher, the same situation can be highly stressful, unpleasant, the solution of which requires maximum effort and control from him. Some of them perceive this type of situations as a threat, stress, even in terms of their impact on teachers. Inversely, other people can see it as a challenge, an incentive to start something new. It is clear from these illustrations that the fact of demandingness and stress must be interpreted in the context of situational characteristics and personality traits of a particular person.

If a teacher feels angry, depressed, nervous and disappointed, when he feels anxiety or tension due to some fact related to his teaching work, we talk about teacher stress. The specific sources of stress experienced by individual teachers vary considerably from case to case. The common denominator is that stress triggers a feeling of threat, self-esteem, well-being. It appears that most teachers experience some stress at times and that a significant number of teachers experience high stress quite often. Stress occurs most often when we feel that the circumstances in which we find ourselves place too demanding demands on us and we are unable to fulfil them in an adequate quality. The essence of stress in this case is precisely the feeling of threat.

## 2 Stress in the teacher's pedagogical activity

Stress is a part of life; it is a state in which the organism reacts and is put on "standby" when it is affected by stressors. Stimuli can be various psychological factors - we talk about psychological stress as a state of excessive mental load (Košč, 1994). In everyday life, everything that puts pressure on us, overloads us and makes us uncomfortable is usually referred to as stress.

Burdensome things that affect us from the outside are called stressors. After being exposed to stressors, our body and soul can experience a stress reaction (Praško, 1996). The understanding of the given situation will influence whether we will consider the situation as a stressor or not. So the stress reaction will not only depend on what happened, but mainly on how we understand it. Therefore, the most important factor in changing the stressful experience can be changing oneself. A characteristic response to stress is the "fight" or "flight" reaction – this reaction is called so because it prepares people in many situations to run away from the threat or, on the contrary, to fight it.

Stress is the result of a psychological and physiological reaction to a stressor (a stressful situation, event, factor, anything that a person considers threatening some of the important values). (Bratská, M., 2011). The key factors in terms of the occurrence of stress can be considered: time constraints and overly broad workload, emotional tension at the workplace, stress resulting from the job position, i.e. conflict between the demands of superiors and subordinates and conflict between work and private life.

Stress itself is considered a serious source of psychological burden. Difficult or unusual sensorimotor conditions for the performance of activities, time deficit, pressure of threat and responsibility are considered stress factors (Bedrnová, 2009, in Bedrnová et al.).

Lazarus and Folkmanová (1984, In Baumgartner, 2001) created a transactional definition of stress, which is based on the study of interactions between a person and the environment. Stress is "a specific relationship between a person and the environment, which the person perceives as strenuous, or exceeding her personal resources and at the same time threatening her subjective satisfaction."

However, the authors do not quite clearly agree on whether stress and burden are synonymous. Uzel (2008, p. 4) talks about load as a measure of stress that is inherent in life and is common in life. According to him, stress occurs when the load is unbearable. Hošek states that stress and load are words with the same meaning (Hošek, 1999, p. 7).

In relation to stress, we can come across different terms related to stress, depending on whether they refer to a low or high intensity stressful situation.

Hyper stress – stress exceeding the limits of adaptability, the ability to cope with stress. Hypo stress – stress that has not yet reached the usual stress tolerances.

According to how stress affects a person, Selye characterized stress as negative, i.e. distress and positive i.e. eustress.

Both eustress and distress are physically manifested in a similar way. From a health point of view, it is a measure of stress, mainly in the frequency of its occurrence.

The teaching profession is also one of the most demanding professions where teachers come into contact with stressful situations. The teacher has to cope with both time and psychosocial pressure. In many of our and foreign research on teachers' workload, it can be seen that at least a third of interviewed teachers consider the workload associated with the performance of their profession to be very strong, even extreme, and definitely greater than the workload of their lives outside of their jobs.

The teaching profession places significant demands on the teacher's personality, which also plays an important role in managing the workload. This fact should already be considered when choosing adepts for the teaching profession, who should have personality characteristics leading to more effective handling of the workload.

The causes of this stress include, for example, factors such as lack of time, bureaucracy in education, poor material equipment of schools, but also stressors in the field of interpersonal relations (with pupils, colleagues, superiors).

According to Grecmanová and Urbanovská (2007), a major source of burden for the teacher is the teaching activity. Before the actual teaching, however, it is necessary to prepare for it. This preparation is usually carried out in the evenings, on weekends or holidays. The teacher is very often faced with a lack of time.

Urbanek (2005) divided the psychological burden felt by teachers into five groups:

1. load in the area of perceptual demands – increased attention at work, control of pupils, etc.,
2. load in the area of cognition – demands on thinking, application of professional knowledge, etc.,
3. burden in the emotional area – controlling one's own emotions, relationships with students,
4. burden in the social area – communication with parents, pupils,
5. burden in the field of self-regulation – self-evaluation and self-control.)

Symptoms of stress can be registered at the individual level of the teacher, including chest pains, nervous breakdowns, irritability, lack of concentration, increased consumption of alcohol or other addictive substances, but also, at the organizational level. The main symptoms of stress at the organizational level can be a high rate of teacher absence, a higher rate of turnover, difficulties in labour relations, but also a decrease in work productivity. All this creates the conditions for frequent manifestations of apathy and occupational accidents at worst possible consequences for the individual worker, but also for the organization.

However, a certain amount of work stress is beneficial, it contributes to employees being able to maintain their attention, to remain alert, to be able to respond flexibly, appropriately and effectively to current challenges and new tasks. The problem arises when the load accumulates, in which case work productivity, overall work performance may decrease, and the decision-making processes of individuals may be weakened (Barnová & Krásna, 2018).

But it is necessary to learn to reduce excessive work stress, as well as stress related to contact with students, parents, colleagues, superiors, etc.

### **3 Coping with difficult situations in the context of the teacher's managerial competences**

From the position of a teacher who has found himself in a difficult situation, the decisive fact is the choice of the procedure for solving it or handling this situation. Stress is a consequence and manifestation of states of stress, it represents their extreme form, which is caused by extreme demands of the environment. The research into the ways in which a teacher manages challenging situations and how he behaves in them is probably also for this reason a significant attention paid by experts, considerably more than attention devoted to the questions of what characterizes a difficult situation, what types of these situations we can specify. From the point of view of successful or failure to cope with a challenging situation, it is not only its size that is crucial, but the whole scale of circumstances, internal and external factors and their combination, which cause some teachers to process the load without anyone even noticing it, while other teachers it can fail and act short even on seemingly small things. Therefore, it is desirable that the methods of handling stressful situations in the teacher's work go hand in hand with the methods and techniques for preventing stress and building resilience to these challenges.

There are a large number of different ways of managing stressful situations and increasing resistance to them, starting from interest in one's own health through rational nutrition, positive thinking, relaxation, use of time management, assertive behaviour, rest, physical activity (yoga, walks, active sports) to education focused on the issue of stressful situations and others. It is up to the teacher to decide which method or technique to choose and apply in coping with stressful situations and building resilience against them. The increasing number of difficult situations in a teacher's life highlights the need for the development of managerial competencies, as well as a growing interest in how to effectively address these situations and their impact on the teacher's psyche, health, and well-being. Overall, solving the issue of the quality of working life logically directs attention to the issue of managing and solving difficult situations. Therefore, it is necessary that part of the managerial competence of teachers is also the handling of difficult situations during their pedagogical practice. Knowledge about the laws of load management can be beneficial for everyone.

They have the potential to significantly facilitate coping with challenging work and life situations. In our and foreign professional literature, it is possible to get acquainted with a wide range of researched strategies for managing difficult situations, which focus on a goal or a process. Goal-oriented models of managing challenging situations represent an effort to change or control environmental factors that are perceived as stressful or to regulate or to manage own unpleasant emotions that arose as a result of a stressful situation. Process-focused models of coping imply tendencies to encounter or avoid a stressor. In another

context, it is possible to distinguish strategies for coping with difficult situations focused on a problem, emotion or detachment from a stressful situation.

According to Ruseilov (2006), stress management strategies represent certain more generalized ways of behaving in different types of stress situations. Effective load management depends on personality characteristics that help coping, characteristics of the social environment and a specific stressful situation.

Kyriacou (1996) describes his breakdown of stress management strategies, while the names of the strategies are synonyms to those mentioned above, namely: direct action coping and palliative coping

Stress management strategies Lazarus and Folkmanová (1984, p. 141) define coping as "a set of cognitive and behavioral efforts aimed at managing, reducing or tolerating internal and external demands that threaten or exceed the individual's resources."

### **3.1 Research on coping with stressful situations by teachers in Slovakia and abroad**

Research by a pair of authors Žitniaková Gurgová and Behúňová (2017) brings identification of the most frequent teacher stressors using the method of a non-standardized questionnaire of their own creation. Their research group consisted of 50 respondents from seven primary schools in the Považská Bystrica district. The authors found that the most common sources of stress for teachers are frequent legislative changes, the presence of a student with special educational needs and the social evaluation of teaching work. Other frequently mentioned sources of stress were salary conditions, holding multiple positions and perfectionism. On the contrary, relationships in the teaching staff, management of pedagogical documentation and relationship with a superior were cited as the least stressful.

The aim of the research by Žitniaková and Behúňová was to find out which stressors are most effective in the work of primary school teachers, what are the manifestations of stress in teachers and the ways in which teachers manage stressful situations. They also investigated the burnout rate of primary school teachers in terms of the length of teaching experience and the level of primary school at which the respondents worked. Based on their findings, they agreed with the authors: Clipa and A. Boghean (2015), Kačmárová, Kravcová (2011), Kopčanová (2005), Popelková (2011), O'Connor, Clark (1990) and others, that the teaching profession is relatively stressful, primary education teachers are more at risk and also teachers with many years of experience. Manifestations of stress mainly include somatic and psychological problems, which in practice are mainly reflected in more frequent absences from work due to health problems. They state that favourable conditions for practicing the teaching profession are not currently set in Slovakia.

In her study, Janšová Martina verified the protective role of spirituality on perceived stress and work burnout. The participants were 95 Slovak teachers between the ages of 20 and 68 (AM = 42.21 years, SD = 11.19; 83.2% women), of which 55.8% worked in primary schools.

Perception of current health was measured by the WHO-5 scale (WHO, 1998). Spiritual Experience Index SEI-R (Genia, 1997), perceived stress scale PSS-10 (Cohen et al., 1983), psychological workload of Meisters were used to measure spiritual experience psychological workload assessment questionnaire. Job burnout was measured by the Slovak version of Shirom Melamed's SMBM burnout method.

The results of the descriptive analysis show significant differences in the perception of stress and spiritual support depending on the length of teaching experience. It was found that the investigated teachers experience an average level of subjective well-being and spiritual experience. On average, they perceive low to medium stress, the level of job burnout was at a medium level for 31.6% of respondents. Correlation analyses confirmed significant positive associations between psychological workload, perceived stress and individual burnout factors. The results of the regression analysis showed that perceived stress and burnout are significant negative predictors of subjective well-being. Despite identifying a significant negative relationship between spiritual openness and monotony experienced in the work of teachers, as well as positive connections between spiritual experience, spiritual support and overload, the buffering effect of spirituality against stress or burnout was not confirmed in this study. The results may be useful in further studies in the field of quality of life and occupational health.

In their research, Kačmárová, Kravcová (2011) brought findings related to sources of stress and coping strategies in the teaching profession, which is rightfully considered one of the most stressful professions today. The results of their research showed that teachers consider the following factors to be the most stressful: psychological demands, low salary, time pressure, underappreciation of the work of a teacher and frequent changes in educational projects and school organization. On the contrary, they have the least stressful effect on them: low possibility of professional growth, low possibility of using innovative methods, problematic parents, use of mobile phones by pupils in lessons and demands for improvisation.

Research by Urbanovská (2011) mapped the most significant work stressors among 223 teachers of various levels of education (kindergarten, primary, secondary, elementary art schools) and educators in school groups. It turned out that teachers are most and most often stressed by the inconsistency of the required work with the assessment and school equipment; feelings of insufficient appreciation and evaluation of their work (financial and personal); a big rush, being overwhelmed with tasks, not being able to take a break, not even following a drinking regimen, not being able to relax and regain strength. In addition, teachers consider sudden and significant changes in education and changes in professional requirements to be a frequent source of stress. Among the least serious stress factors, they included an unpleasant environment, little privacy and physical difficulties, as well as moral problems with work, assigning tasks against one's own beliefs and working conditions in terms of the physical environment (noise, cold, lack of fresh air).

Alex Cristian Brezan and Valentina Georgeta Vartic (2022) from Romania investigated the level of stress in ordinary secondary school teachers and teachers in special schools. The study

participants were 60 teachers, of which 30 secondary school teachers from regular secondary schools and 30 secondary school teachers from special education. Of these, 12 were men and 48 were women, the age of the subjects was between 26 and 61 years, the average age was 42 years. Mainstream teachers fall into the following categories: 13.3% achieve low levels of stress and 86.7% achieve medium levels stress. At the same level, special education teachers fall into the following category: 10% achieve a low level of stress and 90% of special education teachers achieve a medium level of stress. The data they obtained through research confirmed their hypothesis that teachers are subject to a significant degree of stress at work, due to a number of factors that affect them, and at the same time teachers at special schools achieve a higher degree of stress than teachers of ordinary secondary schools.

## **4 Techniques helping teachers to manage stressful situations**

Techniques and methods helping to prevent stress and manage stressful situations can be divided into collective and individual measures. It is possible to prevent stress in the work of a teacher by collective measures at the level of, for example, improving the social and social status of teachers, i.e. the status of a teacher, which in today's understanding is at a low level. At the level of work organization within the school, it is possible to prevent with these tools, for example free hours for teachers, breaks at work, limited number of students in classes and, last but not least, improvement of working conditions.

The prevention of stress in the work of teachers can include the establishment of discussion clubs or a rest room for teachers at school, training teachers in the psychology of relationships and ensuring the presence of a psychologist at the school, who will be dedicated not only to students but also to teachers, either individually or in groups. Another important benefit is the provision of an adequate amount of information. Failure to provide the necessary information or insufficient information is a source of uncertainty, on the other hand, too much information, even irrelevant, burdens the worker. This also includes awarding workers even when solving tasks that did not bring maximum success, dedicating space for informal meetings organized outside the workplace of school employees, such as team buildings, visits to various cultural and sports events.

Methods that lead to physical and mental relaxation and at the same time strengthen resistance to stress are self-regulation methods. Through them, we can achieve a balance of emotions, improve the overall state of mind, and reduce tension. Another effect can be a relaxation response that acts as an antagonist to the stress response.

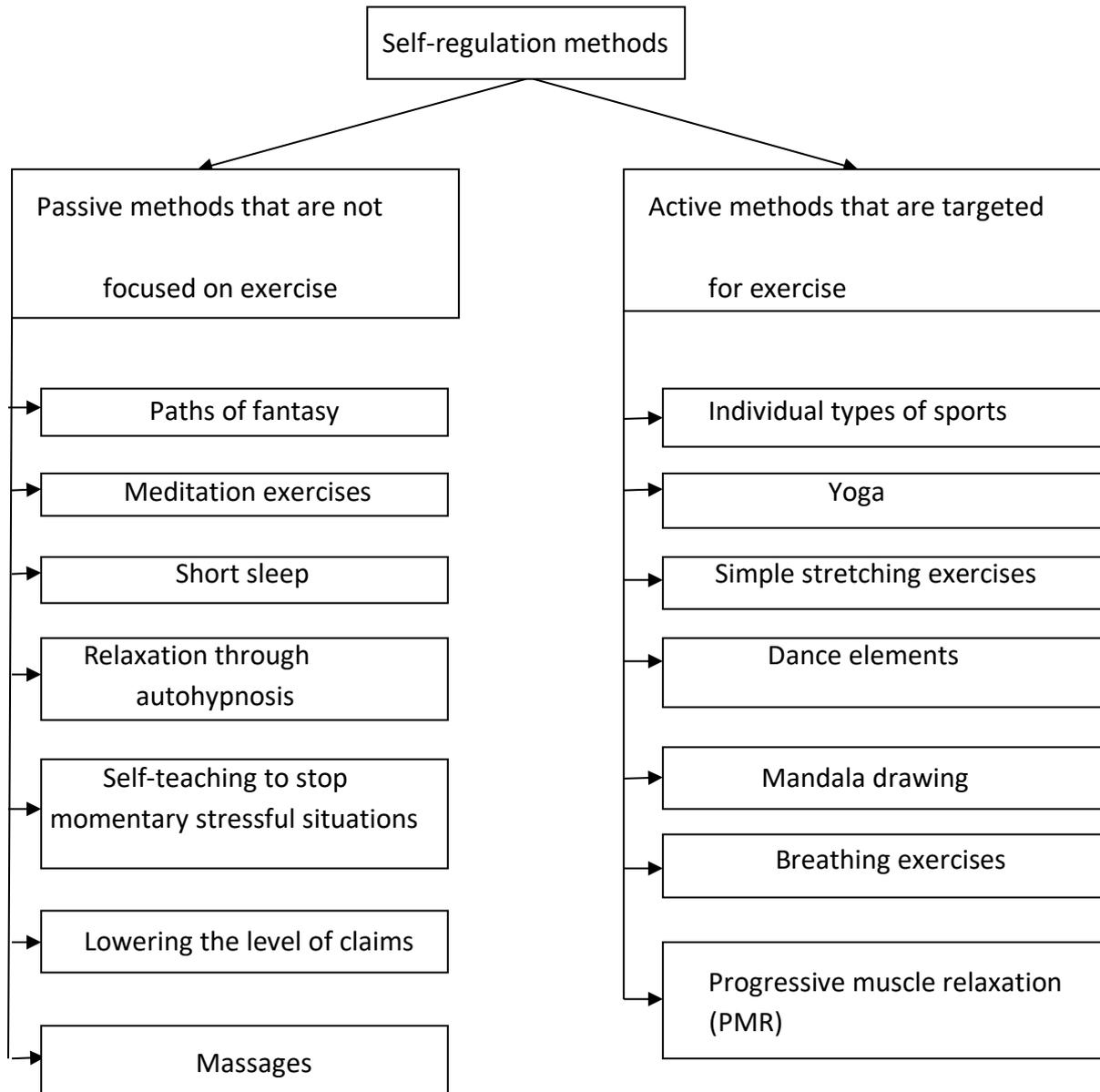


Figure 1: Individual self-regulation methods (Source: Authors' graphical output, 2024)

Active use of preventive measures and stress management methods can significantly eliminate the risk of stress and its consequences. Every teacher should find his own method and technique that would suit him best in terms of resistance to stress and try to protect his physical and mental health and, above all, lead a comfortable life.

## 5 Conclusion

The work of a teacher is not only a mission to educate but also to shape the next generation. Teachers help students build and develop creativity, shape their personalities, form opinions, and learn how to prioritize life's values. They guide students in developing attitudes toward

people, things, and themselves. Teachers strive to raise educated individuals who are prepared to manage and overcome life's challenges, while also pointing them in the right direction. A person is not born a teacher but becomes one. This profession is demanding, not only in terms of mental and physical load but also in terms of time.

Every individual, including teachers, should be aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as recognize when stress factors are motivating and manageable, and when, conversely, these factors become harmful, hindering their ability to fulfil tasks and achieve goals. Stressful situations are an everyday part of pedagogical practice in today's world. Therefore, it is essential to address this issue more thoroughly and explore ways to enhance teachers' resilience to stressful situations.

In conclusion, it can be summarized that every teacher, and indeed every individual, should be aware of the stressors they encounter at work and actively address the root causes of these stressors. Rather than merely focusing on the symptoms and consequences of stress, it is crucial to tackle the underlying issues that trigger it. Each person should identify the stress management method or technique that works best for them and take steps to protect both their physical and mental health.

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