

**Professional Burnout of Higher Education Teachers:  
Factors of Psychological Ill-Being and Solutions**

**Sergey ZAKHARIA**

Doctor, Associate Professor,  
Comrat State University.

Senior Researcher, “M.V. Marunovich” Gagauzia Research Center

[skzaharia@mail.ru](mailto:skzaharia@mail.ru)

**Oksana KURTEVA**

Doctor, Associate Professor,  
Comrat State University

[oxana.curteva@gmail.com](mailto:oxana.curteva@gmail.com)

**Olga SHCHUKINA**

Doctor, lector,  
Comrat State University

[o.shchukina@gmail.com](mailto:o.shchukina@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

The problem of emotional burnout of higher education teachers is a consequence of constant exposure to stressogenic factors and has negative consequences affecting the physical state of the teacher, psychological and emotional spheres. The article analyses the problems and identifies constructive ways of solution: from preventive measures to optimisation of working conditions of a higher education teacher, which can have a beneficial effect on both external and personal factors of emotional burnout in professional activity.

**Keywords:** emotional burnout, professional burnout, high school, teacher.

The problem of professional burnout began to attract the attention of researchers at the beginning of the 20th century, and later the term burnout was coined, which means “becoming exhausted” or “stressed out”. This state was discovered in people whose professional activities require intensive communication and interaction with others, including preschool teachers, school teachers, and university professors. These specialists, despite a high level of professionalism and passion for work, gradually lost interest in their duties, conflicted with others, and avoided solving urgent problems. In some cases, burnout led to the development of neurotic disorders, which are associated with long-term exposure to stress factors in professional activities (Maslach 2009).

The term “professional burnout” is closely related to the term “emotional burnout”, which describes a psychological state corresponding to professional burnout and manifests psychological distress. Professional burnout is identified when the sources of emotional burnout are factors associated with a person’s professional activity.

According to D. Greenberg (2004), emotional burnout manifests itself as physical, emotional, and cognitive exhaustion, accompanied by deteriorating health, decreased productivity, loss of self-esteem, and a weakened sense of humour. In the early stages, it can act as an adaptation mechanism that helps to rationally use energy resources. However, in the later stages, burnout leads to serious problems, including disruption of professional functions and deterioration of social connections. Thus, emotional burnout is a chronic state of physical and emotional exhaustion that occurs as a result of excessive work and/or constant stress.

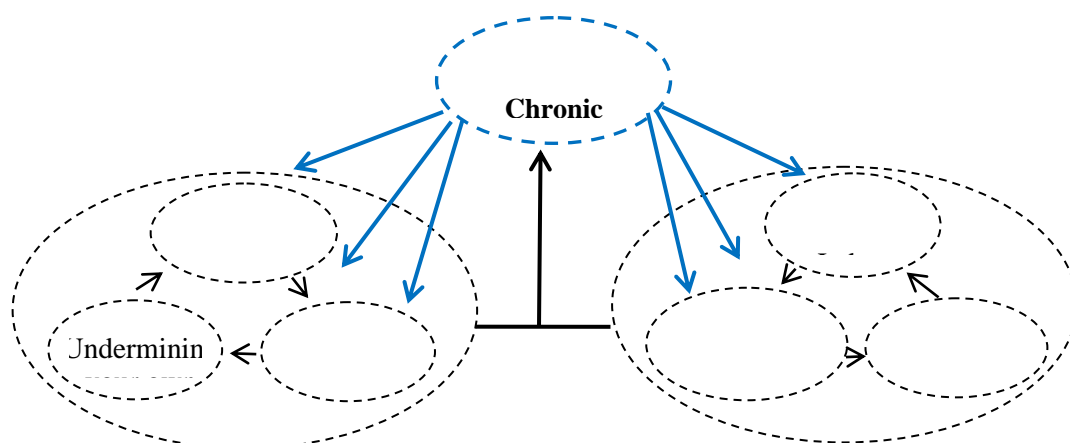
Symptoms of emotional burnout manifest themselves both in physical fatigue and in a feeling of psychological and emotional exhaustion. Psychologist Christina Maslach (2009) identifies the following components of emotional burnout:

- emotional exhaustion - a feeling of emotional overstrain and exhaustion;
- depersonalization - a feeling of insensitivity, detachment. In professional activities, it is expressed in a reduced response or detachment in relation to recipients of services, care, treatment or training;
- reduction of professionalism - a decrease in the feeling of one's own competence, productivity when working with people.

Professional burnout is a fairly common phenomenon and leads to serious consequences, in particular: mistakes in work, weakening empathy, dissatisfaction with work and with oneself as a professional. Quite a lot of research is devoted to burnout among representatives of the so-called helping professions (teachers, lecturers, doctors, social workers, etc.). Some studies have found that the degree of burnout is higher among those specialists who are not well aware of their own and other people's emotions and poorly manage them.

The main difference between burnout and stress lies in the mechanisms of their occurrence. Stress is the body's adaptation response to changing conditions. In itself, such a response is neither good nor bad - it is necessary for survival. This is how the body mobilises. In the development of emotional burnout, human relationships and the social context play a central role. Relationships with colleagues, managers, students, and parents can be both a resource, a source of replenishment of strength, and a factor contributing to the development of burnout.

An important difference also lies in the influence that stress and burnout have on the body. Mild or transient stress develops the body's adaptive abilities, activating a person to action. Burnout, on the contrary, leads to increased exhaustion and a burst of strength with a simultaneous weakening of the resources required for work and involvement in it (Diagram).



The research identified key stages in the development of emotional burnout, characterised by a gradual fading of emotional response, an increase in distance in relationships with others, from restraint in communication to obvious rejection, and then to indifference to professional activities and one's own life. Symptoms of professional burnout are grouped into three main categories: psychological and physical, social and psychological and behavioural.

Let us indicate the main groups of reasons contributing to the formation of the emotional burnout phenomenon, which were identified and analysed by psychologists:

1. Personal factors: individual psychological characteristics of the personality, including empathy, a tendency to excessive involvement, aggressiveness, character accentuations and the choice of strategies for coping with difficulties [2].

2. Role factors: conflicts and uncertainty of professional roles, social comparison, and lack of social support.

3. Organisational aspects: lack of temporal, substantive and evaluative certainty, specifics of personnel policy, interaction with the administration.

4. Existential reasons: lack of personal significance sense, inability to recognise the value of others, social insecurity and a sense of injustice.

5. Motivational factors: prevalence of external motives over internal ones, dissatisfaction with professional activity, limited career opportunities, low wages and discrepancy between expectations from work and reality.

Additionally, factors specific to pedagogical activity are identified, including high workload against the background of demonstration events, insufficient discipline and low level of students' culture, lack of material and technical resources, systematic change of activity according to management order, as well as conflicts with both representatives of the administration and between students.

Examining this problem, in 2023 a study was conducted among 128 teachers of higher education institutions of the Republic of Moldova, which made it possible to identify the key factors that provoke professional burnout: social assessment of the teacher's activity (48.3%), role conflicts (46.9%), high responsibility (53.1%), demotivation of students (42.2%), a tendency to emotional restraint (46.9%), overwork and

long working hours (41.4%), as well as acute experiences of professional situations (47.6%). Personal factors included a high level of responsibility and perfectionism (64%), as well as idealism and a tendency to self-sacrifice (53.9%).

Thus, it can be stated that the professional activity of the teachers' target group involves significant emotional stress due to the abundance of social contacts and a high degree of responsibility. Modern requirements for a teacher cover not only educational tasks, but also a person-oriented approach, educational work, and correctional support, which makes the profession psychologically stressful. At the same time, teachers often lack self-regulation and recovery skills, which exacerbates their vulnerability to burnout. Therefore, it is necessary to develop programs for teaching skills for preventing emotional burnout and restoring the emotional state, which requires more in-depth scientific study and practical implementation.

Based on the research of this problem, we will highlight the external factors that lead to exhaustion, depersonalization and reduction of professionalism.

**Exhaustion.** The most obvious factor of exhaustion is excessive workload. This is logical: few opportunities for rest, for recovery - an inevitable path to exhaustion.

**Depersonalization.** It can be caused by conflicts in a variety of forms: with colleagues, with students, with administrative staff. No matter how independent we feel, we all need a safe social space to feel good and confident.

**Reduction of professionalism.** This can be caused by insufficient control over working conditions. If you do not understand what you are doing and why, but the system is overloaded with demands, this can reduce your willingness to solve professional problems, interest in them and involvement in work.

Research shows that people who burn out more often than others have certain personality traits:

1. High level of neuroticism (that is, emotional instability) - a person is easily excitable, vulnerable, and quickly loses balance.

2. Low level of friendliness and extroversion. The work of a teacher is directly related to communication, so the less pleasant emotions it gives you, the more tired you are of it, the more difficult it is.

3. High rigidity (lack of flexibility). It manifests itself if a person has difficulty with everything new, finds it difficult to adapt to changes, is conservative and experiences anxiety before anything that is different from the usual.

4. Perfectionism - that is, the desire to do everything perfectly and clearly, according to plan. Perfectionism is not the same as responsibility. It is always about excessive demands on yourself and your results - even in cases where the result, which seems not ideal enough, will still be effective. It is especially bad when perfectionism is combined with a high level of self-criticism and a negative attitude towards oneself.

Despite the complexity and popularity of the professional burnout syndrome manifestation, it is possible to identify preventive and "rehabilitation" measures that can prevent or minimize the manifestations of this phenomenon in teachers. Let us note some elements of emotional stability that protect against exhaustion:

- a good understanding of yourself, your states and emotions;
- the ability to manage your states, using the most appropriate ways of coping with stress;
- adequate understanding of others and the ability to effectively interact and communicate with them;

- proactivity, focus on solving problems and improving conditions;
- the skill of analyzing and solving problems.

Any problem includes two components - the initial state (what you do not like, what worries you) and the target (where you would like to go, what you would like to have or feel instead of the difficulty you are experiencing).

Recommendations from psychologists: How to constructively approach difficult situations?

- What exactly am I not happy with? Describe the problem, if possible, without giving it assessments - imagine that you are an outside observer. List the components of the situation, its actors, and their behavior (try not to hypothesize about the motives and intentions of other people; describe only what a video camera could record).

- What do I feel in this situation? Describe your emotions, experiences.

- What am I thinking about in this situation? Separate your thoughts from your emotions. For example, the phrase "I think that the current situation threatens my reputation" is a direct reflection of thoughts that can cause fear. By separating thoughts from emotions, you can take the next step - separate your subjective experiences and interpretation of the situation from the facts. This is important in order to more sensibly assess the strength of our emotions and how much they correspond to the situation.

- What actions am I taking to solve the problem?

- What result do I get? Am I satisfied with it? Sometimes what we do does not work and even makes the situation worse. It is important to separate those ways of solving problems that really help us from those that are useless or harmful.

The following approaches are recommended as constructive measures to overcome emotional burnout:

1. Individual strategies:

- awareness of professional motivation;
- managing the emotional state through acceptance of your own emotions;
- prioritizing physical and psychological health;
- developing communication skills;
- improving the psychological climate in the team;
- adhering to the principles of a healthy lifestyle, work-life balance, transforming negative beliefs and improving the level of professional skills.

2. Systemic measures of psychological and pedagogical support:

- conducting personal growth trainings and educational programs on burnout prevention;
- introducing physiological and physiotherapeutic measures (e.g. health restoration programs, fitness memberships);
- expanding the availability of psychological assistance in educational institutions;
- developing specialized advanced training courses on the prevention of professional burnout.

Teachers exposed to adverse factors should use a variety of methods to reduce professional stress, including increasing variety in work, rest, developing hobbies and seeking professional help if necessary.

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