

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# The prevalence of stress in the workplace

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of work stress on the health and well-being of employees within an organization. To this end, a comprehensive analysis was conducted that addressed the prevalence of work stress in the current environment, as well as its underlying causes and its impact on employee performance. The study was based on a systematic review of information from books, theses and papers published in prestigious databases such as Scielo, Scopus, Latindex and the Fondo Editorial San Marcos, where a total of 25 relevant papers on the subject were analyzed. Thus, different categories of analysis were identified, including work stressors, consequences and strategies for organizations to contribute to its reduction. The objectives motivating this research are to evaluate the impact of work stress, identify the factors that contribute to its occurrence, what consequences exist and the importance of adopting preventive approaches in the work environment. The results indicated that the factors that contribute to stress are mainly work demands and tensions, workload and lack of control, unfavorable working conditions and work environment: In conclusion, it was found that there are business practices that can reduce stress levels, among which are the implementation of wellness programs, work flexibility, appropriate recognition and rewards, training and continuous monitoring as well as feedback.

**Keywords:** Occupational stress; Effects; Health.

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Submitted: 12/09/2023 - Accepted: 03/18/2024 - Published: 06/30/2024

## INTRODUCTION

Canadian endocrinologist Dr. Hans Selye (1907-1982), considered a pioneer in the study of stress, was consulted to conceptualize stress. In 1935, Selye defined stress as the adaptive response of the human body to various stressors and called it the “general adaptation syndrome”. The three stages described by Selye include the initial response, the adaptive phase, and the phase in which the body’s defenses are perceived to be exhausted due to the duration or intensity of the stress.

Stressors, as a response to stress, are defined as circumstances, unforeseen situations, or setbacks in daily life that are consciously or unconsciously perceived as threatening or difficult. Essentially, they are experiences that are interpreted in a negative way, since “los estresores se producen para una persona cuando se produce un desajuste deficitario entre las demandas del entorno (o también las propias demandas) y los recursos con que la persona cuenta para afrontarlas” [stressors occur for a person when there is a deficit mismatch between the demands of the environment (or the demands themselves) and the resources that the person has to cope with them] (Peiro Silla, 2001, p. 32)

La palabra “estrés” proviene del verbo latino *stringere*, que significa apretar o provocar tensión. Esta palabra fue utilizada por primera vez probablemente en el siglo XIV y, desde entonces, ha sido empleada en textos en inglés de diferentes formas: *stress*, *stresse*, *streste* incluso *straisse*. El término *stress* anglosajón significa presión, coacción, y también “tensión”. [The word “stress” comes from the Latin verb *stringere*, which means to tighten or cause tension. The word was probably first used in the 14th century and has since been used in English texts in various forms: *stress*, *stresse*, *streste*, and even *straisse*. The Anglo-Saxon term *stress* means pressure, constraint, and also “tension”.] (Lagos Berríos, 2022, p. 284)

The term “stress” is acquiring extraordinary relevance in our daily lives, especially in our current society, which is characterized by

high levels of self-demand, self-exploitation and the constant search for productivity. Hans Selye, a renowned expert on the subject, even called our era the “age of stress”, emphasizing the magnitude of this phenomenon today (Lagos Berríos, 2022).

Stress occurs as a physiological response of the body to situations that are perceived as threatening or overly demanding. Its expression is intrinsically linked to the demands of the environment, both external and internal, and to individual characteristics. In essence, stress is configured as an innate protective mechanism designed to enable an adaptive and appropriate response to challenging conditions. This response, designed to maintain the balance of the organism, reflects the complexity of the interaction between the individual and his or her environment, underscoring the need for personalized approaches to effective stress management.

Stress affects various aspects of daily life, especially the work environment, which is characterized by increasing complexity, fast pace and changing demands. Work-related stress has gained prominence in scientific research and human resource management because of its negative impact on the health and well-being of employees and the productivity of organizations.

The current work environment, with its challenges and constant innovations, has become a breeding ground for the generation of stress, which manifests itself in emotional and physical tension. This stress can come from a variety of sources, such as work overload, lack of control over work tasks, job insecurity, and lack of social support at work. These pressures can have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of employees, affecting their job performance and organizational effectiveness.

The most frequent stressors in the work environment are usually psychosocial risks related to organizational structure, work design, and working conditions, in addition to external factors that may affect health, performance, and job satisfaction (Torres Ocampo, 2017).

This study explores the incidence of job stress in the current work environment, its

underlying causes, and its implications for workers and organizations. The knowledge gained is intended to provide insights into effective stress management strategies in the workplace, promoting a healthier and more productive work environment, as well as contributing to the scientific literature that addresses occupational stress as a public health concern and a critical issue in the Peruvian work environment.

## **METHOD**

An exhaustive research has been carried out on the basis of national and international scientific articles obtained from databases of scientific journals, books and theses on the impact of occupational stress on different aspects of workers' lives. A total of 40 bibliographic sources related to work stress were reviewed, from which 25 were selected that were considered related to the research objectives, reliable and of added value to the present work, discarding those sources that did not meet these requirements.

The research objectives are:

- Identify the work factors that contribute significantly to stress.
- Evaluate the main effects of job stress on employees' daily lives.
- Recommend organizational programs to reduce job stress.

Reducing stress is essential to maintaining a healthy work-life balance that promotes overall well-being. In this context, the aim of this research is to provide practical and effective recommendations for stress management in the work environment. These recommendations will include time management strategies, stress management techniques, promotion of physical activity, and fostering a work environment conducive to open communication and mutual support among colleagues. Implementing these strategies will not only help reduce stress, but will also cultivate a more harmonious work environment that is conducive to the well-being of all involved.

## **RESULTS**

There are several scientific analyses of work stress, such as that of Berrocal (2023), who states that an increase in work stress has the effect of reducing the level of psychological well-being among teachers in the Ayacucho region of Peru. In addition, stressed teachers manifest various symptoms such as fatigue and insomnia, some mood swings, problems with concentration, depression, and so on.

According to Rojas (2017), the occupations that tend to cause the most stress are those in which the demands and tensions exceed the employee's skills and abilities, with limited opportunities to make decisions or exercise control, and with little backing and support from others. According to Ayuso (2006), this dynamic is particularly relevant for professionals in caring roles, such as teachers, who may face significant levels of job burnout due to the demanding nature of their responsibilities and limited ability to influence their work environment. This situation highlights the importance of identifying and addressing specific stressors in different work contexts and promoting support and stress management strategies tailored to individual and professional needs.

Las principales causas de la depresión en el personal de blanco de América Latina incluyen factores estresantes en el trabajo, problemas personales y familiares, y factores culturales y sociales. La falta de apoyo emocional y la falta de recursos para manejar el estrés también pueden contribuir a la depresión [The main causes of depression among Caucasian workers in Latin America include job stressors, personal and family problems, and cultural and social factors. Lack of emotional support and resources to cope with stress can also contribute to depression] (Gómez, 2023, p. 3)

Stress is a natural response of the body to situations that are perceived as threatening or challenging, and work stress refers to a specific type of stress that occurs in or is related to the work environment. In this sense, Matteson and Ivancevich (1987) define work stress as

the reaction that manifests itself according to the unique personal characteristics of each individual and that occurs as a result of actions, circumstances, or work events that place high demands on the person being analyzed.

Research conducted in Latin America emphasizes that prolonged exposure to high levels of stress can induce mental and psychosocial disorders that affect the normal functioning of the individual, as pointed out by Osorio and Cardenas (2017). This situation not only affects the individual, but can also have complex effects on all family members when extrapolated to their environment. Stress has emerged as one of the most prevalent syndromes in the workplace worldwide, highlighting the urgent need for effective stress management strategies that address not only individual, but also collective well-being. Understanding the far-reaching effects of stress in the personal and family spheres underscores the urgency of holistic approaches to mitigating its adverse effects.

When work stress becomes chronic, it turns into burnout, in this sense Santaella Palma (2022) defines that burnout usually manifests itself with exhaustion, cynicism and perception of low professional efficacy. Burnout syndrome was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2000 as an important occupational risk factor that affects the performance of workers, affects their mental health and increases the likelihood of creating situations that, because they are unsafe, can compromise the physical integrity of the worker. In 2019, the World Health Organization included burnout syndrome in the eleventh edition of its "International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems", identifying it with the code QD85 and describing it as occupational burnout syndrome.

According to Dongil-Collado (2009), the most common symptoms of anxiety in the face of stress are the cognitive-subjective aspects of anxiety, which manifest as worry, uncertainty, difficulty making decisions, fear, negative thoughts about oneself and one's performance in front of others, and fear of perceived difficulties and loss of control. These cognitive elements can have an impact on cognitive

performance, such as difficulty thinking, learning, and concentrating. At the physiological level, anxiety manifests itself through symptoms such as sweating, muscle tension, signs of tachycardia, body tremors, digestive discomfort, difficulty breathing, and dry mouth, among others. This complex panorama of manifestations highlights the need to understand anxiety from an integral perspective, taking into account both its mental and physical aspects.

The interrelationship between cognitive-subjective and physiological components underscores the complexity of this emotional response and highlights the importance of holistic therapeutic approaches that address both mind and body. The identification and detailed understanding of these indicators can guide personalized intervention strategies that effectively address the challenges associated with anxiety, thereby improving the quality of life of those who experience it.

Stress also causes depression. According to Gómez (2023), triggers of depression include work-related stress, personal and family problems, lack of emotional support, and lack of resources to cope with chronic stress. According to Rodríguez (2022), a program to reduce work stress would improve performance and reduce depression rates in the workplace.

Another result of stress is fatigue. According to Vidal Lacosta (2021), stress is one of the most common causes of fatigue and endangers the health of the individual, since it increases its devastating effects on all the body's systems. According to the analysis of Serrano Gisbert (2002), stress generators produce adaptive diseases such as stress and burnout, which affect the health of people and their social relationships, so the analysis of stress generators will help to understand the nature of changes in the workplace, including chronic fatigue.

Avila's study (2022) found that one of the effects of prolonged stress is the increase in tobacco consumption, both inside and outside working hours, which is related to the increase in insomnia, a sleep disorder that allows people to be exposed to a large number of pathologies.



It is essential to recognize that burnout syndrome is caused by prolonged exposure to chronic stressful situations in the workplace. According to recent research by Camacho Vargas (2023), this syndrome is triggered by persistent causes, and it is noteworthy that the primary stressors are related to the operational nature of daily tasks. Likewise, the presence or absence of the syndrome shows variations that depend on the temporality of the measurement, the risk factors inherent to each profession, as well as the cultural and social aspects present in different countries and regions.

The detailed analysis of the triggers of burnout syndrome underlines the complexity of this phenomenon and the importance of considering various contextual elements when assessing its presence. The temporality of measurement, specific occupational risks, and the influence of cultural and social factors are crucial components in understanding the prevalence and manifestation of the syndrome in diverse work environments. This comprehensive approach is vital for designing burnout prevention and management strategies that are adapted to the unique characteristics of each profession and work environment, thus promoting the mental health and well-being of workers globally.

Parra-Gálvez (2023) speaks of the inverse relationship between the degree of stress of health science teachers and professors and the negative consequences on the teaching and learning process of their students; that is, that professors in health sciences faculties represent a population with potential for the development of chronic occupational stress for several reasons, such as constant interaction with students, the heavy workload inside and outside university institutions, the great social responsibility derived from training professionals who develop and cultivate the necessary competencies to take care of health. In addition to considering that future health professionals also perform health care tasks that may increase the levels of burnout among them, directly affecting their work and academic performance, which should be taken into account in the design of future education systems at all levels. To complement this idea, Gordillo Montero (2023) explained that health professionals face

a very heavy daily workload, which exposes them to various stressful situations, which has several impacts on the physical and emotional aspects of their work.

It is important to cite the work of Jennings (2018), who mentioned some useful tips for reducing stress:

- Laughing and enjoying life with friends and family provides a sense of belonging and boosts self-esteem, according to research. This social connection can be especially beneficial during difficult times, as spending time with friends and loved ones has been shown to trigger the release of oxytocin, a natural feel-good hormone, in women. This phenomenon, known as “caring and befriending,” counteracts the fight-or-flight response associated with chronic stress. In addition, laughter not only helps reduce immediate stress levels, but also helps improve the immune system and mood in the long term by relaxing muscles and reducing tension.
- Regular exercise reduces the likelihood of experiencing anxiety compared to those who do not exercise regularly. This is due to several factors, including the reduction of stress hormones such as cortisol, improved sleep quality, and increased self-confidence through the sense of competence and security that regular exercise provides.
- Eat a healthy diet, including organic and low saturated fat alternatives.

The review reveals important findings on work stress and its effects, but also identifies contradictions and limitations in the existing studies. For example, some studies suggest an association between work stress and cardiovascular disease, whereas others find no significant association. In addition, many studies lack a robust experimental design and representative samples. Further research into this malady affecting our society at a deep level is recommended to better understand its implications,

highlighting key findings such as the impacts and root causes of occupational stress.

## DISCUSSION

Job stress affects not only the psychological well-being but also the physical health of employees. Research suggests that chronic stress can contribute to health problems such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and gastrointestinal disorders.

The combination of high job demands and low autonomy can increase the risk of health problems. It is important to consider both the workload and the worker's ability to control his or her work environment.

The perception of stress is subjective and varies from person to person. Not everyone reacts the same way to the same working conditions; a strong support system in the company can help mitigate the effects of stress. In addition, employees should be educated about coping strategies and the importance of seeking help when needed.

The severity of job stress and its potential to contribute to fatal events underscores the need for comprehensive approaches that include both organizational changes and individual initiatives to manage and prevent job stress.

Some of the factors that contribute to job stress include:

- **Job demands and stress.** Jobs that tend to cause the most stress are those where the demands and stresses exceed the employee's skills and abilities, where there are limited opportunities for decision making or control, and where there is little support and encouragement from others.
  - **Workload and lack of control.** Professionals face significant levels of job burnout due to the demanding nature of their responsibilities and limited ability to influence their work environment.
  - **Unfavorable working conditions.** Lack of support from coworkers and lack of resources to cope with stress can also contribute to job stress.
  - **Stressful work environments and situations.** Professionals with heavy daily workloads are exposed to a variety of stressful situations with physical and emotional consequences.
- There are several effects of stress in the workplace, the main ones being
- **Mental and physical health effects.** Job stress can, in some cases, have a significant impact on the mental and physical health of employees, in addition to contributing to the development of anxiety disorders, depression and emotional exhaustion. Chronic job stress can contribute to the development of anxiety disorders and depression, which can negatively affect the employee's quality of life and productivity at work and in daily family life.
  - **Job performance.** Job stress can negatively affect an employee's performance in the work environment. Stressed employees tend to experience a decrease in productivity, concentration, and effective decision making, as well as a sharp increase in resignations of employees burdened by excessive stress levels, which can have repercussions at the individual, family, and organizational levels. Stress can have a negative impact on work performance, reducing productivity and the quality of daily work; in addition, fatigue and lack of concentration contribute to an increase in errors and reduce efficiency.
  - **Work environment and interpersonal relationships.** The presence of stress in the workplace can negatively affect the work environment and relationships with co-workers, subordinates, and supervisors, and can contribute to an unfortunately tense work environment, decrease job satisfaction, and increase conflicts among co-workers at all levels. It is important to keep in mind that the work environment is affected by these predictable events. Stress can create tension in work and personal relationships; irritability and lack of patience can

affect communication and cooperation among colleagues.

- **Turnover and absenteeism.** Job stress may also be related to higher rates of employee turnover and absenteeism. Employees who experience high levels of stress may be more likely to seek other job opportunities or take sick days, and frequent absences may affect the operational continuity of the company. Rodriguez and De Rivas (2011), "A nivel organizacional, entre las principales consecuencias tanto del estrés laboral como del desgaste profesional destacan el abandono o intenciones de abandono del puesto de trabajo, el absentismo laboral, y un mayor número de rotación y bajas laborales" [At the organizational level, the main consequences of both job stress and burnout include job abandonment or intentions to quit, absenteeism, and increased turnover and sick leave.] (p.76).
- **Engagement and motivation.** Stressed employees may experience decreased engagement and motivation at work. This can affect the quality of daily work and the ability of employees to contribute meaningfully to organizational goals and objectives, affecting innovation and positive contribution to the team and the organization.
- **Interventions and management strategies.** Companies should measure and reduce stress levels with business strategies such as workplace wellness programs, active breaks, stress coping skills training, and staff support policies to have a positive impact on reducing stress and improving employee well-being.
- **Public health issues.** An effective workplace stress management strategy should be implemented. Research on the effects of workplace stress provides valuable information for employers, human resource professionals, and legislators to develop

policies and programs that reduce the incidence of workplace stress and promote a healthier and more productive work environment.

- **Sleep problems.** Stress can affect sleep quality and contribute to problems such as insomnia or sleep disorders. Not getting enough sleep can exacerbate the effects of stress.
- **Impact on personal life.** Work stress can spill over into personal life, affecting family relationships, leisure time and the ability to enjoy activities outside of work, keeping in mind that the development of stress can be different for each person, depending on how they manage their positive emotions, thoughts and lessons learned from past experiences in the face of stress (Rojas-Solís *et al.*, 2021).

Based on the findings, here are some practical recommendations for managing work-related stress:

- **Encourage employee autonomy.** Giving employees a degree of autonomy and the opportunity to suggest improvements to stressful processes reduces feelings of overload due to lack of control, a key factor in work stress.
- **Workload management.** Evaluate and adjust workloads to ensure they are reasonable and achievable. Fair distribution of tasks and clarity of expectations are essential.
- **Professional development.** Provide opportunities for professional development within the organization, as personal growth can increase motivation and job satisfaction, thereby reducing the impact of stress.
- **Job flexibility.** Where possible, offer flexible scheduling and remote work options that allow employees to better manage their responsibilities and balance work and personal demands, thereby reducing the stressors that cause stress at work.

- **Implement wellness programs.** Wellness programs can address mental and physical health through mindfulness sessions, exercise programs, or counseling. These programs can help employees develop coping skills and reduce stress, and it is recommended that stress levels be measured on a regular basis and that medical attention be sought for severe cases, known as burnout.
- **Recognize employees' achievements and efforts fairly.** This can be done by measuring performance and goal achievement, either through financial incentives or formal recognition (such as "employee of the month"), which can increase job satisfaction and reduce feelings of stress.
- **Offer training programs.** These programs are designed to train employees in new skills to effectively reduce excessive workloads, which can help them reduce stressors in a healthy way.
- **Continuous monitoring.** Establish mechanisms to continuously monitor stress levels and solicit feedback from employees. This allows policies and programs to be adjusted as needs change.

## CONCLUSIONS

The exhaustive study of occupational stress has shed a revealing light on the significant impact that this problem has on the daily lives of workers as well as on the overall functioning of organizations. Throughout this research, the various aspects of work-related stress, from its causes to its consequences at both the individual and organizational levels, have been analyzed in detail. In this context, a number of critical factors contributing to workplace stress have been identified, as well as a variety of interventions and programs aimed at mitigating its adverse effects. These findings, based on a comprehensive review of the literature and consideration of multiple perspectives, are essential to inform policies and practices that

promote healthier and more sustainable work environments.

This research provides critical insights into the impact of occupational stress on the health and well-being of workers. Although significant progress has been made in understanding this phenomenon, much remains to be done; more research is needed to address the limitations of existing studies and to provide practical guidance for addressing occupational stress.

Based on the main findings of the 25 scientific articles reviewed in the results section, this study details the origins, effects and alternative solutions to occupational stress, contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon and its impact on the work and personal environments of those affected.

The creation of a healthy work environment is a fundamental responsibility to society, and this implies the implementation of concrete measures aimed at reducing high levels of stress. This action not only has a positive impact on improving the work environment, but also plays an important role in promoting a healthy and sustainable work culture. Through this commitment, we not only contribute to the individual well-being of our employees, but also play an active role in building a more equitable working society and promoting standards that support long-term health and productivity.

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#### Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

#### Author contributions

Juan Manuel Calvo Lugo (lead author): research, methodology (original draft, review, and editing).