



Research article

# Relationship between occupational stress and emotional skills among university professors in Physical Education

Relación del estrés laboral y habilidades emocionales en profesores/as universitarios/as de Educación Física

Relação entre stress relacionado com o trabalho e habilidades emocionais em professores universitários de Educação Física

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Maureira-Roldán, G., Jeria-Pérez, F., & Maureira-Cid, F. (2024). Relación del estrés laboral y habilidades emocionales en profesores universitarios de Educación Física. *Revista Ciencias de la Actividad Física UCM*, 25(1), enero-junio, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.29035/rcaf.25.1.11>

## ABSTRACT

Burnout syndrome is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion that involves a loss of interest in work, negative attitudes towards others, and low self-esteem. Emotional skills are defined as the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others. The aim of the present research was to analyze the relationship between levels of emotional skills and Burnout syndrome in university professors from Physical Education schools. A total of 31 university professors from two universities in Santiago, Chile, were evaluated. The Trait Meta-Mood Scale, validated in Physical Education students in Chile, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) were employed. The results reveal a low and negative relationship between depersonalization and emotional repair scores in the sample. The professor's gender, years of university teaching experience, holding managerial positions, or undergoing psychological or pharmacological treatment do not influence levels of occupational stress and emotional skills. It is recommended to replicate this research with samples of university professors from Physical Education schools in other universities, controlling for other variables such as anxiety, depression, motivation, etc.

**Key words:** Academic stress; Emotional skills; University teachers; Physical education.

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## RESUMEN

El síndrome del Burnout es un estado de agotamiento físico y emocional que implica una pérdida del interés en el trabajo, actitudes negativas hacia los demás, y baja autoestima. Las habilidades emocionales se definen como capacidades para conocer y dominar emociones propias y de otros/as. El objetivo de la presente investigación fue analizar la relación entre los niveles de habilidades emocionales y síndrome de Burnout en docentes universitarios de escuelas de Educación Física. Se evaluaron a 31 docentes universitarios de dos universidades de Santiago de Chile. Se aplicó la Escala de rasgo de metaconocimiento emocional validada en estudiantes de Educación Física de Chile y el inventario de Burnout de Maslach (MBI). Los resultados revelan una relación baja y negativa entre los puntajes de despersonalización y reparación emocional en la muestra. El sexo del docente, los años de docencia universitaria, tener cargos directivos o estar en tratamiento psicológico o farmacológico no influyen en los niveles de estrés laboral y habilidades emocionales. Se recomienda replicar esta investigación con muestras de docentes universitarios de escuelas de Educación Física en otras universidades, además del control de otras variables como ansiedad, depresión, motivación, etc.

**Palabras clave:** Estrés laboral; Habilidades emocionales; Docentes universitarios; Educación física.

## RESUMO

A síndrome o Burnout é um estado de esgotamento físico e emocional que implica uma perda do interesse no trabalho, atitudes negativas para com os outros, e baixa auto-estima. A habilidades emocionais é definida como capacidade para conhecer e dominar emoções próprias e de outros/as. O objetivo da presente pesquisa foi analisar a relação entre os níveis de habilidades emocionais e síndrome de Burnout em docentes universitários de Educação Física. Foram avaliados 31 docentes universitários de duas universidades de Santiago do Chile. Foi aplicada a Escala de rasgo de meta-conhecimento emocional validada em estudantes de Educação Física do Chile e o inventário de Burnout de Maslach (MBI). Os resultados revelam uma relação baixa e negativa entre as pontuações de despersonalização e reparação emocional na amostra. O sexo do docente, os anos de ensino universitário, ter cargos directivos ou estar em tratamento psicológico ou farmacológico não influem nos níveis de stress laboral e habilidades emocionais. Recomenda-se replicar esta pesquisa com amostras de docentes universitários de escolas de Educação Física em outras universidades, além do controle de outras variáveis como ansiedade, depressão, motivação, etc.

**Palavras chave:** Stress laboral; Habilidades emocionais; Professores universitários; Educação física.

## INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, work stress has become a phenomenon inherent to the competitive-work environment, with negative consequences that can cause a decrease in the performance and physical-psychological health of workers. Freudenberger (1974) called this phenomenon Burnout syndrome, which is defined as a set of relationships between the person and a work situation, where the latter exceeds the individual's capacity and puts his or her personal well-being at risk, implying a loss of interest in work, negative attitudes towards colleagues and clients, and low self-esteem, in addition to manifesting itself as a progressive loss of energy and desire to achieve objectives, hindered by work conditions (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslach & Pines, 1977). For Maslach & Jackson (1986) Burnout syndrome is composed of three symptoms: a) emotional exhaustion or tiredness, since the person feels emotionally exhausted, exhausted in his or her efforts to cope with the situation; b) depersonalization-cynicism, a dimension characterized by an impersonal, cold and cynical response towards the beneficiaries of the services or towards the activity being carried out; and c) lack of personal fulfillment characterized by incompetent feelings and job failure.

For Palacios & Rivera (2020) teaching work (at any level) has a stressful nature, considering aspects such as: the teaching task, work overload through administrative support, guidance to parents, teaching support, tutoring for students and above all, the particularity of this occupation in dedicating more time than established in its development. The above has a significant link with manifestations of job burnout, depression and anxiety. A research by Rivera et al. (2018) evaluated 159 teachers from Higher Education Institutions in Guayaquil (Ecuador) concluding that 67.5% of them suffer from Burnout. Pando et al. (2006) studied the specific prevalence of work-related stress in 185 teachers at a private university in Mexico, finding that 38.9% of the population suffers from this syndrome, due to presenting at least one of the three burnout dimensions. Correa (2012) analyzes Burnout in teachers from public (233 teachers) and private (44 teachers) sectors in Mexico, finding physical consequences of Burnout in 34% of teachers from the private sector and 37% from the public sector, manifesting in headaches, insomnia, etc. Colino & Pérez (2015) evaluated 279 teachers from public schools in Montevideo, finding that 4.2% of them presented high levels of work-related stress, and 42% high values in at least one of the dimensions.

Gallardo et al. (2019) evaluated 1,890 teachers from Seville (Spain) finding that 11.6% of teachers present high levels of general Burnout. Specifically, the results in the different dimensions were: 74% of teachers obtained a medium level in emotional exhaustion, 83% obtained a medium level in depersonalization and 86.2% obtained a medium level score in lack of accomplishment. Tito et al. (2022) evaluated 262 teachers from two medical schools in Lima, revealing a low prevalence of Burnout (79.4%), with a low score in exhaustion (43.5%), cynicism (60.3%) and a high score in efficacy (46.6%). Burgos et al. (2018) evaluated 522 academics from the Universidad Austral de Chile-Valdivia. Their results showed that 43% had a high level of Burnout, 56% a medium level and only 1% a low level. Lepe & Gutiérrez (2022) surveyed 152 teachers from various educational institutions in Chile, showing that almost 94% presented high levels of emotional exhaustion, 84.9% lack of personal fulfillment, and 66.4% depersonalization. Santibáñez et al. (2021) surveyed 160 health teachers in Chile, showing a prevalence of Burnout of 4.4%, with 17.5% of teachers meeting two of the three criteria for this syndrome. Means of

25.13±11.05 were reported for exhaustion (out of a maximum of 54), 4.73±4.91 for depersonalization (out of a maximum of 30), and 34.93±8.31 for personal fulfillment (out of a maximum of 48).

Some evidence suggests the existence of personality factors and emotional skills that influence overall levels of work stress, acting as mediators of the effects of work stress on emotional adjustment (Mearns & Cain, 2003). An individual skill that would help to better understand why some teachers are more susceptible to the negative consequences of stress and, however, others are very tolerant of its effects, is the construct called Intelligence or Emotional Skills (Cabello et al, 2010). Goleman (1995) defines them as the ability to control emotions, through tools such as self-control in situations and context. The perspective that will be developed in the present study is based on the EI model of Salovey & Mayer (1990), who define it as the ability to master feelings and emotions in oneself and with others, allowing one to discern between them, and use this information to guide actions and thoughts assertively. The authors argue that EI is composed of four skills: a) Emotional perception, which corresponds to the ability to perceive and identify emotions in oneself and in others; b) Emotional facilitation, which refers to the ability to use emotions to focus attention and think more rationally; c) Emotional understanding, which is the ability to reflect the ability to analyze emotions; and d) Emotional regulation, which corresponds to the ability to regulate one's own and others' moods and emotions.

A study by Taramuel & Zapata (2017) evaluated EI in 177 university students from a Faculty of Philosophy in Ecuador, concluding that women present better results in the three dimensions (perception, understanding and regulation), especially in emotional perception. Urrutia-Gutiérrez et al. (2022) evaluated 126 students from the University of the Basque Country, showing that there is a significant difference in emotional clarity, with men showing higher values. As for the other two dimensions, the male group shows higher scores in emotional repair and the female group higher scores in emotional attention. Saucedo et al. (2011) evaluated 242 medical students, where 46.3% obtained adequate levels of emotional attention, 52.5% of emotional clarity and 60.3% of emotional repair. Men presented better results in the attention and repair factor, and women in the clarity factor. Gutiérrez (2020) evaluated 175 Social Education students, showing that women have better scores in attention and emotional repair, without finding differences in emotional clarity. Del Rosal et al. (2016) evaluated 358 master's students in Primary Education and Sciences, revealing that there are significant differences in the level of emotional repair according to sex, and those in the master's degree in primary education present higher scores in the three dimensions. Mora et al. (2022) evaluated 127 Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers from the city of Madrid, obtaining values close to 28 points in attention, 30 points in clarity and 29 points in repair, with no significant differences between women and men, and with better scores in repair by those teachers who have had training in emotional skills.

A study by Coronado et al. (2023) evaluated 204 university students from Sonora (Mexico) revealing that 50.2% and 43.3% of men and women, respectively, obtained adequate emotional attention. 50.2% of men need to improve their understanding of their emotions and 57.8% of women have adequate and excellent clarity. Finally, 76.9% of men presented adequate and excellent emotional repair, while 61.7% of women did. Sánchez (2024) evaluated 62 pedagogy students from Veracruz (Mexico) where adequate values of perception, assimilation, understanding and regulation of emotions were found. Vera et al. (2023) studied emotional skills in 102 nursing students from a University in Paraguay, showing

that 82.3% have a medium level of development of these skills, 10.8% have a low level and only 6.9% have a high level. Hoyos & Borrajo (2023) evaluated 285 university students from Colombia and Spain, showing that men have higher scores than women in clarity ( $p = 0.001$ ) and emotional repair ( $p = 0.01$ ). In addition, Colombian students had higher scores than Spanish students in the same two dimensions. A study by Maureira et al. (2023) evaluated 226 Physical Education students from Chile, with an average of  $29.5 \pm 5.7$  points in emotional clarity,  $22.7 \pm 4.5$  points in emotional attention and  $18.4 \pm 3.8$  points in emotional repair, without finding differences between women and men. Regarding the relationship between emotional skills and Burnout Syndrome, the literature shows that there is an inverse relationship, since the different susceptibility among teachers to the syndrome is probably due to the existence of EI (Baena et al., 2008). Extremera et al. (2003) found a positive relationship between attention to feelings and suppression of thoughts and personal achievement; a positive relationship between emotional clarity and personal achievement and mental health; a positive relationship between personal achievement and mental health, and a negative relationship between emotional repair and exhaustion and depersonalization. Martínez et al. (2010) found that the teacher's EI predicts the level of Burnout that he or she suffers. In addition, they concluded that teachers with a greater ability to identify, understand, regulate and think about emotions in an intelligent manner will have more resources to obtain emotionally more intelligent and prepared students, with greater capacities to face stressful events that originate within the classroom. Based on the background presented, the objective of this research was born: to analyze the relationship between the levels of emotional skills and Burnout syndrome in university teachers from two Physical Education schools in Chile.

## METHODS

### Sample

The sample was of an intentional non-random type. It consisted of 31 Physical Education Pedagogy teachers from two universities in the city of Santiago de Chile. One of the universities was public and the other private. The minimum age was 30 years, the maximum 62 years, with an average of  $47.9 \pm 9.5$ . Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1**

*Sociodemographic variables of the sample of university Physical Education teachers.*

Variables				
Gender	Female	Male		
	17 (54,8%)	14 (45,2%)		
Years of teaching school	<3 years	3 a 10 years	10 a 20 years	>20 years
	9 (29,0%)	14 (45,2%)	2 (6,5%)	6 (19,4%)
Years of university teaching	<3 years	3 a 10 years	10 a 20 years	>20 years
	2 (6,5%)	9 (29,0%)	14 (45,2%)	6 (19,4%)
Number of institutions where you work	One	Two	Three	
	14 (45,2%)	12 (38,7%)	5 (16,1%)	
Psychological treatment during the last year	Yes	No		
	4 (12,9%)	27 (87,1%)		
Use of anti-anxiety or antidepressant drugs during the last year	Yes	No		
	6 (19,4%)	25 (80,6%)		
Graduate, diploma or postgraduate degree related to emotional skills	Yes	No		
	10 (32,3%)	21 (67,7%)		
Hold a management position at the university	Yes	No		
	10 (32,3%)	21 (67,7%)		

## Instruments

A sociodemographic survey was applied to obtain information on age, sex, course, educational level of the father and mother, hobbies and preferred curricular activities in the career.

The Emotional Meta-knowledge Trait Scale of Fernández et al. (2004) was applied, validated in Physical Education students in Chile (Maureira et al., 2023) consisting of 19 items with a Likert-type response ranging from: 1 = totally disagree, to 5 = totally agree. The instrument evaluates three dimensions: a) emotional clarity, which corresponds to the ability to know and understand one's own emotions (8 items); b) emotional attention, which refers to the ability to recognize feelings and know their meaning (6 items); and c) emotional repair, related to the regulation of positive and negative emotions (5 items). The Spanish adaptation of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1997) was also applied, validated in Chilean teachers (Buzzetti, 2005). This instrument consists of 22 items and measures three dimensions of the Burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion, which describes the feelings of a person who is emotionally exhausted by work (9 items); depersonalization, which describes an impersonal and cold response toward the recipients of the professional's services or care (5 items); and personal accomplishment, which describes the feeling of incompetence and job failure (8 items), which are assessed on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = never, to 6 = every day.

## Procedures

The instruments were applied online using a Google form. During this study, the ethical principles for medical research with human beings of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association [WMA], 2013) were respected. To participate in this research, all university teachers signed an informed consent.

## Data analysis

The SPSS 27.0 program for Windows was used. Descriptive statistics were applied (with means and standard deviations). Normality tests were also performed with the Shapiro-Wilk test, which yielded a non-normal distribution of the variables ( $p < 0.05$ ), so non-parametric statistics such as the Mann-Whitney U test were used to compare the scores of emotional skills and work stress according to sex, having or not received psychological treatment during the last year, having or not consumed anxiolytic or antidepressant drugs during the last year, having or not completed a postgraduate, diploma or postgraduate degree related to emotional skills and having or not held a management position at the university. Kruskal-Wallis tests were also applied, comparing the scores of emotional skills and work stress according to years of university teaching and number of institutions where they work. Spearman correlations were used to relate each dimension of emotional skills and work stress. Values  $p < 0.05$  were considered significant.

## RESULTS

Table 2 shows the total scores for emotional skills and work stress in the sample. In the area of emotional skills, the emotional clarity subdimension achieved a mean of  $32.6 \pm 3.9$  out of 40 possible points, the emotional attention subdimension achieved a mean of  $23.4 \pm 3.9$  out of 30 possible points, and the emotional repair subdimension achieved a mean of  $20.2 \pm 2.8$  out of 25 possible points. In relation to work stress, the emotional exhaustion subdimension achieved a mean of  $14.7 \pm 8.2$  out of 45 possible points, the depersonalization subdimension achieved a mean of  $2.6 \pm 2.9$  out of 25 possible points, and the personal accomplishment subdimension achieved a mean of  $38.8 \pm 5.3$  out of 40 possible points. In the sample, significant differences were observed in emotional clarity, with higher scores in those teachers who say they have a postgraduate degree, diploma or postgraduate degree related to emotional skills.

**Table 2**

*Emotional skills and work stress scores of the total sample and comparison between those who say they have a graduate, diploma or postgraduate degree related to emotional skills and those who do not.*

		Total (n=30)	Yes (n=20)	No (n=10)	p
<b>Emotional skills</b>	Clarity	32,6±3,9	35,4±3,3	31,2±3,3	0,004**
	Attention	23,4±3,9	25,2±3,4	22,7±4,0	0,085
	Reparation	20,2±2,8	21,4±3,0	19,7±2,6	0,148
	<b>Total</b>	76,2±8,3	82,0±7,1	73,6±7,4	0,010*
<b>Work stress</b>	Emotional exhaustion	14,7±8,2	12,3±6,8	17,0±9,7	0,244
	Depersonalization	2,6±2,9	1,9±2,5	2,8±3,1	0,332
	Personal fulfillment	38,8±5,3	40,7±2,2	38,2±6,3	0,093

\*\*significant difference at  $p < 0.01$  level

The analyses comparing emotional skills scores and job stress did not reveal significant differences between those teachers who reported being in psychological treatment during the last year and those who did not.

Table 3 shows the correlations between the various dimensions of emotional skills and job stress for the total sample. It is possible to notice that there is only a relationship between emotional repair and depersonalization, with a negative and medium relationship ( $r = -0.451$ ).

**Table 3**

*Correlations between dimensions of emotional skills and work stress of the sample.*

	Clarity	Attention	Reparation	Total
Emotional exhaustion	-0,158	-0,084	-0,209	-0,144
Depersonalization	-0,112	-0,130	-0,451*	-0,201
Personal fulfillment	0,203	0,130	0,127	0,219

\*significant correlation at  $p < 0.05$  level

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that there is a low and negative relationship between the scores of depersonalization and emotional repair in the sample, that is, those teachers who lose interest in their occupation the most and with cold and impersonal attitudes towards the rest, indicated less ability to regulate their moods. This could be explained because teachers make use of emotional suppression as a strategy to regulate their emotions in the face of constant stressful situations, causing the attractiveness of their work to be undermined and distant attitudes to develop towards the recipients of the service they provide. According to Gross (1999, cited in Hernández-Montaña & González-Tovar, 2022), emotional suppression can be effective in reducing the expression of negative emotions, although it does not help in reducing negative experiences.

This result coincides with that reported by Extremera et al. (2003), who maintain that people with a greater tendency to suppress negative thoughts and a lower capacity to repair their emotional states indicated a higher level of depersonalization.



On the other hand, variables such as sex, years of teaching, management positions, drug use (anxiolytics or antidepressants) and psychological treatment in the last year, do not influence the levels of work stress and emotional skills. In this sense, university teaching does not entail emotional exhaustion or significant stress, when working with adult students the academic demands, behavioral problems and the level of maturity are different compared to lower levels. Nieto (2006) points out that secondary school teachers are those who present the greatest psychosocial risk, since adolescence tends to complicate interactions between students, their peers, their parents and their teachers, which would explain high scores of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal achievement at those levels, unlike primary and higher levels.

Teachers who have completed a postgraduate, diploma or post-graduate degree related to emotional skills showed better scores in emotional clarity than teachers who did not, which is logical, since greater training in concepts and strategies that allow working on emotional states would be associated with better recognition of these (Maureira et al., 2023), a situation that allows these teachers to have better general levels of emotional skills.

Regarding the levels of depersonalization, Nieto (2006) states that the greater involvement shown by school teachers towards the learning of their students would explain the low levels of depersonalization. This is consistent with what was reported by Moreno et al. (2009) where university teachers present moderate and high levels of depersonalization, compared to university teachers. Gallegos (2013) states that this has to do with the fact that most university teachers did not study a teaching career in formal terms. However, in the case of the sample of university teachers from physical education schools, the majority did study a teaching career and, therefore, are physical education teachers, which would explain in the opposite sense the previous antecedents, and the results found regarding the low levels of depersonalization.

This involvement generates greater expectations regarding methodologies, knowledge and competences in order to contribute to achieving changes and improvements in the teaching task, but many times these expectations are not met, which can lead to a feeling of failure or a general state of frustration, and in some cases, Burnout. This reality gives rise to a tendency of the professional to evaluate himself and his task negatively (Malandar, 2016), which could explain the high levels of stress associated with personal achievement in the sample of university teachers from physical education schools.

The levels of emotional skills of the sample are higher than those reported by Maureira et al. (2023) in Physical Education students, which could be influenced by greater work experience of the teachers and greater emotional maturity resulting from the psychosocial development of the teachers.

Among the limitations of the present study, it can be mentioned that the sample is limited to two universities, which implies that it is not representative of the population of university physical education teachers in Chile.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this research show that teachers from physical education schools in two universities in Chile have low levels of depersonalization and high levels of stress associated with personal achievement. It is observed that the highest score is in emotional clarity and the lowest in emotional repair. The sex of the teacher, the years of university teaching, having management positions or being under psychological or pharmacological treatment do not influence the levels of work stress and emotional skills. Finally, there is a low and negative relationship between the scores of depersonalization and repair.

It is recommended to replicate this research in other Physical Education schools in the country, to have a more general view of these characteristics in this particular population. It would also be interesting to associate the results with other variables such as anxiety, depression, motivation, etc.

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Received: 14-11-2023

Accepted: 09-04-2024



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