



CHAPTER 7:

Teachers' perceptions of the effects of stress

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This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the *Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009* survey.
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Teachers' perceptions of the effects of stress

“I feel like I can't keep up to the demands of the job, not enough time.”

“I feel that the stress of my constantly-changing workload has affected my emotional health.”

“There isn't one issue that can be said to be ‘the’ stressor. It's more like a death by a thousand cuts. Much more than normal, so it is hard to cope these days—the band-aids are running out.”
(survey respondents)

There are many reasons to be concerned about teachers' stress. Multiple sources of data, including BCTF, national, and international studies, have documented increased stress in society generally, and high work-related stress in those public-sector workplaces that involve high levels of human interaction: education, health, and social services.

The [Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009 survey](#) asked participants to indicate their responses to seven statements reflecting possible effects of work stress on their well-being. Responses to this survey offer some insights.

A significant proportion of teachers report stress having negative effects. Table 1, below, lists the survey statements, and the proportion of respondents who indicate that they experienced the stated effects *most of the time* or *all of the time*. Over half of respondents (51.5%) have difficulty “turning off” work concerns in personal time, while close to half (46%) find keeping up with workload demands stressful. Over one-third (34.8%) feel that job pressures interfere with family/personal life, and over one-fifth (22.5%) state feeling that stress has a significant and negative impact on their physical or emotional well-being.

Table 1: Effects of work stress

Negative effects	Percent who experienced effect <i>most of the time</i> or <i>all of the time</i>
I have difficulty “turning off” thoughts or concerns about work during my personal time.	51.5%
I find keeping up with the demands of my workload as a teacher stressful.	46.0%
I feel that job pressures interfere with my family or personal life.	34.8%
I feel that my job is negatively affecting my physical or emotional well-being.	22.5%
Positive effects	
I feel my work life and personal life are in good balance.	33.6%
I feel there are enough hours in the day to meet all of my teaching responsibilities.	29.8%
I have energy left at the end of the day, after I have completed my teaching responsibilities.	21.7%

It is clear from these data that many respondents are reporting that they experience work-related stress. More respondents report negative effects of stress than express positive reflections like having a good sense of balance between work and personal life. Teaching, for these respondents,

is consuming not only considerable amounts of time with long working hours in and outside of school (an average of 47.8 hours per week reported for full-time teachers¹), but it is also having considerable mental or emotional effects, with over half of respondents indicating that they have difficulty turning off thoughts and concerns about work in their own time. Thus, it appears that for many teachers, stress factors linger long after the working days are finished, with a range of impacts on well-being and personal lives and relationships.

On the positive side, a smaller but still significant number of respondents indicate positive perspectives, with one-third (33.6%) indicating that they feel that their personal and work lives are well balanced, and over one-fifth (21.7%) feeling some energy at the end of a day’s teaching. Yet even these data are troubling, for if one-third of respondents report balance between work and home lives, and one-fifth feeling some energy at the end of a day’s teaching, then, by implication, two-thirds are reporting an imbalance between work and home lives, and four-fifths are reporting no energy at the end of a workday.

Gender and stress

Triggers of workplace stress also differ somewhat between men and women. While men and women had a similar likelihood of feeling stress because of poor interpersonal relationships, threat of job loss, or having to learn computer skills, the likelihood of citing other triggers varied. Women between 45 and 64, regardless of family structure, were significantly more likely than men the same age to feel workplace stress as a result of too many demands or hours. (Williams, 2003, para. 29)

There is a clear indication of gender differences in responses to the statements of possible effects of work stress on personal well-being. In every question, female respondents report more negative effects than males. Such a pattern is a concern, in that it identifies stress as being perceived as a consistently more-serious factor for female teachers than it is for male teachers in the sampled population.

Table 2: Effects of work stress, by gender

Effects of work stress	Female (mean)*	Male (mean)*
I have difficulty “turning off” thoughts or concerns about work during my personal time.	3.56	3.25
I find keeping up with the demands of my workload as a teacher stressful.	3.50	3.28
I feel that job pressures interfere with my family or personal life.	3.30	3.08
I feel my work life and personal life are in good balance.	2.96	3.23
I feel that my job is negatively affecting my physical or emotional well-being.	2.86	2.74
I feel there are enough hours in the day to meet all of my teaching responsibilities.	2.63	3.08
I have energy left at the end of the day, after I have completed my teaching responsibilities.	2.62	2.98

* on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=never, and 5=all of the time

¹ See [Chapter 3, Workload issues for BC teachers](#).

Previous BCTF studies (Naylor and Vint, 2009; Naylor, 2008, 2001) that include analysis of the international literature have also identified gender as a factor in differences of reported stress and possible coping mechanisms. The 2008 study reported:

In terms of gender, Park (2008) reported that more employed women reported higher stress than men. An Australian study (Timms, Graham, & Caltabiano, 2006) indicated higher levels of stress by female elementary teachers while Naylor & Schaefer (2003) found higher stress levels reported by BC female teachers than male colleagues. Pei and Guoli (2007) report significant gender differences in terms of stress affecting teachers in China. There is evidence that some women may be carrying substantial responsibilities for children and aging parents—the so-called “sandwich generation” of Canadian women with dual and significant family responsibilities:

They are called the ‘sandwich generation,’ or people caught between the often-conflicting demands of raising children and caring for aging parents or other relatives. And their life can be particularly stressful and hectic. Almost 3 in 10 of those aged 45 to 64 with unmarried children under 25 in the home, or some 712,000 individuals, were also caring for a senior, according to a new study based on the 2002 General Social Survey. More than 8 in 10 of these sandwiched individuals worked, causing some to reduce or shift their hours or to lose income. Indeed, caring for an elderly person could lead to a change in work hours, refusal of a job offer, or a reduction in income. Some 15% of sandwiched workers had to reduce their hours, 20% had to change their schedules and 10% lost income... Women were more likely than men to be sandwiched (StatCan Daily, September 28, 2004). (Naylor, 2008, p. 3)

A recent report from the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (June 2010) documented a Canada-wide increase in the number of working-age adults providing care to seniors. Accessing StatCan data, the report showed that 17.4% of working adults provided care to seniors in 1996, a number which had increased to 19.5% by 2006. StatCan data also stated that a higher proportion of females (22.5%) than males (16.3%) provided care to seniors, and for more hours per week. The report also estimated that 16.8% of working adults had responsibility for both childcare and elder care in 2009.

In the Naylor and Vint (2009) BCTF study, comparisons were made by gender of claimants to the BCTF's Salary Indemnity Plan (SIP), which provides benefits to teachers who are unable to work but have utilized all sick-leave entitlements. Data showed that proportionately more women than men made SIP claims:

24% of SIP claims were from male teachers, while 76% were from women. 31% of BC teachers are men and 69% women. Women are therefore making a greater proportion of claims than might be expected related to their numbers, but this is consistent with findings from a wider literature. (p. 1)

There is some discussion of gender differences in terms of coping with stress in a range of literature, aptly described by Iwasaki, Mackay, and Mactavish (2005):

Although gender has not been a primary focus of inquiry in stress and coping research, researchers have increasingly given greater attention to the role that

gender may play in explaining the use of coping methods. For example, Ptacek, Smith, and Dodge (1994) proposed that gender differences in coping strategies could arise from early socialization that promotes stereotypes of women as emotional, supportive, and dependent, compared to men who are portrayed as independent, instrumental, and rational. Evidence, however, shows that females tend to use behavioral coping (e.g., taking direct and positive actions to deal with problems) more actively than males (Fielden and Davidson, 2001). Similarly, Gianakos (2000, 2002) found that women were more likely than men to use direct action coping to deal with stress by working longer and harder. Gianakos (2000) also noted that working women might utilize coping skills such as active planning and time management to juggle work and family responsibilities effectively. She suggested that this result might be explained by the idea that employed women must work harder to survive in careers, particularly when their professions are male-dominated. (p. 2, web version)

Differences in women's and men's perceptions of control, influence, and power over life may be another aspect responsible for gender variations in stress-coping. According to Phillips-Miller, Campbell, and Morrison (2000):

Women tend to have less control over resources for coping with job stress, less influence on their work environments and their male colleagues, and less power in marital relationships to bring about a more equitable distribution of child care and household responsibilities. (p. 17)

This perspective is supported by findings reported by Apostol and Helland (1993), Duxbury and Higgins (1991), and Steil and Weltman (1992). It also has been suggested that lower perceived control, influence, and power in home and work domains may limit the range of effective coping strategies available to women and increase role overload and depression (Greenberger and O'Neil, 1993). Supporting this contention, Davidson and Fielden (1999) noted that "in comparison to men, women tend to report significantly poorer mental health, characterized by low self-esteem, increased self-doubt, and self-blame." (p. 425)

Iwasaki et al.'s assertion that "women take direct and positive action" to deal with stress suggests that women may be more likely than men to recognize and deal with stress in their work and lives. Thus it may be that women are more likely to report feeling stressed than males, while it is also possible that males are more stressed than they report if they are less likely to recognize and deal with stress.

Age and stress

Differences in responses from teachers in different age categories were also analyzed. Conclusions generated from responses sorted by age are less clear than when sorted by gender. However, there appear to be somewhat higher perceived negative effects of stress in most questions from teachers aged 35 to 44 in most categories. In the Naylor and Vint (2009) study of stress-related claims, 16% of claims were from males who were aged 35 to 44, while 26% of claims in the same age category were from women. This suggests that there may be particularly significant stressors for women in that age group, a finding supported by the StatCan (2004) study.

Elementary/Secondary differences

There were few, and relatively minor, differences between the responses of teachers in elementary and secondary grades in terms of the perceived effects of stress, with one exception: slightly fewer elementary teachers than secondary teachers feel they have energy left at the end of the day after completing teaching responsibilities.

Conclusion

The evidence from this survey and from a wide range of literature is that stress impacts women more than men, and in teaching, a profession where the female-male ratio is steadily increasing, the effects of stress on women require greater consideration. The issue of gender in terms of workload has not been prominent in BCTF debates, yet this range of evidence suggests that it may be time to re-engage with a closer consideration of gender and stress within the union. A wider employer and governmental consideration of stress is also required because of the rapid growth in stress-related illness with high economic and social costs. With evidence that education, health, and social service workers are at highest risk, it makes strong sense that these areas should be considered. Yet, sadly, there appears to be no indication of interest in these issues to date on the part of many employers or federal or provincial governments.

It is harder to make any definitive statements from these data with relation to differences in responses in terms of the age or grades taught (elementary/secondary) of the respondents. However, data from a study of stress-related claims in the BCTF Salary Indemnity Plan indicate that over 60% of SIP costs for claims linked to Psychological/Psychiatric disorders are linked to teachers over 50, while only 39% of BC teachers are aged 50 or older. Older teachers are therefore significantly over-represented in SIP claims. Such data bolster the case for considering funding and implementing an Early Retirement Incentive Program (ERIP) for older teachers in BC's public schools.

Teachers' perceptions of the effects of stress found in this survey are consistent with the actual effects of stress that are outlined in the wider literature. A range of work/life balance programs exist, and other initiatives or personal efforts can be taken, to enable individual teachers to better manage stress. However, many of the stress factors identified in the literature are systemic. Ideally, addressing such systemic factors should be a system responsibility, yet there appears to be little effort being made to consider changing the BC educational system to reduce workload and stress for those who teach within it. An ideal combination would be to address systemic factors while also supporting work/life balance; in BC, however, as in many other jurisdictions, the onus lies on the individual, while the system does little to address the factors that cost both individuals and society dearly.

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