

MANAGING PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL RISK FACTORS AND STRESS IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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Abstract. *The publication highlights a topical and socially relevant issue in the professional reality of social workers - the dangers of psycho-emotional and psychosocial factors in the work environment and possible solutions to reduce them. The aim of the article is to identify and describe the psycho-emotional risk factors in the work environment of social workers, and to offer suggestions for reducing stress and improving job security in the practice of social work. The data for the study were obtained by analysing scientific literature and normative documents, as well as by interviewing 194 social workers from different regions of Latvia. The study identified psycho-emotional risk factors in the working environment of social workers: high professional demands, time-limited work and deadlines, increased responsibility and insufficient availability of personal protective equipment. The publication highlights recommendations, based on theory and practice, on the necessary measures to reduce stress and improve occupational safety of social workers in the provision of social services in Latvia.*

Keywords: *psycho-emotional work environment risk factors, work environment, stress management, social workers.*

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Introduction

Social work is the technology of social relationships. Social workers use specific tools: specific knowledge and professional skills in assessing social processes and problems, finding points of intervention in complex social structures, planning and implementing strategies for change that enable people to improve their quality of life (Vilka, 2008). The profession of social worker belongs to the risk group of psychological well-being professions, as social work is concerned with addressing the multiple problems of individuals and families who may be exposed to various risks of danger, violence, setbacks and acute stress situations. The professional working environment requires not only specific, multi-faceted knowledge, but also a high level of resilience, as clients are confronted with psychological trauma, health problems including addiction, mental illness and mental disorders. "The social problems we have to deal with are becoming more and more complex and require more and more professionalism on the part of social workers, new knowledge of cultures and traditions of other countries and knowledge of languages. Problems and aspects that could not even be imagined twenty years ago - the lack of a middle class, the general poverty of society, which influence people's attitudes, including, for example, on the issue of refugees" (Jaunsleinis, 2015, p. 5).

Social work with different target groups therefore puts social workers under increased psychological strain, which can often lead to emotional exhaustion and the risk of professional burnout. It has been observed that the absolute number of newly registered occupational diseases in Latvia continues to increase and reached its highest level in 2021 (1807 registered persons) (Vanadzīņš et al., 2023a). In 2021, a study conducted by a leading research and consulting company in Latvia shows that three out of four employees, or 75%, admit that they are worried about stress related to their daily work tasks (Kantar, 2021).

According to the results of the study "Working conditions and risks in Latvia 2019-2021", working conditions in Latvia have continued to change since 2006 from traditional work environment risk factors to psycho-emotional work environment risk factors, which became dominant in 2022 (Vanadziņš et al., 2023a).

Work takes up a third of a person's life, and there is no other area of activity that is comparable in terms of time (Doronina, 2016). It is therefore important to feel safe at work, as an individual's well-being has a significant impact on their physical and mental health, as well as their overall quality of life. A study published in 2021 found that the psychological well-being of employees can be a determinant of higher levels of productivity. Experimental evidence suggests a causal effect of employee well-being on productivity (Isham, Mair & Jackson 2021). On the other hand, prolonged stressors can lead to exhaustion or burnout, as the social work profession involves unpredictable daily challenges and hazards.

Based on the topicality and social relevance of the study, the **aim of the publication** is to identify and characterise the psycho-emotional risk factors of the working environment of social workers, offering suggestions for reducing stress and improving safety at work.

Literature Review

Psycho-emotional risks and stress at work are one of the main occupational safety and health problems in Europe. They have a significant impact not only on the health of individuals, but also on the well-being of organisations and national economies (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022).

According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work's EU "Eurobarometer OSH Pulse", almost half of workers (46%) are under a lot of time pressure or overworked. Other factors causing stress are poor communication or cooperation within the organisation and lack of control over work, the pace of work or processes. A fairly high proportion of workers report several work-related health problems, which are usually related to stress: 30% of respondents report at least one health problem (general fatigue, headache, eye movement, muscle problems or pain) caused or aggravated by work (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022).

Exposure to work-related psychosocial risk factors at work can cause prolonged work-related stress and lead to anxiety, depression and burnout, which affect workers mental health (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2024).

Clients often experience intense emotional experiences and crises which social workers need to be able to withstand, listen to and manage in a supportive way. Ābeltiņa (2023) argues that the vivid retelling of the trauma by the survivor and the subsequent emotional and cognitive processing of the event by the helping professionals can lead to a range of symptoms and reactions similar to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Stress has become an integral part of modern life, entering people's every day and professional lives and affecting their health and satisfaction with life in general. In addition, the situation regarding psychological well-being and stress has been significantly aggravated by the global spread of the coronavirus disease Covid-19 and its associated limitations and economic consequences. The start of hostilities in Ukraine on 24 February has also caused stress and uncertainty. To help people in crisis and emergency situations, social workers need to be able to keep calm, manage stress and have some professional knowledge about crisis intervention, emergencies and communication in such situations. Emergencies create additional stress and strain for social workers, which can have long-term negative health effects. In addition to human suffering and damage to health, there is also a purely economic side to the problem. Research shows that increased stress levels and employees failure to address psycho-emotional risk factors in the work environment lead to reduced work capacity,

more frequent sickness and higher healthcare costs (Riga Stradiņš University Institute of Occupational Safety and Environmental Health & Stabingis, 2011).

The prevalence of work-related psycho-emotional illness is likely to increase in the future, as surveys show an increase in the number of employees with heavy workloads, time constraints, the need to make difficult decisions, etc., which can lead to burnout (Vanadziņš et al., 2023b).

In a survey of employees in Latvia in 2022, a total of 62.1% of respondents said that their job involved a heavy workload and many tasks, one of the most common workplace risk factors cited by employees. In addition to being psycho-emotional risk factors, lack of time and heavy workload can increase the risk of accidents and affect employee safety, as employees lack time and attention (Vanadziņš et al., 2023b).

The definition of the working environment is given in Article 1 of the Labour Protection Act, which defines the working environment as the workplace with its physical, chemical, psychological, biological, physiological and other factors to which an employee is exposed during the performance of his or her work (Labour Protection Act, 2001). The working environment is also explained as an institution for socialisation and competence formation. In the work environment, people are aware of their role in the team, their abilities, interests, motives, attitudes, the degree of satisfaction of needs, as well as the formation of a culture of interpersonal interaction and behaviour (Garleja, 2006). "Today, the working environment is changing: work is becoming more and more intensive, it requires a great deal of attention, the maximum use of human mental and physical capacities. Problems are caused by unprecedented materials, a combination of risk factors in the work environment, over-intensive work, information overload, psychological stress, dependence on computers, the vocational orientation of young people and an ageing workforce. New risk factors in the work environment may arise from modern work processes, technologies and workplaces, as well as from changes in work organisation, globalisation and uncertainty about the future of work" (Eglīte, 2012, p. 2).

According to the results of the study "Working conditions and risks in Latvia 2019-2021", working conditions in Latvia continue to change. In 2006, it was concluded that there had been a shift from traditional risk factors to ergonomic and psycho-emotional risk factors in the working environment. In 2018, psycho-emotional risk factors (organisation of working time, direct contact with customers, etc.) and ergonomic risk factors (forced postures, uniform movements, etc.) were the most frequently mentioned, while in 2022 psycho-emotional risk factors have become the most frequent (Vanadziņš et al., 2023a).

Reducing psycho-emotional risk factors can take place at two levels. At the organisational level, this involves changing the work situation within the organisation, and at the individual level, it involves strengthening the employee's resilience to specific work stressors and thus learning to cope better with stress. At the organisational level, this means carrying out employee surveys, improving job content and the work environment, creating a favourable organisational climate, improving management, programmes to improve employee health, etc. At the individual level, it means educating employees, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, participating in personal and communication skills training, work-life balance, cognitive behavioural therapy, relaxation, etc. (Reņģe, 2007).

Psychologist V. Reņģe believes that stress in the workplace is mostly reduced at the individual level, without always taking into account the specific characteristics of work stress and the role of the work environment in causing stress. He also believes that stress management procedures address stress in general, not specific workplace stress, and that it is a misconception that stress is only a personal problem and not a work-related one. "Instead of reducing stressors in the organisation, people are taught how to cope with stress" (Reņģe, 2007, p. 66).

It should be noted that social workers have access to a specific form of support, such as supervision, the need for which is determined by Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 338 of 13 June 2017 "Requirements for social service providers" (Regulation No. 338 of the Cabinet of Ministers, 2017). Supervision is a consultative support in matters related to the professional activity of social workers. Supervision also helps to build relationships with colleagues, broaden the professional perspective on case management, and aims to reduce stress factors and burnout (Latvian Association of Supervisors, n.d.).

"In Latvia, there are no specific laws and regulations regulating the permissible level of psycho-emotional risk factors in the workplace. However, psycho-emotional risk factors of the working environment are mentioned in several normative documents on labour protection" (Eglīte, 2012, p. 669). With regard to the requirements for determining the psycho-emotional risk factors of the work environment, the most relevant normative document to be taken into account is Annex 1 to Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 660 of 2 October 2007 "Procedure for Internal Monitoring of the Work Environment", which specifies which psycho-emotional risk factors should be assessed when conducting a risk assessment of the work environment (Rīga Stradiņš University Institute of Occupational Safety and Environmental Health & Stabingis, 2011).

The definition of occupational risk is given in Article 1 of the Labour Protection Act, where it is defined as the probability of damage to the safety or health of workers in the working environment and the probable severity of this damage (Labour Protection Act, 2001). According to Section 8 (1) of the Labour Protection Act, the employer must assess the risks in the working environment in accordance with a specified procedure and, as a final step, determine what appropriate protective measures (e.g. providing personal protective equipment, carrying out mandatory health checks, training employees, replacing work equipment) are necessary to prevent or reduce risks in the working environment (Labour Protection Act, 2001). "Today it has been proven that virtually all adverse environmental factors - chemical, biological, physical and mechanical risk factors in the workplace and the environment, as well as ergonomic, organisational and psychosocial factors - act through stress mechanisms" (Eglīte, 2012, p. 666).

The Dictionary of Social Work by Ozola et al. (2023) emphasises that stress is broadly defined as the body's response to any environmental demand or change. Stress occurs in situations where there is a significant discrepancy between the demands of the internal or external environment and the person's ability to meet them, and there is a threat to stability. "... but when stress is prolonged, intense and recurrent, it leads to mental and physical health problems (depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease, etc.)" (Forand, 2007, p. 63).

Stressors are threatening or unpleasant environmental factors that make an individual defensive. Stressors are stressful stimuli and stress reactions are stress responses or tensions. The most common stressors in the work environment are: overwork, demands to work faster, deadlines, conflicting demands, relationships with managers, colleagues and customers. When stressors are prolonged, they lead to illness and burnout syndrome (Reņģe, 2007). "The only way to improve the social aspects of work is to promote all positive contacts in the work environment, which would increase the importance and self-esteem of each employee and promote teamwork" (Eglīte, 2012, p. 675).

Methodology

The empirical study was conducted between 4/12/2023 and 10/12/2023. According to the classification of the research design, an applied, non-experimental review study was conducted; according to the data extraction procedure, a structured survey of social workers was conducted.

According to the information available on the website of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, there are 43 municipal administrative areas in Latvia, 36 municipalities and 7 cities that are not part of municipalities (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, 2021). In the light of the above, the information available on the Internet about municipal social services in Latvia and their e-mail addresses was identified. The survey was conducted among social workers of Latvian municipal social services, n = 194 respondents in total.

The questionnaire contained 49 questions based on the authors findings on psycho-emotional risk factors in the workplace and the impact of stress on social workers health, as highlighted in the theoretical review. The questionnaire was sent electronically to social services email addresses. The survey was conducted anonymously using *Google Forms* software (online form creator).

Methods used in the study: theoretical research - analysis of scientific literature, analysing the content of normative documents; methods of data collection: quantitative method - structured survey (instrument - questionnaire); methods of data analysis: statistical analysis (*Microsoft Excel*) and descriptive statistical method (*Excel Charts*).

Research results

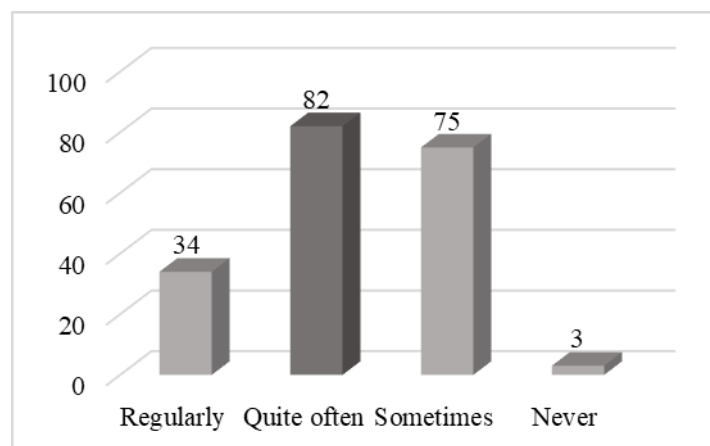


Figure1 *Stress assessment in the work environment* (created by the author)

The data show that stress experienced at work quite often has a significant impact on the health of n=82 (42.3%) social workers, n=75 (38.7%) social workers sometimes have a significant impact on their health, n=34 (17.5%) social workers regularly have a significant impact on their health, n=3 (1.5%) social workers never have a significant impact on their health. Conclusion: for the majority, i.e. n=116 or 59.80% of the social workers surveyed in Latvia, stress at work regularly or quite often has a significant impact on their health, which is in line with the survey of employees in Latvia conducted by the leading research and consulting company Kantar in 2021, according to which 75% of the employees surveyed admit that they are worried about stress related to the performance of their daily work tasks.

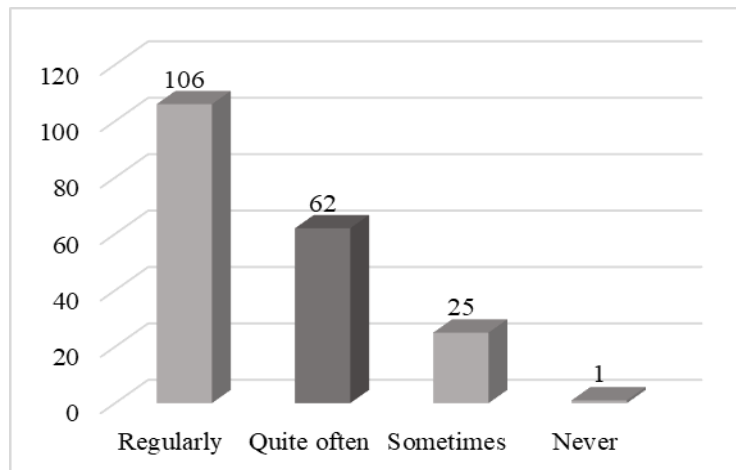


Figure2 High professional requirements in the workplace (created by the author)

The data show that n=106 (54.6%) social workers regularly have high professional requirements at work, while n=62 (32%) have high professional requirements quite often and n=25 (12.9%) sometimes, but n=1 (0.5%) social worker never has high professional requirements at work. Conclusion: a very large majority, i.e. n=168 or 86.6%, of the social workers surveyed have high professional requirements at work regularly or quite often.

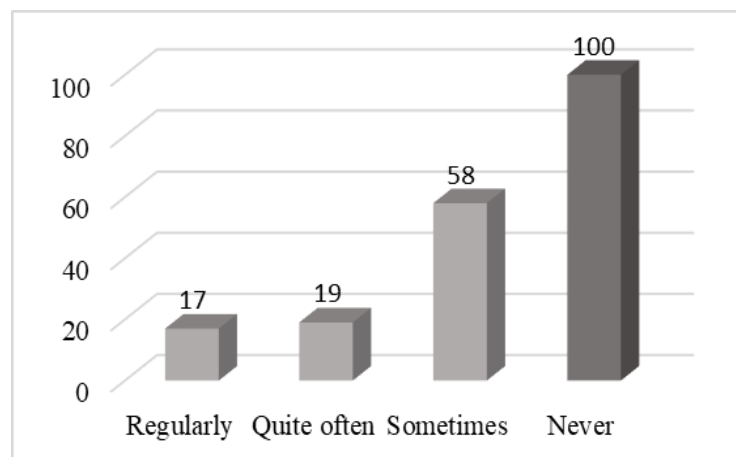


Figure3 Evaluation of employee surveys in the workplace, e.g. to identify causes of stress, psycho-emotional risk factors in the work environment or to assess employee satisfaction, etc. (created by the author)

The data show that n=17 (8.8%) social workers' workplaces conduct employee surveys regularly, n=19 (9.8%) conduct them quite frequently, n=58 (29.9%) conduct them sometimes, but n=100 (51.5%) social workers' workplaces never conduct employee surveys. Conclusion: more than half of the social workers surveyed, i.e. n=100 or 51.5%, never conduct employee surveys in their workplaces, e.g. to identify causes of stress, psycho-emotional risk factors in the work environment, or to assess employee satisfaction, etc.

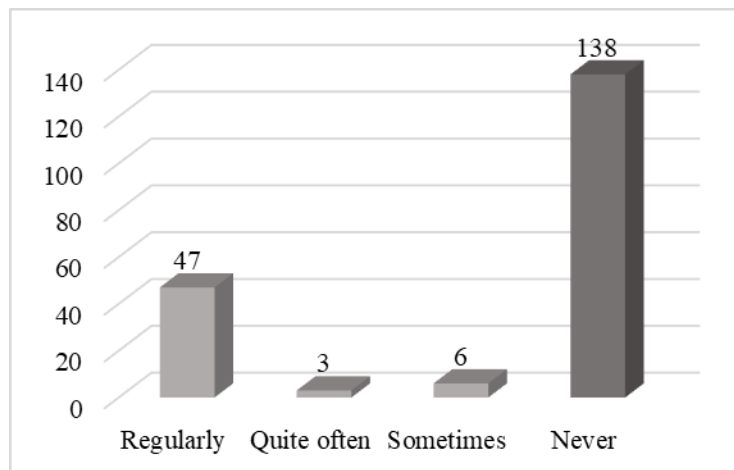


Figure 4 Workplace equipment with an emergency button (created by the author)

The data show that n=47 (24%) social workers have the emergency button at their workplace regularly, n=3 (2%) have the emergency button quite often and n=6 (3%) have the emergency button sometimes, but n=138 (71%) social workers never have the emergency button at their workplace. Conclusion: the majority, i.e. n=138 (71%) of the social workers surveyed never have the emergency button at their workplace, which would be necessary as it would increase safety in the workplace and possibly prevent social workers from being physically harmed by clients.

Table 1 Psycho-emotional risk factors of social workers and their assessment (created by the author)

Groups of stressors	Stressors	Survey data	High risk	Medium risk	Low risk
Content of the work	high professional requirements	106 or 54,6% regularly	X		
	jerky work	85 or 43,8% sometimes		X	
	constant work	83 or 42,8% sometimes		X	
Workload and pace of work	too much work	78 or 40,2% sometimes		X	
	working at too fast a pace	94 or 48,5% sometimes		X	
	time-limited work and time limits	130 or 67% regularly or quite often	X		
Organisation of working time	working hours according to wishes	84 or 43,3% regularly			X
The employee's role and participation in the organisation	inability to influence decisions about work	103 or 53,1% sometimes		X	
	too much responsibility	134 or 69,1% regularly or quite often	X		
	too little responsibility	157 or 80,9% never			X
Organisational culture	unsatisfactory internal communication	91 or 46,9% sometimes		X	
	confusion about the organisation's objectives and structure	83 or 42,8% sometimes		X	

	ineffective management style	87 or 44,8% sometimes		X	
Career development	career failure (lack of progression)	65 or 33,5% sometimes			X
	undervaluing achievements	96 or 49,5% sometimes		X	
	job insecurity	88 or 45,4% sometimes		X	
Relations with other employees	social isolation	120 or 61,9% never			X
	mobbing in the workplace	107 or 55,2% never			X
	bossing in the workplace	33 or 17% regularly or quite often			X
	lack of support and communication between workmates	85 or 43,8% never		X	
	disagreements with work colleagues	145 or 74,7% sometimes		X	
Physical characteristics of the workplace	poorly organised work processes	114 or 58,8% sometimes		X	
	annoying workplace defects (e.g. squeaky doors, broken chairs, equipment not working, etc.)	103 or 53,1% sometimes		X	
	insufficient personal protective equipment	138 or 71,1% agrees	X		
Relationships with customers	negative and/or destructive attitudes from customers	115 or 59,3% feel		X	

Conclusion

As shown in Table 1, working conditions have created a variable set of psycho-emotional risk factors in the work environment, which in turn shape the microclimate in the workplace. A working environment that places mental and emotional stress on people has become a priority. The work environment has a major impact on the health and well-being of employees, as well as on their personal development and socialisation. Employees themselves also shape the work environment in which they work through their attitudes, values, experiences and socialising culture. The authors J. Roja, I. Roja and Kaļķis (2016) argue that stress and violence in the work environment also affect the deterioration of interpersonal relations between employees and can lead to a breakdown of the work organisation and the overall work environment.

Today, the working environment and the intensity of work have changed. Work has become more complex due to the rapid flow of information and technological developments. As the results of the "Working conditions and risks in Latvia 2019-2021" study show, the psycho-emotional working environment is becoming more and more of a priority in 2022 (Vanadžiņš et al., 2023a). The terms psycho-emotional or psychosocial risk factors of the work environment are not defined in the Labour Protection Act, so many authors refer to both in their works.

Taking into account the responses of the respondents (n=194), the practical study identifies the psycho-emotional risk factors in the working environment of social workers and an assessment of these, summarising the responses of respondents. According to the survey,

high occupational hazards in social work are: high professional demands, time-limited work and deadlines, increased levels of responsibility and inadequate personal protective equipment.

The identified psycho-emotional risk factors of the social workers' work environment can be used by social services managers to become aware of the current situation in Latvian social services and to assess the need to conduct employee surveys and organise occupational safety measures aimed at creating a safe and healthy work environment and promoting the well-being of social workers.

Workplace preventive measures are a set of measures that are an integral part of occupational safety and health and are designed to reduce or eliminate workers' exposure to harmful risks in the working environment. They can improve the working conditions and working environment of workers, with long-term effects on their health.

Taking into account the psycho-emotional risk factors of the work environment identified in the study and the answers given by the social workers regarding the causes of stress, it would be necessary to conduct employee surveys in each social service as a workplace to identify the causes of stress, psycho-emotional risk factors of the work environment, as a survey is the only way to find out the opinion of the employees anonymously, and the study found that more than half of the employees, i.e. n=100 or 51.5% of the social workers surveyed, never carry out employee surveys in their workplaces, e.g. to identify causes of stress, psycho-emotional risk factors in the work environment or to assess employees' job satisfaction. There is also a need to improve the content of work and the working environment and to create a favourable organisational climate.

There is a need for training in stress management in social services, as a significantly high proportion, n=137 or 70.7% of the social workers surveyed, agree that there is a need for training in the workplace, and it is also significant that n=116 or 59.80% of the social workers surveyed in Latvia experience stress at work regularly or quite often, which has a significant impact on their health.

The study found that the majority, i.e. n=138 or 71%, of the social workers surveyed had never had an emergency button in their workplace, which should be a primary consideration when thinking about the safety of social workers, as it would create a greater sense of security and possibly protect social workers from the possibility being physically harmed by clients. Section 28 (2) of the Labour law stipulates that the employer undertakes to provide the employee with safe and healthy working conditions when concluding the employment contract (Labour law, 2001).

Employers need to provide personal protective equipment for employees to use in self-defence or to intimidate an attacker, as more than half, n=101 or 52.06%, of social workers surveyed agree that they would use personal protective equipment to defend themselves or to intimidate an attacker in the event of a direct threat from a client.

Taking into account the results of the study, it would be useful to organise information on psycho-emotional risk factors for employees in social services, as a very high percentage, i.e. n=145 or 74.7%, of the social workers surveyed agree that training on psycho-emotional risk factors in the workplace should be organised by the employer.

It should be noted that the study also found that 85 or 44% of the social workers surveyed never lacked peer support and communication, which is very positive and a very good resource to prevent burnout.

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