AILMENTS COMMON TO TEACHERS

by

Marites T. Domingo
Limay National High School

The idea that teachers suffer from an excessively high rate of mental health problems is widely accepted not only by the general public, but also by the teachers themselves. Teachers report they are exposed to a high risk of stress and occupational "burnout" (i.e., syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do "people-work") which they claim leads them to suffer from psychiatric disorders more than the average. However, this seems to run contrary to well-established epidemiological data in psychiatry which show that the middle classes (where the majority of teachers fall) are relatively better protected against psychiatric disorders than underprivileged classes of society where the highest prevalence rates are found. In contrast, when it comes to their physical health, we could assume that teachers have potentially healthy life styles, although it could be expected that due to their working conditions, they might have a higher risk for certain ailments such as voice disorders or venous diseases.

Although a person's socio-professional category is acknowledged to be a decisive factor in his or her mental health, very few studies have dealt with the differences in the prevalence of mental health problems according to occupation. Among the different occupations analyzed, those studies that have covered the teachers have reported contradictory results. The majority of studies describe a very high level of mental fatigue among teachers (i.e., for example psychological distress and burnout), connected to the specific aspects of their profession. However none of these studies have shown an excessively high rate of psychiatric disorders as defined in mental health diagnostic scales (i.e., for example, mood and anxiety disorders or alcohol abuse), in this specific occupational group.
Studies on teachers' mental health can be divided into two groups. The first group includes studies involving a wide variety of professions, among which, teachers; and the second group includes studies on teachers only, with or without a control group.

A number of other studies on teachers can be found in the literature which lack control groups and are limited to factors such as stress and psychological distress. According to these studies, teachers apparently showed quite a high level of stress and burnout. Four main factors were identified as sources of stress: student misbehavior, poor working conditions, time pressure, and poor school ethos or moral nature. A low level of supervision and colleague support also appeared to be related to work stress and burnout.

As in the case of mental health, only a few studies of varying quality have been published on teachers' physical health. When considering the main classes of diagnoses of physical diseases (musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, nervous and hormonal disorders), Seibt et al. showed no significant difference between the health status of teachers (secondary school) and office workers. Moreover, when focusing on cardiovascular disorders, a study carried out in Germany even showed that there was a lower risk for male teachers compared to men working in other professions.

However, some studies have demonstrated that for small number of more specific physical disorders, the prevalence is clearly higher for teachers. Impaired phonation represents the most characteristic teachers' physical disorder because it is directly related to their specific occupational demands when teaching. According to a number of studies aimed at identifying which occupational groups were at an increased risk of suffering from occupational voice disorders, teachers were found to be particularly vulnerable to developing such problems. Smith et al. showed that compared to a control group, teachers were significantly more likely to report having 6 voice symptoms, among which hoarseness was the most frequent, and 5 related physical discomfort symptoms (tiring, effortful, ache, uncomfortable, and rough).
Probably because of their occupational environment, characterized by permanent contact with people and particularly with children, the Lerman et al. study opened the door to the idea that teachers could be at a higher risk of developing infectious diseases by documenting a significant increased risk of Hepatitis A infection in Israel among kindergarten staff and teachers in comparison to the general population.

It is worth mentioning that there are a few additional studies that have shown a different impact on teachers: an excessive rate of some major cancers, in particular breast and thyroid cancers are surprisingly enough case.

The study determines that teaching profession differs from other occupations in its impact on workers' mental and physical health by comparing the prevalence of a wide variety of mental health disorders and level of psychological distress, together with the prevalence of several physical ailments in teachers to a control group.

Reference:

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1523205/