



Evaluating the effectiveness of a stress management training on teachers and physicians' stress related outcomes

Saul Neves de Jesus^a, Juan José Miguel-Tobal^b, Claudia Lenuta Rus^c, João Viseu^a, and Vítor Gamboa^a

^aUniversity of Algarve, Portugal

^bComplutense University of Madrid, Spain

^cBabeş-Bolyai University, Romania

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the immediate influence of a stress-management training on teachers and physicians' stress-related outcomes (emotional exhaustion, work distress and irrational beliefs), using meta-analytic techniques. In an action-research perspective, the stress-management training program was implemented in several groups of physicians and teachers in Portugal and in Brazil ($n = 144$). It was found that in all the samples where this intervention was implemented a decrease on stress-related outcomes occurred; nevertheless not all results obtained were statistically significant. The largest impact of the implemented training program was on the irrational beliefs, with a medium effect size ($d_s = 0.61$). These results suggest the short-term benefits of this intervention on teachers and physicians stress.

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Evaluación de la eficacia de una intervención en manejo del estrés en indicadores de estrés en maestros y médicos

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga la influencia a corto plazo de una intervención de manejo del estrés en algunas variables indicadoras de estrés (agotamiento emocional, *distress* en el trabajo y creencias irracionales), en maestros y médicos, utilizando procedimientos estadísticos de metaanálisis. En una perspectiva de investigación-acción, el programa de capacitación para el manejo del estrés se llevó a cabo en varios grupos de médicos y maestros en Portugal y Brasil ($n = 144$). En todas las muestras en las que se aplicó esta intervención se observó un aumento en el bienestar positivo y una disminución en los indicadores de estrés, aunque no siempre se obtuvieron resultados estadísticamente significativos. El impacto más significativo del programa fue sobre las creencias irracionales, con un tamaño medio del efecto ($d_s = 0.61$). Estos resultados sugieren los beneficios a corto plazo del programa de intervención en el estrés de los maestros y los médicos.

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Palabras clave:

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Maestros

Occupational stress is a significant problem throughout the modern world and a concern for many organizations (Flaxman & Bond, 2010). But it does not affect in the same manner the numerous existing occupations. Several studies have revealed that human services occupations, including teaching and health-care providing, are prone to high stress levels (Bermejo-Toro & Prieto-Ursúa, 2010; Camuñas et al., 2006; Gaspar, Jesus, & Cruz, 2011; Lens & Jesus, 1999; Lim, Bogossian, & Ahern, 2010; Moya-Albiol, Serrano, & Salvador, 2010; Pacheco & Jesus, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Occupational stress has implications in terms of its negative consequences for

individuals (Mark & Smith, 2012; Merín, Cano, & Miguel-Tobal, 1995) and subsequently for organizations and societies in which they are embedded (Edwards & Burnard, 2003). Thus, it is preferable to prevent it (Moreno & Peñacoba, 1995).

One way to prevent and surpass its negative consequences is to design and implement stress management interventions targeting different levels, including person-focused interventions (Minguez, 1995; Semmer, 2010).

In another review of the occupational stress management programs (Jesus, 1996), it was found that previous programs had some limitations, such as their focus on using only one kind of intervention, such as relaxation techniques (e.g., Bamford, Grange, & Jones, 1990), mindfulness strategies (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 1982) or coping strategies (e.g., Esteve & Fracchia, 1986).

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Saul Neves de Jesus. University of Algarve. Faculty of Human and Social Sciences. Campus of Gambelas. 8005-139 Faro, Portugal. E-mail: snjesus@ualg.pt

In general, the results of occupational stress management interventions in health care workers show a limited influence on psychological variables. The review of Van der Hek and Plomp (1997) about the published effect sizes of occupational stress management programs evidenced an urgent need of a better conceptualization and theoretical reflection on the analyzed interventions. In the review conducted by Routsalainen, Serra, Marine, and Verbeek (2008) on occupational stress management interventions in health care workers, limited evidence was found that person-directed intervention could reduce stress, emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment, and anxiety.

Concerning the need for a better conceptualization in this field, an integrative model of stress, motivation, and well-being was formulated to serve as a theoretical background to design and implement further stress management interventions (Jesus, 1996; Jesus, 2003; Jesus & Lens, 2002; Jesus & Lens, 2005).

To measure the variables considered in this model, a self-report instrument was developed (Jesus, 1996). It included several scales measuring some psychological stress indicators (work distress, emotional exhaustion, and irrational beliefs). Empirical studies have revealed that all its comprising scales had reliability higher than .70 (Jesus, 1996; Jesus & Conboy, 2001). These measures were also adapted in Brazil (Jesus et al., 2011).

This integrated model of stress, motivation, and well-being served as a foundation for the development of a stress management intervention training combining different person-focused interventions including relaxation, cognitive-behavioral skills training, and several specific approaches (Jesus, 1998). It emphasized the acquisition of coping skills to ensure a better decrease of stress related outcomes. Its sessions were organized during 30 hours and conducted around the following topics: (a) sharing of professional experiences; (b) management of professional stressors and symptoms; (c) coping strategies and resilience; (d) irrational beliefs management; (e) relaxation exercises; (f) time management; (g) team work; (h) assertiveness and conflict management; (i) healthy life styles and quality of life; and (j) perspectives for the

implementation of the taught strategies in their personal and professional life. The description of the sessions was presented in previous papers (e.g., Jesus, 2011) and in Table 1 is presented a descriptive synthesis of each program session.

This stress management training was empirically examined in several studies that have used a pre and post-measurement research design (Bjorn, Jesus, & Casado, 2013; Jesus, 2002; Jesus, 2006; Jesus & Conboy, 2001; Jesus & Costa, 2004; Jesus, Rus, & Tobal, 2013; Sampaio, Jesus, Stobaus, & Mosquera, 2008). To evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention, it is necessary to meta-analytically integrate the results of the empirical studies that have examined it. As suggested by Giga, Noblet, Faragher, and Cooper (2003), without having a greater clarity about the effectiveness of different types of job stress interventions, the "efforts to minimise the human and economic costs of stress will be limited by a lack of sound evidence on the effectiveness of stress management strategies" (p. 158). Thus, this study aims to collect and meta-analytically integrate the results of the studies that have empirically examined the influence of this intervention on employees' well-being related outcomes immediately after its implementation. It is expected that the stress management intervention training will decrease work distress, emotional exhaustion and irrational beliefs. The meta-analytic procedure is similar to that used in previous studies (e.g., Jesus, Rus, Lens, & Imaginário, 2013).

Method

Sample of Studies and Selection Criteria

The relevant studies for this meta-analysis were searched using two methods. First, the published and unpublished papers that have empirically examined this stress management training and that were known by the first author of the present study were considered. Second, a computerized search was performed in Web of Science® with Conference Proceedings and PsycInfo® databases. This search was conducted using the following keywords: (a) stress

Table 1
Description of the motivational and stress management course sessions

<p style="text-align: center;">Session 1: Introduction to the program and sharing of professional experiences</p> <p>The course begins with an introduction to the program and with exercises to promote a good relational climate among the participants, favorable to the exchange of professional experiences, authenticity and teamwork.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 2: Symptoms and professional stressors</p> <p>Factors leading to professional stress and common symptoms associated with stress were analyzed. The development of stressful situations was analyzed and the concepts of <i>eustress</i> and <i>distress</i> were distinguished.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 3: Coping strategies</p> <p>Several coping strategies were analyzed, specifically confrontation strategies and symptoms management approaches. The participants then developed individual plans to introduce some of the coping strategies in their professional and personal lives in order to improve wellbeing and professional fulfillment.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 4: Management of irrational beliefs</p> <p>Participants first assessed their own irrational beliefs, and then, using Ellis's method of rational-emotive therapy, the attempt was made to alter patterns of negative thinking to more suitable cognition, that is, both positive and realistic patterns of thinking.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 5: Relaxation exercises</p> <p>Control techniques including breathing exercises, muscular relaxation, and relaxation by imagination were presented and practiced.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 6: Time management</p> <p>Participants did several exercises to learn how to organize agenda, how to change habits, and how to have more time for the priority tasks, and not only for the urgent ones.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 7: Team work</p> <p>Exercises focused on group creativity and brainstorming, problem solving and decision making, to improve better the opportunities of working together.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 8: Assertiveness and conflict management</p> <p>This session was focused at role-playing exercises of communication abilities, at verbal and non-verbal assertiveness skills, and at other possible strategies for conflict prevention.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 9: Healthy life styles and quality of life</p> <p>Was presented several aspects of healthy life styles, and the participants did exercises to help them to learn how to decide priorities and how to balance several life dimensions, for a better quality of life.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 10: Sharing of professional experiences</p> <p>In the last session, we continued exercises involving the sharing of professional experiences, focusing not only on the difficulties, but also on the positive experiences. Each participant shared with the others several perspectives for the implementation of the program strategies in his personal and professional life.</p>

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