



Research of Occupational Stress Factors in Funeral Industry Workers

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Abstract

The funeral industry, despite its importance to society, remains under-researched in the context of professional stress. This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the psychological issues faced by workers in the Russian funeral industry, including stress factors, consequences for mental health, and coping strategies. A study conducted among Russian funeral service workers identifies specific stressors in this profession, such as social stigmatization, emotional exhaustion, workplace health risks, and exposure to traumatic events. The results of the study show a significant connection between these stressors and the prevalence of psychological issues among employees, such as PTSD and depression. Recommendations for addressing these issues include the implementation of stress management programs and the creation of a supportive corporate culture.

Keywords: occupational stress, funeral industry, funeral workers, occupational stress factors

1. Introduction

Professional stress is a widely studied issue in high-risk professions, such as healthcare, law enforcement, and emergency services. However, the funeral industry, which also faces unique psychological challenges, remains relatively under-researched. Working in the funeral industry involves exposure to death and grief, which can lead to significant emotional strain and psychological trauma (Durand-Moreau & Galarneau, 2021; Goldenhar et al., 2001; Guidetti et al., 2021). The aim of this article is to investigate professional stress among funeral industry workers, focusing on identifying key stress factors, the impact of stigmatisation, and the consequences of working in the funeral business for mental and emotional health.

2. Theoretical Review

Professional stress is defined as a state of mental or physical strain caused by work-related factors perceived as a threat or challenge. These factors may include high demands, lack of resources, insufficient support from colleagues and management, and unclear expectations (Karasek, 1979; Thomas, 1998; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008).

Some studies also examine personality in corporate culture and the influence of corporate culture and the team on personality, without including specific stress factors (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). While much research focuses on professions with obvious risks (e.g., healthcare and law enforcement), little attention has been given to the specific issues faced by funeral industry workers, despite the unique stressors of grief and death.

Previous research in related fields shows that psychological stress can lead to physical and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD. In the context of the funeral industry, additional stressors, such as exposure to grief, trauma, and health risks (e.g., infections from deceased bodies), play a significant role (Hoyt & Larson, n.d.). Unfortunately, earlier the topic of professional stress in the funeral business was not considered at all by Russian and Soviet researchers. The number of publications by foreign authors is also limited, which complicated the research.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted using virtual questionnaires at the Novosibirsk Training Center for Funeral Services and included 126 participants from various roles within the funeral sector. The survey covered various parameters, including gender, profession, education level, marital status, work experience in the funeral industry, key stress factors, availability of psychological support, and participants' mental health. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked about addictive behaviors, including alcohol use, smoking, substance abuse, gambling, or video games. It was hypothesised that higher levels of professional stress would increase the risk of addiction.

The study included participants over 18 years of age and utilised several psychological surveys, including:

- WOSS Professional Stress Questionnaire (D. Weiman)
- Trauma Screening Questionnaire (Brewin C. et al., 2002)
- Mental Health Continuum (M. Keyes)
- Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21, S. Lovibond and P. Lovibond)
- Method for the Determination of Individual Coping Strategies, MDICS (E. Heim)

The stage of empirical research was the study of the interrelationships between various indicators of psychodiagnostic techniques. The correlation was calculated using Spearman's method, since as a result of checking for the normality of the array distribution, all quantitative scales had an abnormal distribution.

4. Results

The study identified 8 major stress factors:

1. Social Stigmatisation (22.9%): Workers faced social isolation, stigma, and relationship difficulties, often due to societal taboos related to death and funeral services.
2. Emotional Exhaustion (17.5%): A significant number of participants reported sleep disturbances and emotional exhaustion due to constant exposure to grief.
3. Corporate Culture Issues (14.6%): Low support and poor organisational culture were significant stress factors.
4. Health Risks (13.8%): Fear of infection, particularly from diseases such as HIV and hepatitis, was a major source of stress.
5. Family-Related Conflicts (7.1%): Balancing work and family duties added extra stress, particularly for women.
6. Cyberbullying (6.7%): Public pressure through social media became a new stressor.
7. Chemical Exposure (5%): Concerns about the impact of hazardous chemicals, such as formaldehyde, used in body preparation, were prevalent. Both men and women expressed concerns about infertility.

In the process of analyzing the results of an empirical study of occupational stress among the staff of a ritual organization, mathematical, statistical, correlation analyses were conducted.

Interpretation of the selected psychodiagnostic techniques yielded the following results in the majority of study participants: low stress (64.29%), no risk regarding the number of reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (82.54%), high level of emotional hedonic well-being (54.76%), average level of social eudaemonic well-being (44.44%), high level of psychological eudaemonic well-being (43.65%), combined average level of psychological health (52.38%), the average severity of depressive experiences (73.02%), moderate anxiety (66.67%), moderate stress (57.14%), the use of adaptive coping mechanisms in the cognitive sphere of mental (38.1%) and emotional (62.7%) activities, the choice of adaptive coping mechanisms in the behavioural sphere of mental activity (42.86%).

According to the results of the correlation analysis, positive two-way correlations were found between the level of occupational stress and the frequency of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, levels of depressive and anxious experiences. There are also significant correlations between the levels of depressive and anxious experiences. The degree of anxiety and depression correlate with the level of stress. A connection has been found between the adaptability of coping mechanisms in the emotional and behavioural spheres of mental activity. In turn, the adaptability of coping mechanisms in the emotional sphere of mental activity correlates with psychological health and all its components. Social well-being is related to emotional and psychological well-being. Emotional and psychological well-being also have a significant two-way relationship. The adaptability of coping mechanisms in the behavioural sphere of mental activity depends on psychological well-being. The frequency of

symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder is in a two-way correlation with the degree of stress, levels of depressive, anxious experiences.

Negative two-way correlations exist between the level of occupational stress and psychological health with its components, the adaptability of coping mechanisms of the emotional sphere of mental activity. There are also significant correlations between the degree of stress, the severity of depressive and anxious experiences, the frequency of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the adaptability of coping mechanisms in the emotional sphere of mental activity. Psychological health, with all its components, is in a two-way relationship with the frequency of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, the levels of depressive and anxious experiences, as well as the degree of stress.

Thus, summarising all the above, we can draw the following conclusion: acute susceptibility to individual stress factors of the professional environment increases the level of psycho emotional stress, becoming a factor in the development of post-traumatic stress disorder, depressive and anxious experiences, a decrease in psychological health and all its components, in particular, forcing to make a choice in favour of ineffective and sometimes destructive strategies. coping with stress.

When planning the study, it was assumed that professional stress in the funeral industry would increase the risk of addiction, but the results were optimistic. The survey showed the following data:

- Smoking: Frequent (46.3%), Never (30.9%), Occasional (22.8%)
- Alcohol: Occasional (65.9%), Never (22.8%), Frequent (11.4%)
- Drug Use: Never (95.9%), Occasional (4.1%)
- Gambling: Never (91.1%), Occasional (8.9%)
- Video Games: Never (74.8%), Occasional (23.6%), Frequent (1.6%)

Alcohol consumption and smoking rates were comparable to national averages in Russia for individuals over 18. The vast majority of funeral workers cope with stress without resorting to psychoactive substances or gambling and are not prone to internet gaming disorder.

Despite high levels of stress, study participants demonstrated strong coping mechanisms. Positive strategies, such as social support and personal resilience, were widespread. However, the lack of accessible psychological support underscores the need for the implementation of targeted initiatives to address the mental health issues faced by funeral industry workers.

5. Discussion

The study highlights the significant psychological impact that professional stress has on funeral industry workers. Social stigmatisation, exacerbated by public fear and rejection of the profession, was identified as the leading stress factor. This is likely linked to the serious criminalisation of the funeral business in Russia since 1991, when the dissolution of the USSR led to the loss of state control over the funeral sector.

Health risks, particularly related to infectious diseases, also emerged as significant stressors (Durand-Moreau & Galarneau, 2021; Guidetti et al., 2021). Emotional tension caused

by constant exposure to death, particularly in cases of violent deaths and disfigured bodies, can lead to secondary trauma, similar to the experiences of healthcare and emergency service workers. Additionally, specific stress factors for women, such as sexual harassment, work-family balance issues, and exposure to toxic chemicals, were noted (Goldenhar et al., 2001).

6. Conclusion

The funeral industry in Russian Federation is characterised by high levels of occupational stress, which have serious consequences for the mental health of workers. Social stigmatisation, exposure to grief and trauma, health risks, and the lack of a supportive corporate culture exacerbate these stressors. To address these issues, it is necessary to develop specialised psychological training, create supportive networks, and integrate stress management programs into workplace practices.

Currently, based on the results of the study, psychological intervention programs for occupational stress are being developed. A methodology for monthly monitoring of occupational stress among employees is also being developed and will be demonstrated in the future.

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WOSS Professional Stress Questionnaire (D. Weiman)

Trauma Screening Questionnaire (Brewin C. et al., 2002)

Method for the Determination of Individual Coping Strategies, MDICS (E. Heim)