

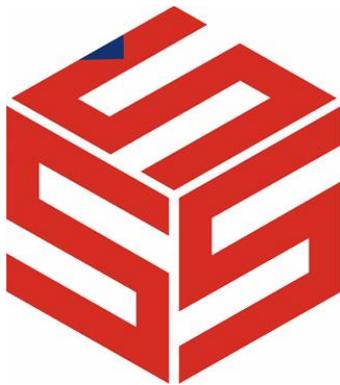


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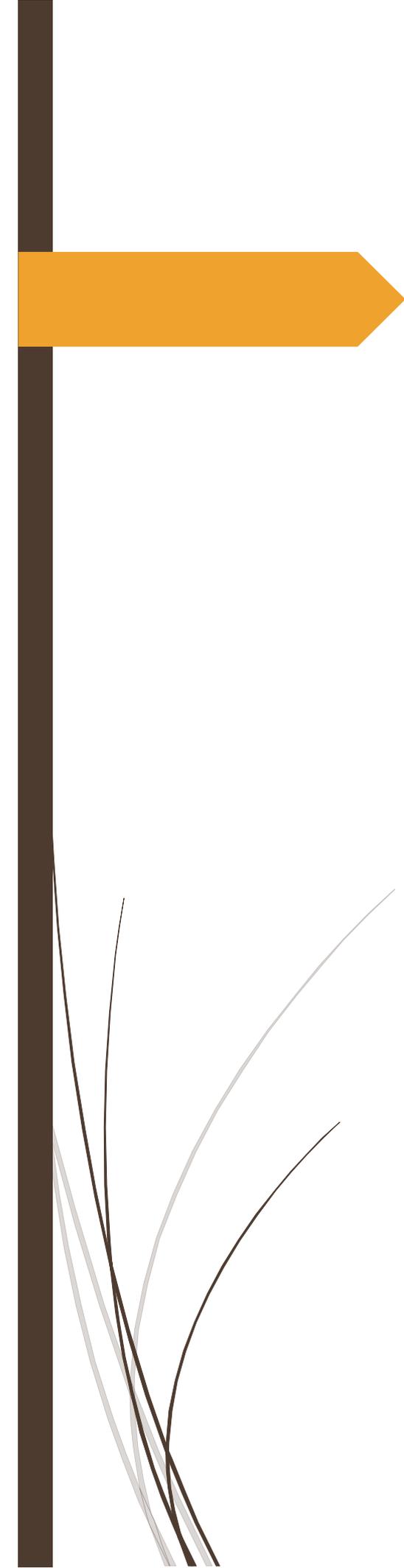


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# **Stress Has Big ...Horns?**

**About Stress and  
Professional Burnout in  
the Emergency Response  
Services**

Katarzyna Bartyńska

KRAKÓW 2022

**Review Paolo Bernardini**

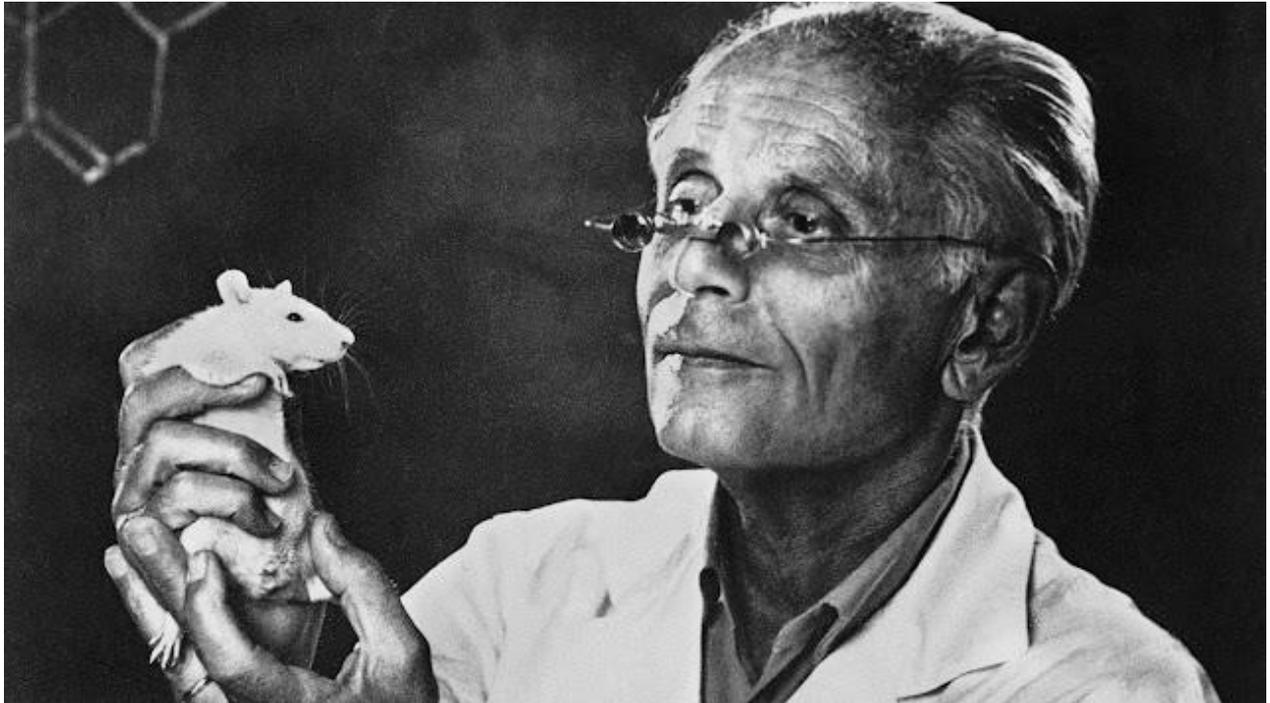
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## Introduction

Stress is one of the phenomena better known and described in science. The concept was introduced to psychology by Hans Selye, a physician who devoted almost his entire professional life to stress studies. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize several times but was never awarded. He researched stress for almost 50 years of his professional life.

Fig.1 Hans Selye. <sup>1</sup>



Can learning about stress really be that important and interesting for people? Today we know that yes, it is! Underestimated and ignored, stress causes serious damage to human health, makes ambitious plans to fail or prevents reaching full potential that lies within you. Stress can take over your life, so it is essential to learn how to control it. Is it difficult? - certainly, yes, but you can be sure that it is worth the effort. Even if you have concerns as to whether you can control stress, there is no other way to find out than to try. Just take stress like the proverbial bull by the horns and try to deal with it. If you find those horns frighteningly big, don't let go. The more we know about stress, the greater control we have over it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://budapesten.blogspot.com/2017/01/stres-zosta-odkryty-przez-wegra.html?m=1>

## Does everyone get stressed?

Stress certainly affects everyone. Regardless of age, gender, education. At different stages of life, different issues become major concerns. These may include a longer separation from parents for an infant, a first crush for a kid at school, deciding on a future profession for a teenager, or difficult events experienced at work by adults. A pessimist might say that the entire life is a series of challenges and stressful situations. But do animals also get stressed?

Fig. 2 Zebra <sup>2</sup>



Of course, they do, and they do it a lot. Imagine how a zebra gets stressed when running away from a hungry lion. In the wild, almost every animal must fight for survival which causes excessive stress. But despite this, animals do not get sick because of stress, they do not experience stomach aches, ulcers, depression or fall into addictions. Therefore, can studies of animal stress provide valuable insights into human stress? Let us take a closer look at the physiology of stress.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://balancedlifeskills.com/zebra-stress-240x300/>

## The physiology of stress

The body's response to stress is complex and consists of three stages: **alarm reaction, resistance, and exhaustion**. When something stressful happens, the body reacts with the alarm stage. When the stressful event is not over or persists for extended periods of time (weeks or even months) and there is no way to avoid or overcome it, the body enters the second stage of the response: resistance. The third stage of the stress response is induced when the body no longer has the strength to cope with the higher level of stress and starts to become seriously ill.

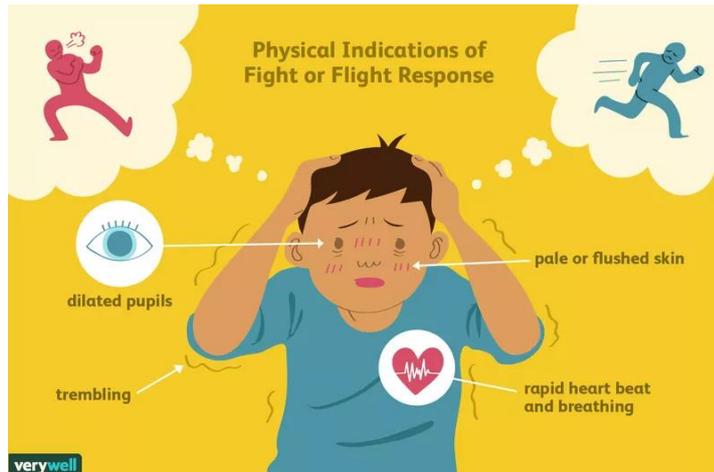
Fig. 3 Stages of stress response



### Alarm reaction stage

You can probably think of a time when you faced something frightening. Do you remember how your body reacted, your heartbeat quickened, and your breathing rate increased? All that happens in the first few moments (sometimes extending to several hours) of a stressful event is called the **alarm reaction stage**. The body then makes a very quick decision to trigger one of only two possible responses: Fight or flight. This decision depends on the stressful event. The brain is an incredibly fast machine that analyses what is better for the body. If there is a chance of overcoming the threat, the brain chooses to fight, but if there is a possibility of retreating, it will try to make us give up the confrontation. A firefighter responding to emergency event experiences a mass discharge of the stress hormones in a short period of time. These include cortisol and adrenaline. The hormones are to mobilise the body's resources to deal with threatening circumstances. In such circumstances, it suddenly turns out that everybody has something like a storage tank with rocket fuel for the body, and stress is the key that unlocks it. This mechanism "helps" the firefighter lift and carry the severely injured person out of a burning building or work long hours and still be effective despite the heavy physical strain. However, this "super power" will soon run out and, of course, it will have its price. Unfortunately, the rescuers' stress does not always go away even the critical incident is no longer an issue. Depressing images and memories of suffering and frightened victims can stay in their minds for a long time, and the fear of what may happen during the next duty makes firefighters response to stress almost constantly elevated.

Fig. 4 Alarm reaction stage<sup>3</sup>



## Resistance stage

Imagine that your mental resilience is a big bucket, and every stressful situation is water being poured into it. Rescuers are exposed to this “pouring of water” almost all the time, because their profession involves experiencing chronic stress, or acting under time pressure. Some time after a stressful event, adrenaline and cortisol levels return to pre-arousal levels. It may seem that the body has adapted to stress and has learned to deal with it. During this phase, milder changes in functioning occur. They can cause irritability, and even minor failures are perceived as major problems. Daily tasks also seem more difficult due to poor concentration. Chronic fatigue affects the daily life and if proper solutions to relieve tension and to rest effectively are not implemented, the body will start sending "signals" that something is wrong. More serious psychosomatic disorders develop, which have mental roots and reflect on the functioning of the body. The stress response then moves into its third and final stage.

## Exhaustion stage

Animal studies conducted in psychological laboratories proved that prolonged stress could even lead to death. This was due to the exhaustion of the body's regenerative capacity. This stage occurred even a few months after the activation of the stressful stimulus. In the case of humans, the body sends out a multitude of alarm signals before this occurs, but doctors are nevertheless aware of cases of heart disease or even heart attack, in which a stressful lifestyle is cited as the cause. Basically, animals do not experience this in their natural habitats. Their stress lasts only a few moments when a threat is present. If they manage to escape - the stress is over. Humans are often unable to "escape" from their stressors, so the only way to do this is to use various stress management techniques to prevent this final phase from occurring.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-fight-or-flight-response-2795194> autor Verywell / Joshua Seong

## Professional burnout

Working as a rescuer involves greater mental strains, exposure to severe occupational stress and therefore requires proper preventive actions. Coping with stress is one of the key ways to prevent professional burnout. It has been widely reported in the psychological literature since the 1970s. Studies show that after several years of professional activity, some people experience significant changes. These include deterioration of their work performance, getting sick more often, finding it more difficult to cope with stress and lacking commitment. They also experience a deterioration in their relationships with others, become less sensitive, withdrawn and even difficult to work with. These signs have come to be related to excessive workloads, and professional burnout has become the nightmare of employers. There are many psychological definitions of this problem, but the most popular one is formulated by Christina Maslach, who says that professional burnout is a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. It can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity, such as those involved in rescue aid. Burnout mainly affects professions that require close, direct work with people, personal involvement and are related to helping others, in which social skills are an essential working tool. This includes doctors, nurses, but also, and perhaps above all, firefighters. It takes a lot of time and effort to prepare a firefighter-rescuer for service. Candidates must sacrifice a lot to meet the high standards of the profession. At the beginning of the service, firefighters always have strong commitment and high expectations, but unfortunately, they also experience excessive stress and mental strain. Rescuers take part in fatal accidents and have direct contact with human tragedies and suffering almost every day.

## How to prevent professional burnout?

Understanding what causes burnout is very important, but even more important is a matter of how to prevent it. One of the main factors leading to burnout syndrome is chronic stress, i.e. situations in which the body is exposed to prolonged tension. Unfortunately, many of these are unavoidable, so it is very important to find constructive ways to release tension and stress resulting from difficult rescue operations, as well as common life problems. The stressful events experienced by rescuers should be balanced by an equal or even greater number of pleasant and relaxing situations. One of the prerequisites for maintaining good mental condition and high resistance to stress is to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Each human being is composed of two substances - a physical substance and a mental one. Both substances interact with each other so problems in one of them result in deterioration in the other. Fortunately, the interaction is bilateral, which means that improvements in physical substance will also have a positive impact on the mental one. The main factors protecting against stress and its effects include a proper diet, active rest and recovery, especially healthy and effective sleep.

## Diet

Can healthy diet help reduce the negative effects of stress on human body? Let us look at the theory of stress and the results of research carried out in psychological laboratories. The human body “knows” that it is experiencing stress when excessive amounts of the stress hormones are released into the blood. These include adrenaline and cortisol. It turns out that an insufficient amount of food can cause their levels to increase. In the course of psychological and physiological experiments conducted on animals, hunger was one of the stress stimuli used. Irregular eating is enough for the brain to perceive this as an anomaly and therefore poses a potential threat. Also, there are many automatic mechanisms in the human body designed to ensure the survival of an organism, so the first meal after a prolonged break will be converted into a kind of “emergency reserve for worse times” and mostly stored as body fat. Only a small part of it will be used for current needs. Irregular eating is therefore not only inducing stress, but also leading to overweight and obesity. Stress hormone levels will also increase when the food we consume has little nutritional value. Empty calories are a very clever trick we play on our own body, which after a while results in further health problems. Hunger can be satisfied because there are two hunger "detectors" in the human body. One is in the stomach and reacts only to the appearance of food in the stomach. The other one is in the blood and acts on sugar. All it takes is for one of them to be activated and the information that we are full is already being sent to the brain. This can give the delusion that there is no need to change the diet - after all, we are not hungry, and we feel good. Nothing could be further from the truth. If our meals do not provide the right amount of vitamins and nutrients, we will start feeling tired, sleepy, not able to focus, and our ability to remember will also deteriorate. All because the brain will reduce those functions for which it lacks energy.

## Effective sleep

The importance of effective sleep in preventing and reducing stress is extremely important. Most people do not get enough sleep, or the sleep does not provide the rest they need. Lack of sleep adversely affects the ability to cope with stress and negative feelings, as well as lowers concentration, memory, and decision-making capabilities. Sleep quality of rescue service workers is also affected by shift work. Studies have shown that shift workers have similar problems maintaining a normal sleep and wakefulness rhythm as pilots and airline workers, who struggle with “jet lag” - a set of symptoms caused by travelling across several time zones. Seeing how much impact sleep has on the work of rescuers, it is essential to ensure that their sleep is effective and brings relaxation. This can be ensured by following sleep hygiene - simple recommendations that can improve the quality and duration of sleep by changing habits, behaviours, and environmental conditions.

## Sleep hygiene guidelines

### 1. Dark bedroom is very important.

Melatonin, a sleep hormone secreted by the pineal gland, is responsible for falling asleep and waking up. Its higher amount makes us become sleepy and fall asleep, and when its concentration in the body decreases, sleep becomes shallower, and then we wake up. The concentration of melatonin is dependent on exposure to light so when darkness falls, the body starts to produce it. The room we sleep in should be dark. Shift workers who sleep during the day should avoid bright light to maintain adequate melatonin levels.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. Silence is also important.

The impact of noise on sleep is not the same for everyone. It may vary depending on gender, health conditions and sometimes habits. Noise during sleep causes stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system<sup>5</sup> and the release of the stress hormones - adrenaline and cortisol. In addition, deep sleep - the REM phase - is shortened, and this results in poorer sleep quality and morning fatigue.

### 3. Ensure your bedroom is at comfortable temperature and properly ventilated.

Too low or too high temperature contributes to a lower amount of sleep. Before going to bed, the room should be ventilated, and proper air circulation should be ensured throughout the sleep. In fact, we tend to pay a lot of attention to the quality of bed and mattress and forget these simple rules for preparing the bedroom before bedtime.

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<sup>4</sup> K. Pawlas, Czynniki środowiskowe wpływające na sen oraz zachowanie higieny snu, Wrocławski Uniwersytet Medyczny, 2013

<sup>5</sup> K. Pawlas, Czynniki środowiskowe wpływające na sen oraz zachowanie higieny snu, Wrocławski Uniwersytet Medyczny, 2013

#### **4. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.**

People are divided into owls and larks. Some of us prefer going to sleep only late at night and wake up late, others, as the proverb says, go to bed with the chickens and get up with the cows. You should go to bed at about the same time. If you find it hard to fall asleep, get up after 15 minutes to do something else and then go back to bed and try to fall asleep again. Lying in bed and contemplating the fact that sleep is not coming increases tension and stress, which prolongs the falling asleep stage. You can also remove the clock from your bedroom to avoid checking it at night. Checking the time when you are struggling to sleep can cause anxious thoughts and worry that you are not getting enough sleep to rest effectively.

#### **5. Avoid daytime naps.**

Daytime naps might worsen sleep problems at night. However, if they are necessary and cannot be avoided, ensure that they are no longer than one hour and take place before 3pm.<sup>6</sup>

#### **6. Do not use mobile phones and computers before bedtime.**

Electronic devices used in the bedroom after lights out negatively affect the secretion of melatonin. Also, they generate blue light and electromagnetic waves that alter brain function during sleep. Research studies using the EEG allow to observe the bioelectrical activity of the brain during the day and at night and show how it is affected by the electronic devices. The results show that exposure to monitors or screens for more than four hours in the evening can increase arousal, make falling asleep more difficult and, more importantly, adversely affect sleep by shortening its stages. Interestingly, we contribute to the quality of our sleep throughout the day, as overexposure to the aforementioned monochromatic blue light (mobile phones, laptop screens, computer monitors) in the morning causes more daytime sleepiness and fatigue.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> K. Pawlas, Czynniki środowiskowe wpływające na sen oraz zachowanie higieny snu, Wrocławski Uniwersytet Medyczny, 2013

<sup>7</sup> P. Semiginowska, K. Golonka, I. Iskra-Golec, Wpływ monochromatycznego światła niebieskiego na aktywność EEG - Rola elastyczności nawyków snu, Polskie Forum Psychologiczne, 2019, T24, nr 2, str. 168-183

## Relaxation techniques

Almost everyone heard about relaxation techniques. They most often include exotic music, beautiful images or sounds of nature (ocean waves, chirping birds), which seem to relieve stress. Some people consider them revolutionary, while others doubt their effectiveness claiming that the positive comments are rather far-fetched. Hours of relaxation music files are available online. Few people know that listening to soothing sounds is not enough, although it is undoubtedly a treat to the ears. The relaxation instructions are no longer so widely known and sometimes the music plays the main role, while it should only be a background. The answer to the question of how relaxation sessions relieve stress should be sought in the extraordinary human mind-body connection, specifically in the mechanism of emotion recognition. Every emotion we feel has a “dual” nature. This can be illustrated with an example of anxiety. On one hand, this emotion causes a series of mental reactions such as poorer concentration, struggling to recall something or even draw logical conclusions. On the other hand, we experience it in the body, where the physiological reactions associated with the emotion take place. Both comfortable and uncomfortable feelings can be recognised just by looking at the physical reactions of the person experiencing them. What's more, these reactions are sometimes very difficult to hide even if you don't want to show that anything is wrong. When we feel anxiety or stress, we often try to hide it and deny it, yet many will not be bluffed. When we are anxious, our facial expressions change, our hands and sometimes our knees start to tremble, we feel pressure in our stomach, and we reflexively hunch into a more defensive posture. Just think of how you felt after a stressful day - like most people, you probably experienced back pain or headaches. This is due to the strong tension in the muscles, which are put in continuous state of readiness for physical action almost throughout the experience of stress. Prolonged chronic stress is often the source of tension pain in the spine, neck, and head. When observing emotions and studying their nature, psychologists have posed very basic questions - what occurs first: an emotion in the mind or a physiological reaction in the body. Are we sad first and therefore cry, or is it the other way around and our brain recognises the reactions in the body and on this basis “knows” what emotion to switch on? A very interesting experiment that studied the emotions involved observing how people's reactions change when they involuntarily smile. The subjects were asked to hold a pencil in their teeth so that they had their mouths stretched into a smile, and then were shown the pictures and photos and asked to describe how funny they found them. It turned out that such an involuntary smile was enough for the subjects to rate the pictures as funnier. People with facial expression of displeasure artificially induced by a different way of holding the pencil in their teeth, rated the same images as less funny. Thus, hypothesis can be drawn that before reacting to an emotion, the brain performs a kind of body scan and looks for clues in the body which emotion to “trigger”.

Fig. 5 Facial feedback experiment <sup>8</sup>



This experiment can help understand how relaxation affects stress reduction. When we find ourselves in a difficult situation, the muscles throughout the body tighten, which the brain “reads” as a signal that we are experiencing stress and triggers the corresponding emotions associated with this (e.g. anxiety). And these emotions will intensify the unpleasant emotions in the body. Since tense muscles prompts the brain that we are stressed, the opposite situation, i.e. muscle relaxation will indicate that we are calm. Accordingly, relaxation techniques will be aimed at consciously influencing the tension of the entire body in order to “convince” the brain to activate the emotions that occur when we are relaxed. When practising relaxation techniques, you should not fall asleep, because, as mentioned, you should constantly be in control of what is happening to your body. The music in these techniques is not the most important factor. It should only provide a background that makes the whole relaxation session a little more interesting. What is crucial, however, is the guidance of the narrator who directs and helps to focus on each successive muscle. Such relaxation sessions should be repeated at least several times to develop the habit of controlling stress and tension.

Fig. 6 Relaxation session <sup>9</sup>



<sup>8</sup>[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/cover\\_story/2016/08/can\\_smiling\\_make\\_you\\_happier\\_maybe\\_maybe\\_not\\_we\\_have\\_no\\_idea.html?via=gdpr-consent](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/cover_story/2016/08/can_smiling_make_you_happier_maybe_maybe_not_we_have_no_idea.html?via=gdpr-consent)

<sup>9</sup><https://pieknoumyslu.com/cwiczenia-relaksacyjne-i-10-trudnosci-z-nimi-zwiazanych/>

## Social support

"Life used to be different...People knew each other more and used to stick together". We have probably all heard it before as all generations repeat it. Parents usually believe that their children's generation is less autonomous and find it more difficult to cope with stress. It is interesting to note that this is exactly what their own parents said about them, which rather suggests that we tend to overestimate the strengths and abilities of our age group in relation to younger people. However, it is true that the social environment in which young people are growing up today is experiencing dynamic changes. A great deal of activity and many relationships are moving to the virtual world. One can joke that soon Maslow's hierarchy of needs will have to be modified, as Internet access will become a fundamental need - in many cases more important than sleeping and eating. Unfortunately, these changes come at the cost of a reduction in real-life encounters. In such conditions, it is much more difficult to start and maintain close social relationships. Friendships made via the Internet or social media are shallow and unsupportive, which can make young people feel lonely. In many areas of functioning, contacts are reduced to chatting with automatons, filling in online forms, and sometimes even call centre agents are bots that become more capable of pretending to be human. The more time we spend in the virtual world or interacting with technology instead of with real people, the more difficult it will be to find ourselves in the real world and create close, supportive relationships. Social media allow you to control how you create your image. The pictures we post on Instagram and Facebook show people who are successful, pretty, well-dressed, always smiling and show no sign of worrying about anything. Experiencing such pressure to be perfect, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept ourselves as we really are and to be honest in our relationships. Firefighters and rescue service workers are professional groups whose members are perceived to get along perfectly well and to have close relationships, including personal ones. There is a lot of truth in this, as the specific nature of their job, exposure to threats and high dependence of one's own safety on the behaviour and skills of the other team members builds trust and care for one another. Trust in the team is the factor that makes firefighters risk their health and lives in difficult actions saving the injured, despite the perceived danger. Trust and caring for each other is also a very important in helping to cope with occupational stress and tension caused by traumatic experiences at work. Thanks to these close social relationships, being a member of a rescue team is still perceived as a very attractive path to professional fulfilment and passion for many young people.

Figure 7. Picture of firefighters together <sup>10</sup>



## The importance of social support during the Covid 19 pandemic

A well-developed social support network includes family and colleague relationships in the workplace and outside of work. Close relationships with other people make us more able to cope with stress. On one hand, we are more open and courageous in finding solutions to the problems we face and, on the other, we adapt better to new situations. Having close friends and relatives with whom we share bonds of friendship is very valuable. The recent experience of the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic demonstrated their role in coping with crisis. Today, the situation no longer arouses such strong emotions as at the beginning. However, we still remember the difficulties that isolation entailed. The fear of the unknown was a major component that intensified stress. Firstly, no one was able to absolutely predict the course of the infection. Secondly, none of the professionals had ever dealt with an epidemic of this scale in their lives. Additionally, coping was complicated by numerous social disparities. Many of the consequences of prolonged isolation and separation from sources of support will be seen for years to come in deterioration of mental health and psychosocial problems, especially among children and teenagers.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/male-female-firefighters-working-together-suits-helmets\\_21076095.htm#query=firefighter%20working&position=31&from\\_view=search&track=sph](https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/male-female-firefighters-working-together-suits-helmets_21076095.htm#query=firefighter%20working&position=31&from_view=search&track=sph)

## Impact of traumatic stress on occupational burnout

Every firefighter knows PTSD - or post-traumatic stress disorder. It is a mental health condition with psychological symptoms triggered by experiencing intense stress of a traumatic nature. Sometimes it affects those who directly experienced the event, sometimes those who provided the aid, and sometimes even those witnessing the incident. Only the most difficult events can be called traumatic. These usually include death, very serious injuries, or terrifying scenes. Firefighters experience an accumulation of such experiences, which is considered one of the main factors contributing to professional burnout. As being aware of this risk, both rescuers and their superiors should undertake preventive and supportive actions.

## Preventive actions - training and psychology syllabus in firefighting schools

Training in the firefighter profession is provided by specially designated schools of the State Fire Service. There are three schools in Poland: in Kraków, Częstochowa and Poznań. There is also the Main School of Fire Service (Polish: Szkoła Główna Służby Pożarniczej), which has the university status, but due to its different form of education it has been excluded from the following study. Once the candidates graduate from high school, they can apply to one of the three schools and upon its completion earn the title of firefighting technician. From the beginning of their education, students enter the service (initially it is the candidate service) and upon graduation they are assigned to designated units of the State Fire Service. The schools are governed by educational regulations, but as part of the State Fire Service structures, they are also subject to the regulations of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration. The syllabus includes vocational subjects - specific to the fire service - but also general subjects. This includes the introduction to psychology. When comparing the Warrant Officers School of the State Fire Service in Kraków with the high school in Semily, the Czech Republic, great similarities can be seen with regard to the learning programme in the scope of prevention in mental health. Polish education regulations require that centrally approved core curriculum is implemented. It provides the main qualification framework and defines the general learning outcomes. In the field of psychology, these are as follows:

1. Student describes the conditions and requirements of the fire service
2. Student uses techniques for coping with stress
3. Student provides psychological support to those in state of need.

These are then defined in detail in the syllabus approved by the Chief Commandant of the State Fire Service. Training and education within the scope of psychological aspects of service is completed during two semesters of the two-year school. The training consists of 42 teaching hours, and the specific learning outcomes are completed within eleven thematic blocks, including, among others:

- ✓ Difficult situations and their impact on human being
- ✓ Stress in service
- ✓ Psychological support for people involved in rescue operations
- ✓ Dealing with selected difficult situations in rescue operations

- ✓ Promotion and protection of mental health in the service
- ✓ Improving stress management techniques

All these topics are in line with the learning outcomes of the Czech RVP - Framework Curriculum for Health Education listed below:

- ✓ Determinants of health: environmental, lifestyle, physical activity,
- ✓ Dietary patterns, risk behaviour, etc.
- ✓ Mental health and personal development, social competences, risk factors.

As in the Polish system, a more detailed scope of student education in the Czech Republic is described in the ŠVP school curriculum, which is based on the general guidelines for student education in the RVP. The effects and competences in the field of preventing burnout syndrome and dealing with stress are specified in this program, and are included in particular in the subjects of citizenship education, crisis management and medical education.

More detailed areas of education are: health - its concept and determinants, stress and its impact on health, risks associated with mental exhaustion and burnout syndrome, relaxation techniques, physical activity and sport and their impact on the human psyche, building mental resilience and preventing accumulation stress and its consequences.

Collaboration between various communities in terms of education always results in inspiration, development and interesting ideas, so a closer comparison of how these matters are dealt with could be of great benefit. New ways of demonstrating matters with regard to mental health prevention could make this knowledge more attractive and accessible, which would certainly have a positive impact on students - graduates of both schools and, in the future, officers of emergency response services.

## Support activities

In order to maintain a firefighter's high psychological and physical performance and to prevent professional burnout, it is necessary to provide individual support of a psychologist. Such a support has been available in the State Fire Service for several years and every firefighter can benefit from advice and consultation. However, providing access to specialists is only half the battle, as it is necessary to overcome many barriers to reach for this help. Psychology is a young science, but due to its fast development it can be applied to almost all aspects of our lives. Modern psychology deals not only with psychopathology, but with understanding how human being functions as a whole. This means that it very often focuses on creating the conditions for proper development and utilising all abilities that lies within, in order to achieve better performance at work and a more comfortable life. Unfortunately, psychological support is still perceived by many as being reserved for weak people who cannot cope. Talking to a psychologist can raise fears and concerns of whether you are really suited to be a firefighter or rescuer. Such concerns are quite normal and almost always raised by people who seek psychological support for the first time. Fortunately, they very quickly find that this form of support is a very good way of coping with professional problems and stress. The lack of access to psychological support results in more frequent professional burnout, but also depressive and neurotic disorders or addictions. Drinking alcohol in stressful situations is very harmful, but unfortunately it still happens all too often. Fortunately, public awareness for mental health is apparently increasing. Senior rescuers will certainly be familiar with the many tragic stories of people who have become ill because of alcohol and as a result lost almost everything. In my opinion, it would not be an exaggeration to say that psychological support, if provided in time, can be a life saver.

## Support from senior and command staff

Staff and command meetings to relieve stress and negative emotions are an irreplaceable form of support in the most difficult rescue operations. Due to the close relationship between team members, firefighters often decide to share their concerns and problems they encountered during rescue operations. It is important that they get an opportunity to do so in a managed and controlled manner during briefings conducted by their immediate superiors. Such meetings are used to communicate important information, decisions and clarify details of operations, but also give opportunity to release emotional tension. All-day stress and tension accumulated during rescue operations can then find release. Such briefings with emotional release can be organised when commanders consider them necessary, but in particular they should be held during prolonged, large-scale rescue or disaster relief operations. Similar briefings can be held with a psychologist, who ensures that stress and difficult emotions are expressed in a constructive way and that each person can feel comfortable to share personal experiences and feelings honestly, without fear of being judged or rejected.

## Conclusion

In this paper, several matters related to the most important psychological risks that students at the State Fire Service schools may face have been discussed. Overlooking and ignoring psychosocial stressors can lead to serious consequences in later work activity, such as professional burnout. Negligence in this area can result in increased staff turnover frequency, greater expenditure on specialist treatment or poorer work performance, which in case of the emergency services can have disastrous consequences. In line with the common wisdom that “prevention is better than cure”, everyone can avoid the negative effects of too much stress and enjoy health, satisfaction, and fulfilment in every aspect of life.

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