

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF WORK-RELATED STRESS IN WELFARE WORKPLACES: INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL AUXILIARY WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Ntombenhle Brenda Mandlazi 

University of Fort Hare

South Africa

ABSTRACT

Work-related stress within welfare workplaces is commonly associated with excessive workloads, emotional exhaustion, and resource limitations. However, less attention has been given to the subtle and often normalised workplace pressures that silently affect frontline practitioners. This study explores the hidden costs of work-related stress among social auxiliary workers within welfare organisations. Guided by the Job Demand–Control Theory and the Person–Environment Fit Theory, the study adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with social auxiliary workers employed in emotionally demanding welfare settings. Data were analysed through thematic analysis.

The findings reveal that occupational stress among social auxiliary workers extends beyond visible organisational demands and includes hidden interpersonal and structural pressures embedded within everyday workplace practices. Participants described stress associated with excessive workloads, role ambiguity, emotionally demanding workplace interactions, unequal task allocation, and pressures linked to client preferences regarding service providers. These experiences were frequently normalised within welfare workplace cultures and often remained unrecognised within formal organisational support structures. Participants further reported difficulties identifying, articulating, and communicating less visible sources of stress, resulting in emotional strain, frustration, reduced motivation, and compromised psychological wellbeing.

The study further found that the hidden costs of occupational stress extend beyond employees and may also affect organisational functioning and service delivery. Persistent workplace pressures contributed to reduced morale, emotional fatigue, diminished productivity, and challenges in maintaining professional effectiveness. Although employees remained committed to acting in the best interests of clients, ongoing emotional strain sometimes affected their ability to function optimally. Existing employee wellness interventions were perceived as limited in identifying and addressing subtle and normalised workplace stressors. The study highlights the need for welfare organisations to strengthen proactive support structures, improve role clarification, encourage open communication regarding workplace wellbeing, and recognise less visible forms of occupational stress. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of addressing hidden workplace pressures that may negatively

affect employees, organisational functioning, and the quality of client care within welfare settings.

Keywords: Occupational stress; Welfare workplaces; Social auxiliary workers; Hidden stressors; Psychological wellbeing; Organisational wellbeing