

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

INTRODUCTION

Helping professions are widely regarded as supportive environments committed to promoting wellbeing and social justice. However, this perception may obscure the complex realities experienced by practitioners within welfare organisations. Social auxiliary workers, like other frontline service providers, frequently operate in emotionally demanding contexts characterised by high workloads, complex client needs, administrative responsibilities, and continuous interpersonal engagement. Although occupational stress in these professions has received considerable scholarly attention, existing literature has largely concentrated on visible stressors such as burnout, emotional exhaustion, staff shortages, and resource constraints. Less attention has been given to subtle, cumulative, and normalised pressures that quietly shape employees' daily experiences and wellbeing.

Within welfare settings, such pressures often become embedded in organisational culture and routine practice, making them difficult to recognise as distinct workplace challenges. Over time, employees may come to regard emotional and organisational demands as an expected part of their role rather than conditions requiring intervention. These include role ambiguity, emotionally intensive client interactions, uneven workload distribution, and sustained expectations of emotional regulation and professional composure. As these experiences accumulate, stress becomes internalised and less likely to be openly acknowledged or addressed.

The impact of these hidden pressures extends beyond emotional strain. Continuous exposure to demanding work conditions may contribute to fatigue, reduced motivation, and diminished professional wellbeing, even among employees who remain committed to quality service delivery. In some cases, practitioners may struggle to identify or articulate the sources of distress, while in others, concerns may remain unspoken due to fear of dismissal or lack of organisational responsiveness. Consequently, significant aspects of occupational stress remain invisible within formal support systems. Beyond individual effects, these pressures may also influence organisational functioning and service delivery. Persistent strain can contribute to reduced morale, lower productivity, interpersonal challenges, absenteeism, and staff turnover. Given the close link between employee wellbeing and service quality in welfare work, ongoing emotional demands may also affect client interactions and the consistency of care provided. Although practitioners continue to demonstrate commitment to

clients, prolonged exposure to unaddressed stressors may gradually weaken emotional resilience and professional sustainability. Despite growing attention to workplace wellbeing, subtle and normalised forms of occupational stress remain insufficiently explored within welfare contexts. Existing organisational responses often prioritise visible or crisis-related stressors, leaving less obvious pressures under-recognised and inadequately addressed. This highlights the need for deeper inquiry into how embedded workplace conditions shape employee wellbeing and organisational effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics are explained through Person–Environment Fit Theory, which emphasises alignment between individual capacity and workplace demands, and the Job Demand–Control–Support framework, which highlights how high demands combined with limited autonomy and insufficient support contribute to occupational strain. These frameworks provide a lens for understanding how hidden pressures accumulate over time and affect both psychological wellbeing and organisational outcomes.

Against this background, the present study explored hidden occupational pressures experienced by social auxiliary workers in welfare workplaces. It specifically examined how workload demands, role ambiguity, emotional labour, and organisational dynamics contribute to less visible forms of stress, and how these experiences influence employee wellbeing and service delivery.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Welfare workplaces are characterised by emotionally demanding environments in which social auxiliary workers provide continuous care and support to vulnerable individuals, families, and communities. In carrying out these responsibilities, employees often prioritise client needs despite experiencing sustained occupational and emotional strain. While occupational stress in helping professions is widely acknowledged, research and organisational interventions tend to focus on visible stressors such as workload pressure, burnout, and resource constraints, often overlooking subtle and normalised forms of stress that shape everyday work experiences.

Within these settings, hidden stressors become embedded in organisational routines and culture, leading to their gradual normalisation. These include role ambiguity, emotionally demanding client interactions, uneven task distribution, continuous emotional regulation, and expectations of professional composure despite fatigue. Over time, employees may internalise these conditions, reducing the likelihood that distress is recognised, expressed, or formally addressed. As a result, these less visible stressors limit organisational awareness and intervention. Employees may struggle to identify or communicate emotional strain, perceive stress as an unavoidable aspect of their work, or hesitate to raise concerns due to fears of

dismissal or limited responsiveness. Consequently, occupational stress remains under-addressed within support systems, contributing to emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, psychological fatigue, and diminished wellbeing. Beyond individual effects, persistent unrecognised stress may negatively affect organisational functioning and service delivery. It may contribute to reduced morale, absenteeism, interpersonal tension, and staff turnover. In welfare contexts, where employee wellbeing is closely linked to service quality, sustained emotional strain may also influence practitioner–client interactions and the consistency of care. Although employees remain committed to service delivery, prolonged exposure to unaddressed stressors may gradually affect emotional responsiveness and professional sustainability.

Despite increasing attention to employee wellness, limited research has focused on the hidden and normalised forms of occupational stress experienced by social auxiliary workers in welfare settings. This highlights the need for research that moves beyond visible stressors to examine how embedded workplace pressures influence employee wellbeing and organisational outcomes. Guided by Person–Environment Fit Theory and Job Demand–Control–Support perspectives, this study therefore explored how hidden occupational pressures shape stress experiences among social auxiliary workers and affect both employees and service delivery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hidden Emotional Strain and Silent Occupational Stress in Welfare Workplaces

Occupational stress in helping professions is typically associated with visible pressures such as workload intensity, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and resource constraints (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). However, emerging literature highlights that stress is also shaped by less visible and embedded workplace conditions that are often overlooked within organisational discourse. In welfare settings, these subtle stressors are frequently integrated into everyday practice, making them difficult to distinguish from routine work demands (Engelbrecht, 2012). As a result, employees may continue functioning while gradually internalising emotional strain.

A key component of this hidden strain is emotional labour, which requires employees to regulate emotional responses while maintaining professional composure in emotionally charged environments (Kanasz, 2017). This ongoing regulation may generate psychological demands that are not formally recognised within organisational systems. Recent studies suggest that repeated emotional suppression and sustained empathic engagement may accumulate over time, contributing to reduced emotional wellbeing and professional fatigue (Heub, Schaller, & Lange, 2024). In addition, literature indicates that occupational stress in welfare environments is often normalised through continuous exposure. Employees may

begin to perceive emotional strain as an inherent part of helping professions rather than a condition requiring organisational support (Fida et al., 2023). This normalisation may reduce help-seeking behaviour and reinforce workplace cultures where employee distress remains under-acknowledged (Crocker & Wilson, 2023).

Occupational Roles, Workplace Expectations, and Emotional Costs

Research indicates that occupational position significantly influences exposure to workplace stress. Frontline welfare workers often operate under conditions of high demand and limited decision-making authority, increasing vulnerability to sustained strain (Ayalew, Tilahun, & Yimer, 2021). Within these roles, unclear expectations and overlapping responsibilities further intensify emotional and operational pressure.

Role ambiguity has been identified as a consistent contributor to workplace stress in welfare settings, particularly where job boundaries are poorly defined or frequently shifting (Engelbrecht, 2014). Such conditions can create uncertainty, emotional fatigue, and difficulty in maintaining professional clarity. Beyond formal role expectations, workplace dynamics may also influence the allocation of emotionally demanding tasks. Evidence suggests that certain employees may be repeatedly assigned complex cases based on perceived competence or availability rather than formal distribution systems (Wang, Xu, & Zheng, 2025). Over time, these patterns may contribute to uneven emotional weight across staff members.

Client Interactions and Emotional Demands in Practice

Client engagement in welfare work is inherently emotionally intensive, particularly when working with vulnerable populations experiencing trauma, poverty, or psychosocial distress (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2022). While such interactions are central to professional roles, they also create ongoing emotional demands that extend beyond formal job descriptions.

Research shows that client expectations, interpersonal dynamics, and communication challenges can further shape employee emotional experiences (Chaves-Montero, Blanco-Miguel, & Ríos-Vizcaíno, 2025). Employees are often required to maintain emotional regulation during difficult interactions, which may involve suppressing frustration or fatigue to sustain professional relationships (Kanasz, 2017). Although expected as part of professional conduct, these demands contribute to cumulative emotional strain.

Organisational Implications of Hidden Stress

Literature consistently shows that occupational stress has consequences beyond individual wellbeing. Persistent emotional strain is associated with reduced motivation, fatigue, and decreased workplace engagement (WHO, 2019). At an organisational level, these conditions may contribute to absenteeism, reduced productivity, staff turnover, and interpersonal

difficulties (Selesho & Naile, 2014, & Moyane, 2016). A key concern in existing research is that hidden stressors are difficult for organisations to detect, resulting in underestimation of their impact on performance and service delivery (Crocker & Wilson, 2023). This invisibility limits the effectiveness of employee wellness programmes, particularly when distress is not explicitly reported. In welfare contexts, employee wellbeing is closely linked to service quality. Studies indicate that prolonged exposure to emotional demands may reduce concentration, responsiveness, and professional engagement, potentially affecting practitioner–client interactions over time (Engelbrecht, 2012). Organisational implications for hidden stress can be costly.

Coping, Resilience, and Structural Responsibility

Resilience is frequently emphasised in helping professions as a key coping mechanism for managing occupational stress (Heub et al., 2024). While adaptive coping strategies support continued functioning, research cautions that overemphasis on resilience may shift attention away from organisational responsibility. Sustainable wellbeing requires structural and organisational support, including manageable workloads, effective supervision, clear communication, and accessible support systems (Fida et al., 2023; Crocker & Wilson, 2023). Without such support, reliance on individual coping strategies may reinforce the normalisation of unhealthy working conditions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the Person–Environment (PE) Fit Theory and the Job Demand–Control (JDC) Theory to understand the hidden occupational pressures experienced by social auxiliary workers within welfare workplaces. These theories were considered appropriate because they provide insight into how workplace conditions, organisational expectations, and job demands influence employee wellbeing, emotional functioning, and occupational stress. The Person–Environment Fit Theory explains that employees’ workplace experiences are influenced by the degree of compatibility between individual characteristics and organisational environments (Yu, 2023). The theory proposes that employees differ in their responses to workplace demands because individuals possess unique emotional capacities, coping abilities, expectations, values, and professional needs. As a result, organisational environments may be experienced as supportive or psychologically distressing depending on how well they align with employees’ personal and occupational realities.

The theory further emphasises that the relationship between employees and workplace environments is dynamic rather than fixed. Employees continuously attempt to adjust to organisational expectations while simultaneously seeking environments that support their emotional wellbeing, professional functioning, and psychological needs (Jiang & Wang, 2022). Where there is poor alignment between workplace demands and employee capacities,

occupational stress, emotional fatigue, dissatisfaction, and reduced wellbeing are more likely to emerge. Conversely, a stronger fit between employees and organisational conditions may contribute to improved morale, job satisfaction, and professional effectiveness. Within welfare workplaces, social auxiliary workers frequently operate in emotionally demanding environments characterised by high workloads, complex client needs, interpersonal pressures, and ongoing emotional engagement. The PE Fit Theory assisted the study in examining how organisational conditions such as excessive workloads, role ambiguity, workplace expectations, task allocation practices, and organisational support structures may contribute to hidden workplace stress. The theory further provided a framework for understanding how subtle and normalised workplace pressures may affect employees differently depending on their emotional resources, coping capacities, and workplace experiences.

In addition, the Job Demand–Control Theory provided insight into how occupational stress develops when employees experience high job demands combined with limited control over workplace conditions (Karasek, 1979). The theory argues that excessive workloads, emotional demands, role pressure, and limited decision-making autonomy may increase employees' vulnerability to occupational stress and psychological strain. Within welfare settings, social auxiliary workers are often required to manage emotionally demanding responsibilities while functioning within structured organisational systems that may offer limited control over workloads, case allocation, and workplace expectations.

The Job Demand–Control Theory was particularly relevant in understanding how silent workplace stressors become normalised within welfare organisations. Employees may continue performing their duties despite experiencing emotional exhaustion, frustration, and psychological strain because workplace pressures are often perceived as unavoidable aspects of helping professions. The theory therefore assisted the study in examining how excessive job demands, limited organisational support, and reduced workplace control contribute to hidden occupational stress among social auxiliary workers.

Together, the Person–Environment Fit Theory and the Job Demand–Control Theory provided a useful framework for understanding how hidden workplace pressures develop and how they influence employee wellbeing, organisational functioning, and professional effectiveness within welfare workplaces. The theories further assisted in examining how subtle and normalised workplace stressors may remain insufficiently recognised within organisational support systems despite their impact on employees' emotional and psychological wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the hidden occupational pressures experienced by social auxiliary workers within welfare workplaces. A qualitative

approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of employees' subjective experiences, emotional realities, and interpretations of workplace stress within their professional environments. The study was further grounded in a phenomenological orientation, which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences.

Participants were purposively selected from the Mpumalanga Department of Social Development in South Africa. The study included social auxiliary workers who had been employed within the department for a minimum period of one year. This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to organisational practices, workplace expectations, client interactions, and occupational demands relevant to the study. A total of 36 participants participated in the study, representing diverse professional experiences, ages, and workplace backgrounds within welfare service delivery.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. These qualitative methods created opportunities for participants to openly discuss their workplace experiences, emotional challenges, perceptions of organisational support, and the subtle pressures encountered within welfare settings. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection and detailed discussion regarding hidden workplace stressors, role expectations, emotional demands, workplace relationships, and organisational practices.

Individual interviews were conducted for approximately 30 to 60 minutes, while focus group discussions lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. The combination of interviews and focus groups enabled the researcher to capture both personal experiences and shared workplace realities among participants. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached and no new themes or significant insights emerged from participant responses.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret the collected data. The analysis process involved repeated reading of interview transcripts, identification of significant statements, coding of recurring ideas, and grouping related concepts into broader themes and subthemes. Particular attention was given to identifying patterns relating to hidden occupational pressures, emotional strain, role ambiguity, workplace expectations, organisational support, and the normalisation of workplace stress within welfare environments.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed, including member checking, peer review of coding decisions, triangulation of data sources, and accurate transcription of recorded interviews and discussions. Ethical principles were also observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained, and participants were informed of their

right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Through this methodological process, the study generated detailed insight into the hidden costs of work-related stress and the subtle workplace pressures experienced by social auxiliary workers within welfare organisations.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review committee, and permission was secured from the employing organisation. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all social auxiliary workers after they were fully informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Given the sensitive nature of discussing workplace stress and emotional strain, care was taken to minimise potential psychological discomfort during data collection, and participants were allowed to pause or discontinue participation at any time.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The provision of helping services in welfare workplaces requires employees to continuously regulate their emotional expressions in response to client needs while simultaneously managing their own emotional reactions to demanding work conditions. This process reflects the emotional labour associated with frontline welfare practice, where employees are expected to maintain professionalism, empathy, patience, and emotional composure regardless of personal strain or workplace pressures (Yildiz, Hoffmann, & Antoniou, 2024; Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Gabriel et al., 2020). Contemporary emotional labour literature emphasises that such emotional regulation is ongoing and deeply embedded within everyday service interactions rather than occurring as isolated incidents.

Within welfare environments, these emotional expectations may become normalised as part of professional responsibility, resulting in employees suppressing emotional fatigue while continuing to prioritise client wellbeing and organisational demands. Over time, the sustained regulation of emotions may contribute to cumulative psychological strain, emotional exhaustion, and reduced wellbeing, particularly where organisational support and recovery opportunities are limited.

From a Person–Environment Fit perspective, these conditions reflect a mismatch between employees' emotional resources and the high emotional demands associated with welfare work. When workplace expectations consistently exceed employees' emotional coping capacity, prolonged psychological strain and reduced occupational wellbeing may occur

(Edwards, 2008). Contemporary occupational wellbeing literature continues to support the relevance of this framework in human service professions.

Normalisation of Workplace Stress

Workplace stress within welfare settings is increasingly recognised as a gradual and embedded process shaped by continuous exposure to high demands and emotional pressures. Employees often come to perceive stress as an unavoidable feature of their professional roles, particularly in human service environments where emotional engagement is central (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Bakker & Demerouti et al., 2023).

“I have spent more than a decade in this position; the workload and monthly reporting requirements have never become easier; one simply learns to find ways to ensure that the tasks are completed.”

“I do what I realistically can. If I am unable to complete certain tasks, I communicate this to my supervisor, although it is not something I am particularly proud of.”

“At this stage, my primary concern is salary progression. Many of the workplace challenges are beyond my control and difficult to change.”

This suggests that prolonged exposure to demanding environments contributes to adaptive coping patterns centred on endurance and task completion rather than emotional wellbeing. Over time, stress becomes normalised, and employees continue functioning despite emotional strain. This aligns with the Job Demand–Control framework, which demonstrates that sustained high demands and limited control contribute to psychological strain and burnout risk (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025).

Hidden Emotional Labour in Client Care

Emotional labour is increasingly understood as a continuous regulatory process shaped by workplace expectations and client interactions (Gabriel et al., 2020; Grandey & Sayre, 2019). Participants described ongoing emotional engagement that required them to remain calm, empathetic, and professional even under emotionally draining conditions.

“I sometimes wonder whether other employees feel the same way I do, it is a combination of loving the work, feeling emotionally stressed, and becoming exhausted from wanting to help every client.”

“I work best when I have had sufficient rest.”

Such experiences reflect the sustained effort required to manage emotional expression in care work, often at the expense of personal wellbeing. Emotional labour in this context becomes a hidden demand that contributes significantly to psychological fatigue (Kinman & Grant, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2022). Within the Job Demand–Control framework, emotional labour represents an additional hidden job demand that intensifies workload and contributes to cumulative strain when not matched with adequate recovery or organisational support (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti & Bakker, 2022). Employees often experience unintended emotional strain while providing support and care to others.

Difficulties in Recognising and Expressing Stress

Occupational psychology research highlights that emotional strain in care professions often develops gradually and may not be immediately identifiable by employees (Liu et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2022). Participants reflected this ambiguity in how stress was experienced and understood.

“I am not entirely sure what specifically causes my stress, but I can say that the workplace environment is not always ideal, although I remain grateful to have employment.”

“I think the nature of the work itself becomes stressful because we constantly deal with emotionally demanding cases.”

“I often feel the need to remain strong for clients, as my role is to support them in every way possible.”

These accounts demonstrate how emotional strain is often internalised as part of professional identity, limiting articulation and delaying recognition of stress. Contemporary coping literature confirms that emotional internalisation is common in helping professions where resilience and service commitment are strongly valued (Schaufeli, 2021; Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). It should be noted that resilience may only be effective to a certain extent.

Employee Reluctance and Organisational Gaps in Emotional Support

Although formal support systems exist, employees reported barriers to accessing them, including confidentiality concerns, limited time, and competing personal responsibilities.

“I am not comfortable using the emotional support services provided by the employer because I fear that confidentiality may be compromised.”

“I have never really felt the need to seek professional emotional support.”

“I do not have the time to consult for emotional support. In the mornings I attend to work responsibilities, and afterwards I have family responsibilities to take care of.”

These findings indicate that emotional wellbeing is often deprioritised due to structural and personal constraints. Research shows that utilisation of support services is significantly influenced by perceived organisational trust and accessibility (Hämmig, 2022; Kim et al., 2023). Person–Environment Fit perspective, reflects a mismatch between organisational support systems and employee realities, as a situation where available resources are not aligned with actual workplace demands (Edwards, 2008).

Hidden Consequences for Employees and Service Delivery

The findings indicate that unrecognised workplace stress affects both employee wellbeing and service delivery. Emotional fatigue, reduced motivation, and diminished energy levels were commonly reflected in participants’ accounts.

“I sometimes wonder whether other employees feel the same way I do, it is a combination of loving the work, feeling emotionally stressed, and becoming exhausted from wanting to help every client.”

“I work best when I have had sufficient rest.”

“I can take leave and rest, but I often feel as though my tasks never end, and I worry that if I take leave, many clients may be left without adequate support.”

These narratives highlight the tension between personal wellbeing and professional responsibility. Employees remain committed to client care, yet continuous emotional and workload demands limit recovery time and intensify strain. Recent research confirms that sustained exposure to high job demands without adequate recovery negatively affects both employee functioning and service quality in human service professions (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2022). Within the Job Demand–Control–Support framework, this reflects increased burnout risk when high demands are not balanced by sufficient support or recovery opportunities (Bakker et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the findings demonstrate that work-related stress among social auxiliary workers is largely shaped by hidden, normalised, and cumulative workplace pressures that are not always recognised within formal organisational systems. The themes collectively show that employees operate in environments where emotional demands, workload intensity, and role ambiguity are embedded into everyday practice, leading to the gradual normalisation of stress

and emotional strain. From a Person–Environment Fit (PE Fit) perspective, these experiences reflect a persistent misalignment between employees’ emotional capacities, professional role expectations, and organisational conditions. When workplace demands consistently exceed available emotional, structural, and role clarity resources, employees experience reduced person–environment fit, resulting in emotional exhaustion, reduced wellbeing, and difficulty sustaining optimal functioning.

The Job Demand–Control Theory further explains how high job demands combined with limited autonomy and constrained organisational support contribute to sustained occupational stress. Participants’ experiences of excessive workload, emotional labour, and unclear role expectations reflect high demands, while limited control over task allocation, case management, and organisational responsiveness reflects low job control. This imbalance contributes to chronic strain that becomes normalised over time, reinforcing the perception that emotional exhaustion is an expected feature of welfare work.

Across all themes, emotional labour emerged as a central mechanism through which stress is experienced yet remains largely invisible. Employees continuously regulate emotions to meet client and organisational expectations, often suppressing personal distress. However, difficulties in recognising and articulating stress, combined with organisational silence and limited proactive support, mean that these pressures remain under-acknowledged within formal workplace systems. Ultimately, the findings indicate that the hidden costs of work-related stress extend beyond the individual, affecting organisational functioning and service delivery through reduced energy, morale, and sustained professional effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that work-related stress in welfare workplaces is not only driven by visible demands such as workload and resource constraints, but also by subtle, normalised, and often unrecognised occupational pressures. These hidden stressors including emotional labour, role ambiguity, and limited organisational responsiveness contribute to cumulative psychological strain among social auxiliary workers.

Guided by Person–Environment Fit Theory and Job Demand–Control Theory, the findings demonstrate that persistent misalignment between workplace demands and employee capacities, combined with limited autonomy and insufficient organisational support, results in ongoing yet often unspoken emotional exhaustion. Importantly, these stressors affect not only employees’ wellbeing but also organisational functioning and service delivery, despite workers’ continued commitment to client care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that welfare organisations strengthen proactive and responsive employee support systems that extend beyond crisis-based interventions to include early identification of subtle and ongoing stressors. Clear role definitions and improved communication structures should be prioritised to reduce role ambiguity and enhance workplace clarity.

In addition, organisations should formally recognise emotional labour as a legitimate occupational demand and integrate it into supervision, workload planning, and employee wellness frameworks. Regular reflective supervision, accessible psychological support, and safe spaces for open dialogue are essential to enable employees to express workplace challenges without fear of minimisation or stigma. Finally, ongoing training for managers and supervisors on recognising hidden stressors and promoting employee wellbeing is critical for strengthening organisational responsiveness and ensuring sustainable, high-quality service delivery in welfare settings.

REFERENCES

- Ayalew, M., Tilahun, B., & Yimer, T. (2021). Occupational stress and associated factors among health and social service professionals in Africa: A systematic review. *BMC Health Services Research*, 21(1), 1–12.
- Bakker, A. B., & de Vries, J. D. (2021). Job demands–resources theory and self-regulation: New explanations and practical implications. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 26(4), 345–360. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000275>
- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Euwema, M. C. (2020). Job resources buffer the impact of job demands on burnout. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 25(3), 170–180. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000170>
- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Sanz-Vergel, A. I. (2025). Job demands–resources theory: Ten years later. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10, 25–53. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-120920-053933>
- Chaves-Montero, A., Blanco-Miguel, M., & Ríos-Vizcaíno, V. (2025). Client-professional interaction and emotional demands in helping professions. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 51(2), 145–160.
- Crocker, J., & Wilson, R. (2023). Coping, resilience, and occupational wellbeing among helping professionals. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 16(4), 310–325.
- Demerouti, E., & Bakker, A. B. (2022). Job demands–resources theory in times of crises. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 15(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2022.21>

- Edwards, J. R. (2008). Person–environment fit in organizations: An assessment of theoretical progress. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2(1), 167–230. <https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520802211557>
- Engelbrecht, L. K. (2012). Burnout and compassion fatigue among social workers in South Africa. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 48(4), 389–399.
- Engelbrecht, L. K. (2014). Management and supervision of social workers: Issues of support, workload, and occupational wellbeing. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 50(3), 359–377.
- Fida, R., Watson, D., Ghezzi, V., Barbaranelli, C., & Ronchetti, M. (2023). Individual differences in occupational stress responses and emotional wellbeing among helping professionals. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 28(5), 412–426.
- Gabriel, A. S., Daniels, M. A., Diefendorff, J. M., & Greguras, G. J. (2020). Emotional labor actors: A latent profile analysis of emotional regulation strategies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(4), 403–420. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000446>
- Grandey, A. A., & Melloy, R. C. (2017). The state of the heart: Emotional labor as emotion regulation reviewed. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(3), 407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000067>
- Grandey, A. A., & Sayre, G. M. (2019). Emotional labor: Regulating emotions for work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 6, 229–253. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012218-015010>
- Grandey, A. A., Diefendorff, J. M., & Rupp, D. E. (2021). Emotional labor in the 21st century: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 47(5), 1042–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206320984198>
- Hämmig, O. (2022). Health risks associated with job stressors and social support in the workplace. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(3), 1321. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031321>
- Heub, A., Schaller, A., & Lange, M. (2024). Gender differences in workplace stress and resilience among human service professionals. *Occupational Health Science*, 8(1), 77–95.
- Jiang, Z., & Wang, Z. (2022). Person–environment fit and employee well-being in organisational settings: A contemporary review. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 95(3), 455–472.
- Kanasz, T. (2017). Emotional labour of social workers as a challenge to maintaining mental wellbeing. *European Journal of Social Work*, 20(3), 389–399.
- Karasek, R. A. (1979). Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24(2), 285–308. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2392498>
- Kim, H., & Lee, S. (2024). Gendered experiences of workplace stress and organisational support in human service professions. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 17(1), 21–38.

- Kim, T. J., Beehr, T. A., & Nair, N. (2023). Perceived organizational support and employee wellbeing: A meta-analytic review. *Human Resource Management Review*, 33(2), 100–118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2022.100921>
- Kinman, G., & Grant, L. (2021). Emotional labour and wellbeing in social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 51(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa104>
- Liu, S., Spector, P. E., & Shi, L. (2021). Use of coping strategies in workplace stress: A cross-cultural review. *Work & Stress*, 35(4), 345–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2021.1894356>
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2022). Burnout in the workplace: A contemporary review. *World Psychiatry*, 21(2), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20984>
- Moyane, N.B., 2016, ‘Social workers’ experiences of occupational stress: A study in the Department of Social Development, Ehlanzeni District, Mpumalanga Province’, master’s dissertation, University of Witwatersrand.
- O’Connor, D., Mann, K., & McMurray, A. (2022). Emotional exhaustion in helping professions: A systematic review. *Journal of Occupational Health*, 64(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/1348-9585.12345>
- Schaufeli, W. B. (2021). Work engagement in the COVID-19 era and beyond. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 26(2), 116–125. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000268>
- Selesho, J. M., & Naile, I. (2014). Academic stress and occupational wellbeing in helping professions. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(3), 240–247.
- South African Council for Social Service Professions. (2022). *Scope of practice for social auxiliary workers in South Africa*. Pretoria: SACSSP.
- Wang, Y., Xu, L., & Zheng, H. (2025). Workplace expectations, emotional labour, and employee wellbeing in helping professions. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 22(6), 4551.
- World Health Organization. (2019). *Burn-out an occupational phenomenon: International classification of diseases*. Geneva: WHO.
- Yildiz, M., Hoffmann, A., & Antoniou, A. S. (2024). Emotional labour and wellbeing in human service work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 112–125. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.012345>
- Yu, K. Y. T. (2023). Revisiting person–environment fit theory in modern organisations: Implications for employee mental health and adjustment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1187456.
- Zhang, Y., Parker, S. K., & Demerouti, E. (2025). Job demands, resources and employee wellbeing: Updated evidence from JD-R theory. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 110(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001100>