

Abstract

Educators are exposed to various stressful events as part of their ongoing work. Previous studies in healthcare and supportive professionals have shown that such stress exposure can lead to an increasing risk of developing clinical symptoms and burnout. Growing evidence suggests that *cognitive flexibility*, the ability to update beliefs, cognitions, and behaviors according to contextual demands, and *regulatory flexibility*, the ability to adapt and switch between different regulatory strategies based on situational demands, moderate the relationship between work-related stress exposure and its possible aversive outcomes. The current dissertation includes three studies that examine the moderating effect of flexibility on the relationship between school-related stress exposure and clinical symptoms and burnout among educators.

Study 1 aimed to examine the interactive effect of exposure to school-related stress and cognitive flexibility on the tendency to develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and on coping skills. One hundred and fifty educators volunteered to participate in this study. The results revealed that educators with low cognitive flexibility demonstrated positive relationships between ongoing exposure to school-related stress and levels of PTSD symptoms, as well as between exposure and maladaptive coping, while no such relationships were found among educators with high cognitive flexibility.

Study 2 examined the interactive effect of school-related stress exposure and cognitive flexibility on the tendency to develop burnout symptoms among a unique population of school counselors. Forty-five counselors volunteered to participate in the study and completed a performance-based paradigm that assesses cognitive flexibility and a set of self-report questionnaires. It was found that among those with low cognitive flexibility

but not high, there was a positive correlation between exposure to stress and sense of burnout.

Study 3 examined the interactive effect of school-related stress exposure and regulatory flexibility on the tendency to develop burnout symptoms among educators. Eighty-nine educators completed a performance-based paradigm that assesses regulatory flexibility and self-report questionnaires. In line with our predictions, we found that for educators with low regulatory flexibility, there was a stronger positive relationship between stress exposure and burnout. In contrast, this relationship was attenuated for educators with high regulatory flexibility.

The findings of the three studies align with each other and strengthen the recognition of the interactive effect that continuous school-related stress exposure and flexibility (cognitive and regulatory) have on the tendency of developing clinical symptoms and burnout. These results may raise awareness to the emotional risk of educators and increase recognition of the critical protective role of cognitive flexibility and regulatory flexibility in reducing the painful cost of exposure to school-related stress. The findings emphasize the need to develop interventions and training programs to strengthen flexibility, and hence improve adaptive behavior and promote well-being in educators.