Stress, coping and well-being among Irish civil servants of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between stress, coping and well-being of Irish civil servants. Participants were the civil servants employed by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service (N=117). The Method used was a cross-sectional, correlational design using an online survey. A Values In Action- optimism measure, Sources of Stress – Control, and Support measures, Brief Resilience Scale, Maslach's Burnout Inventory, and relevant and amended items from Teacher Stress Inventory were used to measure the variables. The hierarchical multiple regressions one for each sub-scale of burn-out were carried out on the significant correlations. The analyses showed that the strongest predictor of well-being (three dimensions of burn-out) is the managerial support (negatively correlated for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, positively correlated for personal achievement) and time pressure (positively correlated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization). There were however other predictor variables which influenced these relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Stress in a working environment is a daily reality for most people. However, two people faced with a similarly stressful situation can experience it in a very different way, for example, it can be perceived as an exciting challenge or as an overwhelming obstacle. The difference in perception of stress comes from within a person, it is a part of person's personality or character. It is dependable on many factors such as personal experience, personality traits, education etc. (Afshar, Roohafza, Keshteli, Mazaheri, 2015). Research shows that depending on coping strategies employed to deal with stress the experience can be magnified or diminished. People leading highly stressful lives face higher risk of developing a stress-related health problem and diminished well-being.

The purpose of this study is to research the relationship between stress, coping and well-being in the Irish civil servants, focusing on the example of civil servants employed in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service.

The civil service is a broad category describing the public officials who advise and assist Government Ministers in the running of their Departments. The three main functions that a civil servant might be expected to fulfil is advising the Government on policy, helping in preparation and drafting of new legislation and the most common – helping the Government to run the country according to the legislation passed by the Oireachtas. Each Department of State has a permanent staff consisting of administrative, professional, specialist and technical employees.

The Houses of the Oireachtas Service (the Service) is the public service body that administers the National Parliament of Ireland (the Houses of the Oireachtas) on behalf of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (the governing Board). Although, Houses of the Oireachtas is not a Department, it follows the departmental structure for civil service,

employing 485 civil servants of all grades, divided between administrative, professional, specialist and technical roles (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017).

The Service is divided into two divisions: Parliamentary Services Division and Corporate and Members Services. Each of the divisions consist of smaller units responsible for a specific area of functioning of the Oireachtas. Depending on which unit a person is working in, their duties will differ significantly, compared to another unit within Oireachtas. The time-pressure, task variety, decision authority, and many other stressors differ significantly bringing new challenges or obstacles for the employee.

A growing body of research is suggesting that perception of stress is dependent on persons coping strategies, which can strengthen or inhibit confidence in ability to deal with stressors. Additionally, Afshar et al. suggest a strong link between personality traits and coping styles (Afshar et al., 2015, Tummers, Bekkers, Vink and Musheno, 2015). There are two main coping strategy styles, that we will concentrate on: the problem-focus and emotion-focused style, however these were shown to be dependent on other factors, such as optimism, resilience, support and feeling of being in control. We will now look closer at these factors, as they play a crucial role in the cycle of stress and coping (Addae & Wang, 2006, Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, Forgeard & Jayawickreme, Kern & Seligman, 2011) and relate directly to the daily reality of civil servants.

Burnout

As Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) describes it "burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job", and is defined by three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism) and personal achievement (inefficacy) (Maslach et al., 2001). Research has shown that burnout is related to anxiety and

depression, however, in contrast with depression, burnout is only an occupation-related problem, not experienced outside of those frames (Maslach et al., 2001).

Of the three dimensions, first and most often identified with burnout is the exhaustion. It reflects the stress dimension of burnout. However, it is important to stress that we cannot talk about burnout without considering the other two aspects of it. This being said, it is the first stage in burnout, as it prompts further changes, that if unstopped, will bring the burnout syndrome. The emotional exhaustion prompts the depersonalization aspect of burnout by creating the need to distance oneself emotionally from the daily work tasks, and from the people who are recipients of ones' service (Maslach et al.,2001). However, depersonalization is more likely in the public roles, that put the employee in continuous, extended and intense contact with public (Tummers &Rocco, 2015). What is understood by this, is a situation where an individual in line of his/her duty meets with customers (continuity), over extended period of time, and the service provided is emotionally draining (intensity). This type of work setting is argued to increase the probability of burnout for civil servants.

The third element – personal achievement, or as Maslach et al. (2001) describes it "reduced personal achievement" can be either a "function, to some degree, of either exhaustion, cynicism, or a combination of the two" (Maslach et al., 2001). In either case, experiencing exhaustion or depersonalization will most likely diminish a sense of accomplishment.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is still to this day the only measure assessing all three core dimensions of burnout (Maslach et al. 2001), therefore this study will use the full 22-items original MBI to assess the outcome of stress and coping styles in Irish civil servants.

Stress

       Stress is identified as "a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances" ("Oxford Dictionary ", n.d.). The modern psychology perceives stress as a multi-factorial problem. As Ogden puts it "contemporary definitions of stress regard the external environment as a stressor […], the response to the stressor as stress or distress […], and the concept of stress as something that involves biochemical, physiological, behavioural and psychological changes" (Ogden, 2007, p. 221). However, these can be broken down even further. Research is differentiating between positive stress (eustress) that provides motivation for action and growth, and negative stress (distress) that is at the source of mental and physical health problems. To add to this, it can be divided further into acute stress, that is intense but short in duration, and chronic stress, where the strenuous situation lasts for extended period of time, and by the sheer repetitiveness of it can become a powerful stressor (Ogden, 2007, Elfering, Grebner, Semmer, Kaiser-Freiburghaus, 2005, Lazarus, 1993).

       The most popular model for understanding psychological stress and response to stress is the transactional model introduced by Lazarus and Folkman in 1987. Highlighting the difference between physiological and psychological stress Lazarus pointed out that "what generates physiological stress – that is, what is noxious to tissues – is not the same as what is stressful ("noxious") psychologically" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 4). Furthermore, Lazarus regarded stress as being a subset of emotions, fitting well into the field of emotion theory, arguing that identifying specific emotions felt by individual, while faced with stressful event will tell us more about his/hers coping and adaptations (Lazarus, 1993). This led him to suggest that the appraisal of a situation is the key factor in the perception of a situation as stressful or not. His transactional model of stress described stress as a transaction between person and the environment. To better explain this Lazarus described a two-step appraisal process. First, a

primary appraisal allows for initial recognition of stimuli as being stressful or not (being irrelevant, positive or negative). Then, if the situation was classified as stressful, a secondary appraisal would take place to allow for further evaluation, and to come up with possible solution (coping strategy). A good person – environment fit meant that person felt confident to deal successfully with the stressor, and level of perceived stress would be low or non-existent.

To better assess the work stressors an adapted version of Teacher Stress Inventory has been used in this study (Maes & van der Doef, 1997). Twelve items have been chosen from the original questionnaire for their compatibility with civil servants' daily experience (e.g. time pressure, role ambiguity, decision authority (control) etc.). Few additional items have been chosen for their relation to outcome results such as, job satisfaction or turnover intention. This should allow for a more robust understanding of sources of stress in civil servants.

Coping

An amounting body of research suggests a direct link between chronic job stressors, and impaired well-being (Addae & Wang, 2006, Elfering, Grebner, et al., 2005, Afshar & Roohafza, 2015, Holton, Barry & Chaney, 2014). These however are affected by the person's general coping strategies.

Lazarus defined coping as a process, "person's ongoing efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands appraised as taxing or overwhelming" (Lazarus, 1993, p.8). He argued that rather than perceiving it as a stable traits or style, coping is highly contextual, since it needs to adapt to changing situations (Lazarus, 1993). As a way of clarifying his theory, he introduced two styles of coping. First is the problem-focused coping, where a person actively pursues change in the surrounding factors that should result in the

diminishing or disappearance of the stressor. It is an active coping style. Second is the emotion-focused coping style, where a person is not trying to change the outside factors but rather tries to change the way they attend to or interpret what is happening (Lazarus, 1993).

A growing body of research suggests that problem-focused coping is a more successful coping strategy (Afshar et al.,2015, Trummers and Rocco, 2015), however, Elfering et al. (2005) argues that research measuring the emotional-focused coping style usually concentrates more on stress reactions rather than attempts at dealing with stress by regulating one's emotions. Additionally, it has been assumed that problem-focused coping is more effective when controllability is high, and emotion-focused coping is better when controllability is low (Lovell, Lee & Brotheridge, 2009). Elfering et al. (2005) argued that chronic job control has positive association with problem solving, and an ability to calm down when under stress. Not surprisingly he agrees that chronic stressors have negative effect on general well-being. However, the difference between situational stressors (an event with a beginning and an end) and chronic stressors (a series of stressful events regarding same work or life area) needs to be recognised. Elfering et al. (2005) suggests that sometimes situational stress is being evaluated as more challenging purely due to its chronic nature, e.g. a time pressure experienced everyday versus time pressure experienced only few times a month (Elfering et al., 2015).

Control

Control and support are listed as modifying factors for occupational stress in the very popular Job-Demand-Control- Support Model introduced by Karasek & Thorell (1990). Where Job demand component relates to work load, which is understood as well in categories of time pressure, role ambiguity, role conflict. Job control relates to the level of decision

authority an individual has over his work and the skills available for managing workload. Support relates to social support from work and outside of it.

It is worth mentioning that control is a factor supplementing the coping ability not only in a work environment but it is the perception of having control in any given situation. Research suggests that high control relates to a reduction in stress and is beneficial to a person's health (Ogden, 2007). Addae and Wang (2006) argue that the lack of having control over one's job stressors intensifies perceived stress, affecting job satisfaction, dedication to one's work and the general well-being. They hypothesize that the high work stress combined with low job control will lower the job involvement. A Sources of Stress – Control 3-item measure (Gibbons, Demster and Moutray, 2009) will be used to check for the perceived control among civil servants. In strongly hierarchical environment of civil service, the perception of having control over ones' work-tasks might be reduced.

Support

As mentioned earlier, support (received from family, friends as well as from managers and work colleagues) can be considered as one of the factors influencing how successful a person is in dealing with stress. As well, it is not reserved to work type situations (Ogden, 2007, Gibbons, 2010, Jackson and Maslach, 1982). According to Reis and Gable (2003) the belief that one is cared for, loved, esteemed and valued has been recognized as one of the most (if not the most) influential determinants of wellbeing for people of all ages and cultures (Reis & Gable, 2003). In his research Payne (2001) was arguing that support can be the strongest predictor of a person's well-being. Other research similarly has found the strong role of support in counteracting distress and negative health outcomes of chronic job stressors (Gibbons, 2010). A source of stress- support 2-item measure (Gibbons et al., 2009) and 3 items from Teacher Stress Inventory (Maes & van der Doef, 1997) will be used to check the

effect support has on civil servants. These five sub-scale were chosen for their ability to check for support received from outside of work (family, friends), and from within (colleagues, managers).

Optimism

Psychology has long recognised that happiness is the state most people want to be in. Happy individuals think and perceive reality around them, in a way that supports the positive narrative of their mind – keeping them happy (Lyubomirsky, 2001, Lyubomirsky, Tucker at al., 2000). Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) showed that "positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires". Another research has shown that there is a positive relationship between happiness and optimism (Kiyanzad, Kajbaf & Phayazi, 2016), while Coversano (2010) proved that optimism is positively related to stress reducing coping strategies. Values in Action - optimism, 8-item measure by Peterson and Seligman (2004) will be used to check for effect of optimism on stress, coping and wellbeing of civil servants. The items of this measure are asking about more pro-active attitude towards life, which is more appropriate for work environment research on optimism.

Resilience

Resilience has been described as an ability to cope and adapt even in the face of loss, hardship or adversity (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004). Resilient individuals are characterised by optimistic, zestful, energetic approaches to life, driven by curiosity and openness to new experiences. They tend to proactively cultivate their positive approach to live by practising optimistic thinking, relaxation and the use of humour (Tugade & Fredirikcson, 2004). Research shows that positive emotions resulting from strong resilience are a good buffer against stress. The problem-focused coping strategy, assigning positive meaning to everyday experiences etc. have been shown to positively affect well-being and mental health.

Additionally, Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) point out that the positive emotions broaden the spectrum of possible behaviours in a person, allowing for better flexibility in coping with stress, and conversely if a person's usual thought processes are negative, their responses might be set, not flexible enough to deal with different situations in a creative way. A Brief Resilience Scale (Smith, Dalen, Wiggins et al., 2008) will be used to study effect of resilience on stress and well-being of civil servants.

Age

In relation to coping strategies, it has been shown that younger people express more of the problem-focused coping style, while older people tend to show the emotion-focused coping style (Ogden, 2007, Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley & Novacek, 1987). However, it is unlikely to find any significant differences within a professional environment.

Gender

Following their research Folkman et al. (1987) have found that the only significant gender difference in coping patterns is noticeable in emotional expression, where men would keep their emotion under stronger control than women, but women would use positive reappraisal more often than men (Folkman et al., 1987). However, other stereotypical assumptions about gender differences were not confirmed in Folkman et al. (1987) study, with men and women using problem-focused coping style equally often. Findings of this study showed that young people use the problem-focused coping style more often, than older people. Similarly, older people were shown to use more of the emotion-focused style of coping (Ogden, 2007).

Job Turnover

An additional outcome of stressful work environment and ineffectiveness of other coping strategies can be an intention to leave the current work environment and move to a different employer. In psychology this is called a job mobility, and usually is studied through job turnover intention. Numerous research has shown the good reliability between intention and the actual move. Liljegren and Ekbert (2009) have studied the health consequences on internal and external mobility. Earlier research has shown that high job turnover intention combined with low actual mobility resulted in diminished health with symptoms like headaches, mild depression and fatigue (Aronsson & Goransson, 1999). Liljegren and Ekbert (2009)) study has shown that high turnover intention was associated with higher degrees of burnout, and lowered wellbeing. However, they pointed out that the negative health outcomes were due to those two factors acting with combined strength on the individual, rather than due to the high turnover/low actual job mobility interaction (Liljegren & Ekbert, 2009).

Aim

The purpose of this study was to research the relationship between stress, coping and the effect it has on the well-being of Irish civil servants. The literature on relationship between stress, coping and well-being is robust, however, the literature relating those topics to the public/civil servants is much narrower and there is even less publications relating to Irish civil servants, thus this study tried to add new information to this field.

To achieve this, the study explored the relationship between measures of stress, coping (control, support, optimism and resilience) and well-being (burnout). Main hypothesis of this research stated that there will be a relationship between stress, coping and well-being of Irish civil servants. The hypotheses will be analysed through running of hierarchical multilinear regressions, one for each sub-scale of the burn-out (perceived here as a measure of well-being).

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant correlation between measures of coping (optimism, control, resilience, support) and well-being (burn-out measures). For emotional exhaustion and depersonalization this will be negative, and for personal achievement this will be positive.

2. There will be a significant negative correlation between measures of coping (support) and well-being (burn-out measures)

3. There will be a significant correlation between sources of stress (e.g. time pressures, workload, role ambiguity) and well-being (burn-out measures). For emotional exhaustion and depersonalization this will be positive and for personal achievement it will be negative.

These analyses are tested through three hierarchical multiple regressions, one for each sub-scale of burn-out.

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study were 134 civil servants who completed an online survey. From these, 17 persons did not provide answers to the main items of the survey, and thus were excluded from the overall sample. The remaining sample of 117 participants consisted of 63 females (53,8%) and 54 males (46.2) aged 23 to 63 (M=42.48, SD= 11.05). Convenience sampling method was used, as all civil servants were employed in the same department as the researcher – the Houses of the Oireachtas Service. In order to gain access to potential participants prior consent from HR department of the Oireachtas was obtained.

Participants were recruited through an email sent out to all staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas, including every section and grade employed in the department. The response rate was distributed evenly between members of each grade. Of the total: 25.9% responses came from the Clerical Officer grade, 18.1% came from the Junior Clerk grade, 29.3% came from the Senior Clerk grade, 17.2% came from Assistant Principle grade, 5.2% from Higher than Assistant Principle grades, and 4.3% chose "other". The civil servants were invited to participate in a voluntary, and fully anonymous survey. The answers were collected on the Survey Monkey server, supporting the anonymity claim.

There was no incentive or reward given for participating.

Design

This study employed quantitative, correlational and cross-sectional design. The predictor variables in the study were: age, grade, experience, optimism, control, resilience, family support, friends support, managerial, supervisory and colleagues support (all separate items), and from the stress measure: task variety, decision authority(control), time pressure,

role ambiguity. The criterion variables in the correlational part of the study were: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal achievement.

An online survey was chosen as a way of collecting the data as it allowed for reaching a broader audience

Materials

Materials used by the experimenter were a laptop, Excel document containing the relevant measures, Survey Monkey (online software), and work computer from which all communication with personnel and participants was made. For respondents, to take part in the survey an access to their work e-mail was required, to obtain the link re-directing them to the Survey Monkey website.

The final questionnaire consisted of 58 questions. It included a demographic questionnaire developed by the researcher, Values in Action (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), Sources of Stress – Control and Support measures (Gibbons, Dempster and Moutray, 2009), Brief Resilience Scale (Smith, B. W., Dalen et al., 2008), Maslach's Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986), and the Teacher Stress Inventory which was adapted for use within civil service.

Demographic questions

Demographic data was collected from the first part of the survey including gender, age, present civil service grade, and at what grade had they entered the service, as well as the length of service.

Values in Action (VIA) optimism scale (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

VIA is a 240-item long inventory of strengths scale. From there an 8-item optimism scale has been used. The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale, with responses coded from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Participants were requested to choose the most relevant answer. The higher the score, the higher the level of optimism. The examples of some items asked: "I always look on the bright side" or "I expect the worst". The last three questions were scored in reverse. The Cronbach's Alfa reliability is .7, with test-retest correlations at .7 (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Sources of Stress – Control (Gibbons et al., 2009).

A 3-item control measure was used to evaluate the level of perceived control one has in his / her life. The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale with responses coded from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Participants were requested to choose most relevant answer. The higher the score, the higher the level of perceived control. The example of the questions asked include, "In general I feel in control of the things that happen to me". The reliability of the control scale was established by Gibbons et al. (2009a, 2009b) at .7 and the scale was judged to have face validity.

Sources of Stress – Support (Gibbons et al., 2010)

An adapted 2-item scale measuring the value of support received from family or friends. On a scale from 0 – no value to 10 – very high value, participants chose the answer that best responded with how much they valued the support received from their families or friends. The reliability of the support scale was established by Gibbons et al. (2009a, 2009b) at .7 and the scale was judged to have face validity.

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith, Dalen, Wiggins et al., 2008)

The Brief Resilience Scale is a 6-item scale designed to measure ability to recover (bounce back) from stress. It is negatively correlated with perceived stress, anxiety, depression, negative affect, and physical symptoms. Participants chose the most relevant answers on a scale from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5- Strongly Agree. The BRS is scored by reverse coding items 2, 4, and 6 (items negatively worded) and finding the mean of the six items. The Cronbach alfa is ranging from 0.8 to 0.9.

Maslach's Burnout Inventory (Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Leiter, M. P. 1996)

A 22-item scale measuring components of burn-out on three subscales: Personal Achievement (questions 4,7,9,12,17,18,19,21), Emotional Exhaustion (questions 1,2,3,6,8,13,14,16,20) and Depersonalization (Questions 5,10,11,15,22). It is still the only measure that assesses all three of the core dimensions of burn-out. The answers were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 7 = "every day". The items were summed in each scale separately to provide a score. A higher score equates with higher feelings associated with the relevant domain.

The alpha reliabilities with this sample were assessed as adequate and showed emotional exhaustion .934, depersonalisation .741, and personal accomplishment .775.

Value "1" was used as a value for "never" instead of "0", a +9 value will be added to balance out for discrepancy between researcher's result and the standardized scoring.

Standardised scoring:

	Personal Achievement	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization
High	0 - 31	27 and over	13 and over
Moderate	32 - 38	17-26	7 - 12
Low	39 and over	0-16	0 - 6

Researchers amended scoring:

	Personal Achievement	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization
High	9 - 40	36 and over	22 and over
Moderate	41 - 47	26 - 35	16 - 21
Low	48 and over	9 - 25	9 - 15

Teacher Stress Inventory (Maes & van der Doef, 1997)

A 76-item scale divided into 16 subscales. The Teacher Stress Inventory is a teacher-specific version of the Leiden Quality of Work Questionnaire (Maes & van der Doef, 1997). Participants were requested to choose most relevant answer from a 5-point Likert scale from 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree. From these, 12 items [10 subscales] was chosen and adapted to correspond with the civil service environment. The subscales used included: job satisfaction and time pressure (2 questions each); turnover intentions, task variety, decision authority(control), role ambiguity, career perspective, social support – management, supervisor and colleagues (1 question each). For example, in the subscale "job satisfaction",

the statement "I enjoy my work as a teacher" was amended to "I enjoy my work"; in subscale "time pressure" the statement "I have limited time to prepare my courses" was amended to "I have limited time to prepare my work tasks".

It is worth mentioning that the decision authority item used, stands in the direct opposition to the control measure mentioned earlier. In sources of stress the decision authority item states: " I have limited influence on the final attainment level" suggesting lack of it being a possible source of stress.

The reliability coefficients of the LAKS-DOC have been reported to be satisfactory with Cronbach's alpha of the subscales between .69 and .87 (Maes & van der Doef, 1997).

Procedure

The Personnel Officer in HR department of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service has been contacted to obtain the permission for conducting the research and emailing the survey to the employees. A preliminary email granting access to staff has been provided by the Personnel Officer in the Oireachtas. Full permission was given after the final version of survey questionnaire was created and submitted for examination.

Once all the requirements were satisfactorily fulfilled an email was sent to all employees of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service, asking for their participation in the research. The initial brief, included in the email, explained the purpose of the survey, highlighting the anonymity component, and its independence from the Oireachtas surveying initiative. A link to the Survey Monkey website was provided. Once the participant clicked on the link he/she was redirected to the first page on the survey. There, full version of the brief note informed the participant about the purpose of the study, as well as reminded them that partaking was fully voluntary and anonymous. In addition to this, participants were

informed that the general finding of the survey will be made available to the HR department of the Oireachtas. Lastly, participants were made aware that completing and submitting the survey will be taken as their consent for participation in the study. The last page of the questionnaire was providing contact details to the support services in case of any difficult issues that surfaced during the completion of the survey.

After almost two weeks of the survey being made available online, the results were collected and downloaded to an Excel file and then transferred to SPSS for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study was given approval by the Department of Psychology, the Department of Psychology Research Filter Committee and the DBS Research Ethics Committee. Additionally, the research obtained sanction from the HR department of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service. The participants were informed that the research has obtained HR sanctions, however, it is not a part of the Oireachtas surveying initiative. This was essential to assure participants of the anonymity of the survey, and lack of possible consequences. Equally, it was deemed necessary for the participants to know that this research might not have any impact on HR policies and should not be considered as a way of communicating personal dissatisfactions to the HR department. Respondents were informed that by submitting the answers they consent to participation in the study. A personal, password protected computer was used to store the data collected. For participants who might have experienced any negative feelings after filling out the survey, the contact details for support help-lines were provided, including the contact details for Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS), which provides help and guidance to civil servants.

RESULTS

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out to determine the results of the study using SPSS version 24. Both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were carried in accordance with the hypotheses. Descriptive statistics were run to determine the means and standard deviations of the variables. See table 1, 2 and 3 for the descriptive statistics for variables (coping and stress measures) and the outcome measures.

A Pearson's Correlation was carried out to determine significance between the predictor variables and the criterion variables: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal achievement (table 4).

Hierarchical multiple regression was then carried out between significantly correlated variables (tables 5, 6 and 8). Variables that revealed to be significantly correlated with outcome measures were divided between three blocks. The variables relating to sources of stress, were put in block 1. Variables relating to support were put in block 2, and other coping and predictor measures in block 3. The variables with the lowest Beta values were then removed, and the regression analysis repeated until the most parsimonious model was obtained – where the Adjusted R squared came close to the R squared with the greatest amount of variance explained.

Separate regressions were run to check for the mediators following the guidelines proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) with one proving to be significant (Figure 1, Table 4).

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics of predictor measures illustrating means, SD, minimum and maximum answers possible*

Predictor	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard. Deviation
Optimism	14.00	40.00	26.4348	4.35110
Control	3.00	15.00	8.2931	1.93825
Resilience	7.00	30.00	17.4188	3.90676
Family Support	1	10	8.27	2.250
Friends Support	1	10	7.45	2.224
Managerial Support	1.00	4.00	2.7232	.93201
Supervisor Support	1.00	4.00	2.8584	.92454
Colleagues Support	1.00	4.00	3.2920	.71566

The mean of the answers for optimism, control and resilience seems to fall almost evenly between the minimum and maximum scores possible, however the mean for support subscales falls closer towards the high end of the scale.

Table 2 *Descriptive statistics of sources of stress*

Sources of stress variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Task Variety	1.00	4.00	2.5929	.79773
Decision Authority	1.00	4.00	2.4956	.96477
Time Pressure	2.00	8.00	5.1327	1.52072
Role Ambiguity	1.00	4.00	2.0885	.84047

The mean of the responses for sources of stress fell almost evenly in the middle between minimum and maximum scores.

Table 3 *Descriptive statistics of outcome measures (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal achievement)*

Outcome measure	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Exhaustion	9.00	62.00	29.7383	12.6444
Depersonalization	5.00	28.00	10.5315	5.61300
Personal Achievement	9.00	56.00	38.0755	8.67036

The mean results for three sub-scales of burn-out show the scores for: emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as moderate in strength, and mean score for personal achievement in the high end of the scale.

Inferential Statistics

  To test the hypothesis of this study preliminary analysis was required. The Pearson's Correlation test allowed for finding variables with significant relationship to outcome measures, which can be seen in Table 4.

  <u>Pearson's Correlation</u>

  The results of the correlations for three outcome measures (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal achievement) were collected in table 5, below, to show all the results in more concise manner. Significant results and those that qualified to be considered a trend, were then used in a hierarchical multilinear regression for all three outcome measures separately.

Table 4. *A Person's Correlation showing the correlations and sig. value between Predictors and Outcome Measures*

Predictor	Burn out					
	Emotional Exhaustion	Sig. (2-tailed)	Depersonalization	Sig. (2-tailed)	Personal Achievement	Sig. (2-tailed)
Age	-.055	.574	-.080	.403	.136	.165
Grade	.010	.916	-.112	.246	.167	.088
Experience (time)	-.116	.236	-.060	.529	.192*	.049
Family Support	-.101	.303	-.072	.453	.171	.079
Friends Support	-.124	.204	-.089	.354	.183	.062
Optimism	-.398**	.000	-.207*	.031	.445**	.000
Control	-.524**	.000	-.272**	.004	.369**	.000
Resilience	-.467**	.000	-.241*	.011	.376**	.000
Task Variety	-.187	.057	-.201*	.038	.321**	.001
Decision Authority	-.318**	.001	-.188	.052	.296**	.003
Time Pressure	.389**	.000	.230*	.017	-.090	.367
Role Ambiguity	.388**	.000	.290**	.002	-.132	.185
Promotion	-.256**	.009	-.206*	.035	.090	.372
Managerial Support	-.443**	.000	-.407**	.000	.359**	.000
Supervisor Support	-.305**	.002	-.277**	.004	.185	.063
Colleagues Support	-.268**	.006	-.234**	.015	.124	.214

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailer)

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Hierarchical Multilinear Regression

In order to evaluate the main hypotheses, the hierarchical multilinear regression was carried out, using the variables that were shown to have significant (or almost significant) correlation with outcome measures (table 5 to 8). The assumptions for all the regression analyses were checked. The criterion variable was always continuous. Tolerance values did not exceed .2, indicating that there was no multi-collinearity. The Mahalanobis' distance values indicated there were no substantial outliers.

Table 5 *Regression model for Emotional Exhaustion*

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	62.677	8.149		7.691	.000
Decision Authority	-1.153	1.098	-.089	-1.050	.296
Time Pressure	1.860	.660	.229	817	.006
Promotion	-.559	1.140	-.043	-.490	.625
Managerial Support	-3.401	1.082	-.255	3.144	.002
Optimism	-.224	.287	-.081	.779	.438
Control	-1.165	.595	-.188	1.957	.053
Resilience	-.778	.318	-.254	2.450	.016

a. Dependent Variable: Emotional Exhaustion

R squared =.488, Adjusted r squared = .449

The model explained 44.9% of the variance in the emotional exhaustion. The largest variance in emotional exhaustion scores was explained by managerial support and resilience– as this type of coping increased, emotional exhaustion diminished. Time pressure was found

to be positively corelated with emotional exhaustion – the stronger this variable the higher the scores in emotional exhaustion.

Table 6 *Regression model for Depersonalization*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
3	(Constant)	62.677	8.149		7.691	.000
	Decision Authority	-1.153	1.098	-.089	-1.050	.296
	Time Pressure	1.860	.660	.229	2.817	.006
	Promotion	-.559	1.140	-.043	-.490	.625
	Managerial Support	-3.401	1.082	-.255	-3.144	.002
	Optimism	-.224	.287	-.081	-.779	.438
	Control	-1.165	.595	-.188	-1.957	.053
	Resilience	-.778	.318	-.254	-2.450	.016

R squared = .237, Adjusted R Squared = .190

The model explained 19 % of the variance in the depersonalization results. The largest predictors of the depersonalizations were lack of managerial support and lack of task variety – as they strongly correlated negatively with the depersonalization. The stronger the managerial support the less likely for depersonalization to occur. Similarly, the bigger task variety the less likely it is for depersonalization to happen. The strongest positive correlation was found with time pressure. Model was tested removing the smallest beta values (VIA and resilience) and was found more parsimonious with them being included in the model.

It was noticed that time pressure was significant in block one but not in block two of the regression. There was only one significant variable introduced into block two, and that was managerial support, which was then tested as possible mediator. Figure 1 illustrates the mediating effect of managerial support between time pressure and depersonalization.

The unmediated value visible in Table 7 suggests that time pressure is a good predictor of depersonalization, however, when looking at the mediating path, it becomes clear that once a managerial support factor is present, time pressure stops being a significant predictor of depersonalization.
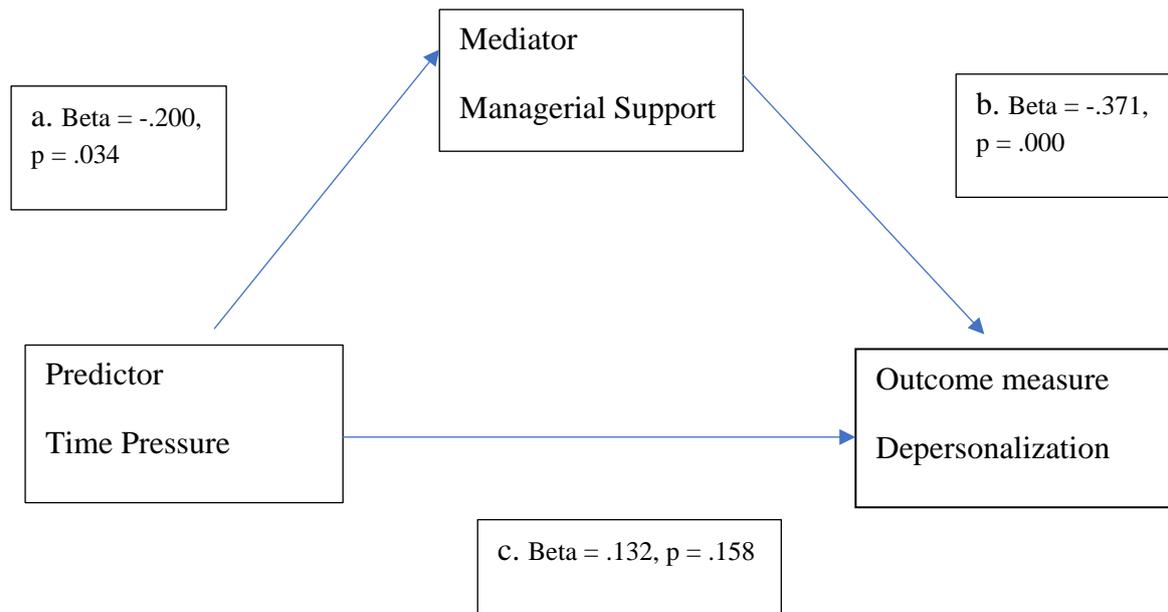

Figure 1. Managerial Support Mediator

Table 7 *Unmediated and mediated values between time pressure and depersonalization (with managerial support mediator)*

	Beta value	*P* value
Unmediated path	.232	.017
Mediated path	.132	.158

Table 8 Regression model for Personal Achievement

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
3	(Constant)	3.829	5.469		.700	.486
	Task Variety	1.234	1.011	.115	1.220	.226
	Decision Authority	.882	.811	.101	1.089	.279
	Managerial Support	2.599	1.030	.278	2.524	.013
	Supervisor Support	-1.151	1.012	-.123	-1.137	.259
	Family Support	.328	.352	.084	.932	.354
	Grade	.724	.496	.130	1.461	.148
	Optimism	.540	.193	.279	2.800	.006
	Control	.726	.459	.163	1.580	.118

a. Dependent Variable: Personal Achievement
R squared = .357 Adjusted R Squared = .299

The model explained 29.9 % of the variance in Personal Achievement. Optimism and managerial support were found to be the strongest positive predictors of the score variance. The higher the optimism and managerial support the stronger the personal achievement. The strongest negative predictor was the supervisors support, suggesting the stronger supervisory support the lower the personal achievement.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between stress, coping and well-being, focusing on the example of civil servants working within the Houses of the Oireachtas Service. This was achieved by creating predictors from selected (and amended) items of the Teacher Stress Inventory – chosen for their relevance to the civil service, and from measures on optimism, support, control and resilience – as these are most often mentioned as the integral parts of coping. Well-being has been analysed through Maslach's Burnout Inventory as it allows for a good understanding of a persons' mental condition. This is the first study to research the relationship between stress, coping and well-being among Irish civil servants of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service.

Person's Correlation was carried out first (Table 4), to check for significant correlation between predictors and outcome measures. From 16 predictors, optimism, control, resilience and managerial support came up as significant in all the outcome variables (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal achievement). They were negatively correlated with Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization and positively correlated with Personal Achievement, supporting the first hypothesis that there will be a significant correlation between coping measures and well-being.

The second hypothesis was only partially proven, as the support measures proved to be a significant negative predictor only for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Managerial support was the only predictor that proved to be significant for all three criterion variables. It was negatively correlated for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and positively correlated for personal achievement. Interestingly, family and friends support were not significant, however, the value was small enough to be classified as a trend and included in the regression model for personal achievement. During the process of reassessing the

regression model, analysis showed that the model was more parsimonious without the friends support predictor, and this variable was removed.

The third hypothesis stated that there will be a significant correlation between sources of stress and well-being, and this hypothesis was supported.

Emotional Exhaustion

Three predictors have been found to show strong negative correlation with emotional exhaustion: managerial support, resilience and control. Time pressure was found to be the strongest positive predictor of emotional exhaustion. The model has been checked for mediating effects, however, none were found among used variables.

As shown in Table 5, as managerial support increased, the emotional exhaustion decreased. Similarly, as resilience or control increased, the emotional exhaustion decreased. It is likely that managerial support means higher trust in employee's skills, and thus leaving them more freedom to make their own decisions, increasing their perceived feeling of being in control. Resilience according to Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) suggests a highly adaptable individual, characterised by optimistic and energetic attitude towards life. An individual with those characteristics will be more likely to find solutions to the time pressure or lack of managerial support.

Depersonalization

The relatively small amount of the variance explained in depersonalization (Table 6) suggests that either the instrument was not as sensitive at detecting those factors that were the main contributors to the levels of depersonalization (Gibbons, 2010) or that the civil servants in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service are not likely to progress from emotional exhaustion to the depersonalization. This can be due to the nature of their work. Depersonalization is characterized as the practice of putting emotional distance between oneself and its

customers/other people at work, due to extreme emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001). However, in general, the work-tasks of civil servants in the Oireachtas do not put them in extreme and prolonged contact or service with customers (understood as any person that might require employees help). Additionally, the work tasks that are customer-oriented are not as stressful as those of public servants (e.g. police, nurses etc), making it more difficult or slower for depersonalization to occur.

The strongest predictor of depersonalization is lack of managerial support, and lack of task variety. The stronger the managerial support the weaker the depersonalization. Time pressure was shown to have a positive correlation with depersonalization. However, the model was tested for mediators, and managerial support was found to have mediating effect between time pressure and depersonalization (Figure 1, Table 7). This can mean that time pressure is not being perceived as a stressful factor, since time constraints are acknowledged by the manager.

Personal Achievement

This model is the only one where optimism achieved a significant score. Together with managerial support they were positive predictors of personal achievement. As Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) pointed out - optimism broadens the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires. In a work environment it can mean being more proactive about your work-tasks, being open to new challenges, finding a creative solution, and providing an individual with the feeling of personal achievement. Managerial support in this situation can mean the acknowledgement and approval of this behaviour, strengthening the tendency.

Interestingly, supervisory support is a negative predictor for personal achievement. It can relate to the way the support is being provided by the supervisor. If the support means lack of stressful challenges, the space for achievement is this much smaller. Alternatively, the

support can mean that one does not perceive their work as his/her own achievement only as a part of a well-functioning team.

Surprisingly, variables such as age or grade (position at work) did not prove to be significant in relation to any of the outcome measures. Most of the literature does not point in this direction either – only some, point to burnout among high performing managers, however considering the stressful environment and role profile of assistant principals who comprised over 17% of the respondents, one could have expected age or grade to play important role at least in one of the three measures.

Limitations

There were limitations encountered while conducting this study. Firstly, the data was collected from an online self-report questionnaire, which raised the possibility of a response set tendencies. As the questionnaire had 59 items, and some items were reverse worded it could be easy to click an answer without reflection.

The second limitation was that the questionnaire was distributed throughout the work-place email, mentioning the supervision of the HR Department throughout the whole process. The introductory email and later the cover sheet for the survey highlighted that although HR has given sanction for the survey it is not an HR initiative and the survey is fully anonymous. The risk of given conformist answers cannot be excluded.

After the survey was conducted, the researcher was receiving feedback from some responders stating that they were not clear whether some of the questions relates to their work life only or the overall life experience. As this can mean that the answers were misunderstood by some, this is considered a limitation to the study.

Due to size constraints of the survey, sources of stress subscales consisted of only 1 item (with the exception of job satisfaction and time pressure subscales), which can be

considered a limitation, weakening the validity of those scores. Different scoring of the Maslach Burnout Inventory can create difficulty with comparing obtained results with future research, even though a comparison tables were included.

Another limitation was the lack of differentiation between full-time and fixed contract workers, which otherwise, could add another level of analysis. Seeing as age, grade and promotion variables did not achieve a significant score for outcome measure, lack of this differentiation can be perceived as a study's limitation, in the sense that any omitted information can be considered a limitation.

Strengths

The researcher who conducted the study is a member of the civil service and is employed by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service, which allowed for full distribution of the survey, and 24% response rate (117 valid responses from 485 employees of the Service). (However, this may not be considered a representative sample in relation to the total of Irish civil service, which includes 35000 civil servants).

The study was released in February, which in Oireachtas is considered to be a typical working month, where the Christmas cheer already passed, and the normal working environment is fully experienced, giving strength to the validity and reliability of the answers.

Within the sample of 117 responses, all grades have been represented almost equally, the only exception is the number of responders above the Assistant Principal level, but this is easily understood as the number of the people in that grade is much smaller.

Future research

Any future research can be beneficial, as there is very little literature regarding mental well-being of civil servants in Ireland, as opposed to public servants. A comparative study

between public and civil servants, or civil-servants and private sector employees could shine more light on differences and similarities of sources of stress, coping strategies and its connection to mental well-being of those groups. It would be important to include the classification between a full time and fixed contract employee, as well as the weekly number of hours worked – to check for the relationship between exposure and stress, coping and well-being.

Conclusion

In this study the relationship between stress, coping and well-being of Irish civil servants employed by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service was studied. It was found that the managerial support was the strongest predictor of personal well-being through (almost) all three criterions. The variable was negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, showing that when the managerial support grows the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization decreases. Moreover, this study found that the managerial support has a mediating effect between time pressure variable and depersonalization. Interestingly, supervisory support was not found to be a strong predictor for any of the criterion variable, and contrary to what could be expected, it was shown to correlate negatively with personal achievement. Similarly, the main coping measures, that are: optimism, resilience and control, although strong enough to be included into each of the models, were not the strongest correlation, almost always giving the first place to managerial support. This can suggest that the perceived distance between managerial decisions and the employee's reality is not big. Consequently, this can suggest that for the average civil servants of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service decisions made on the managerial level, affect them directly enough to be a source of added support or stress, to the level of bringing about or preventing employee's burnout.

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APPENDIX

Participants information sheet

Coversheet for Anonymous Survey

Stress, coping and well-being in Irish Civil Service

My name is Adelina Bulak and I am conducting research in the Department of Psychology, Dublin Business School that explores stress, coping and well-being in Irish Civil Service of the Houses of the Oireachtas. This research is being conducted as part of my studies and will be submitted for examination. Please note that this survey is not affiliated to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves completing and submitting the attached anonymous survey. While the survey asks some questions that might cause some minor negative feelings, it has been used widely in research. If any of the questions do raise difficult feelings for you, contact information for support services are included on the final page.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part.

Please be advised that the summary of the findings will be made available to the management of the Service, however, **participation is anonymous and confidential**. Thus responses cannot be attributed to any one participant. For this reason, it will not be possible to withdraw from participation after the questionnaire has been submitted.

The anonymous, online questionnaires will be securely stored on a password protected computer.

It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the questionnaire you are consenting to participate in the study.

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact Adelina Bulak, 10353212@mydbs.ie. My supervisor, Chris Gibbons can be contacted at ▮▮▮▮▮▮

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

The Survey

Demographic questions

1. What age are you?

2. What sex are you?   Male   Female

3. What grade are you?   Clerical officer   Junior Clerk   Senior Clerk

                                  Assistant Principal   Higher than Assistant Principal
                                      Service Attendant   Usher   Other

4. What grade level were you when you joined the civil service?

Clericla Officer   Junior Clerk   Senior Clerk   Assistant Principal

Higher than Assistant Principal   Service Attendant   Usher   Other

5. How long have you been in the civil service?

Values In Action – optimism measure (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

I always look on the bright side				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I can find the positive in what seems negative to others				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I remain hopeful despite challenges				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I will succeed with the goals I set myself				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think about what is good in my life when I feel down				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I expect the worst *				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I have no plans for my life five years from now *				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am not confident that my way of doing things will work out for the best*				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Sources of Stress – Control (Gibbons et al., 2009)

I often feel I don't have enough control over the decisions I have to make.	1	2	3	4	5
In general, I feel in control of the things that happen to me.	1	2	3	4	5
The pace of work often leaves me with little feeling of control.	1	2	3	4	5

Brief Resilience Scale (Smith, Dalen, Wiggins et al., 2008)

I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have a hard time making it through stressful events	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I usually come through difficult times with little trouble	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Sources of Stress – Support (Gibbons et al., 2009)

I receive and value the support offered by my family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I receive and value support offered by my friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Teacher Stress Inventory – amended (Maes & van der Doef, 1997)

I often don't feel like going to work 4 - 1	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I enjoy my work	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
There is a fair chance that I will look for another job next year	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My profession is challenging to me.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have limited influence on the final attainment level R	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have limited time to prepare my work tasks	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My work is never finished.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
In this job it is not clear what is expected of me	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
As a civil servant one has limited prospects for career development and promotion	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I experience a lot of support from my management	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
When in contact with others (employees, management, Members) my direct supervisor looks after my interests.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I can ask my colleagues for help when I have problems at work.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

End Information Sheet

Thank you for your answers. Your response has been recorded.

If you feel that answering this survey has raised some issues for you, please consider contacting some of the support services listed below, or speak to a friend, family member or professional.

Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS):

The CSEAS provides an internal Employee Assistance Programme to Civil Service staff. The service is designed to assist employees manage/resolve work-related and personal difficulties which, if left unattended may adversely affect attendance, work performance and quality of life. (Click here for link to CSEAS website).

Aware:

The Aware Support Line 1890 303 302

Available Monday – Sunday, 10am to 10pm.

Email for support at: supportmail@aware.ie

Samaritans:

Call on: 116 123

Available 24hrs a day, 365 days a year. Free to call.

Email: jo@samaritans.org