



Chronic Work Stress and Health Promotion: A Narrative Review of Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands

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Abstract

Work-related stress manifests in diverse ways across national contexts. In Japan, a rigid work culture contributes to high levels of occupational stress and burnout, including *karoshi* (death by overwork); in South Africa, professionals face stressors linked to job insecurity, resource constraints, and workload imbalances; and in the Netherlands, despite progressive labor policies, sector-specific stressors remain prevalent. This review paper explores these variations in chronic workplace stress and examines the role of self-care and health promotion initiatives, while also identifying critical gaps in the current literature across Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands to suggest directions for future research. Employing a narrative approach that allows for a comprehensive overview of diverse perspectives without the constraints of predefined inclusion criteria, this review synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed literature and authoritative reports. The findings shed light on how occupational health policies, supportive workplace cultures and structures, health promotion, and targeted stress management strategies play a vital role in addressing work-related stress. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these measures varies substantially across national contexts, underscoring the need for tailored, context-specific approaches. This study concludes that although current interventions demonstrate varying levels of effectiveness, they also reveal significant gaps that highlight the need for more integrated, evidence-based, and context-sensitive strategies for managing chronic workplace stress.

Keywords: Occupational Health, Human Capital, Stress and Burnout, Employee Well-being, Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

Workplace health, defined by complete physical, mental, and social well-being, is essential for fostering human capital development, as it directly influences employee performance, engagement, and positive organizational outcomes through key indicators such as mental well-being, physical well-being, emotional resilience, environmental factors, social support, and work-life balance (Chen et al., 2025; Lee, 2019; Lu et al., 2022).

Karoshi refers to a phenomenon deeply linked to chronic fatigue resulting from prolonged exposure to high-stress work environments—essentially, work overload. The term, which translates literally to "death by overwork" (Ishikawa, 2022), which is a reasonably well-known term in East Asia (Eguchi et al., 2016), is connected to a range of issues, including work-related stress, burnout, and both physical and psychological symptoms. While this issue is most commonly discussed in the context of Japan (Ogura, 2009; Kanai, 2009; Kawanishi, 2008; North & Morioka, 2016; Yukawa et al., 2024), chronic fatigue and unbearable work stress affect people worldwide.

On the one hand, stress can arise in response to challenges or pressures, and in some cases, it may enable individuals exposed to it to strengthen their resilience (Bhatnagar, 2021; Crane et al., 2019; Kalisch et al., 2015) and sometimes push themselves to higher levels of performance (Dou et al., 2022). On the other hand, growing research highlights the negative effects of stress, including



physical health issues like cardiovascular problems (Matthews & Gump, 2002; Vaccarino & Bremner, 2024; Vancheri et al., 2022) and digestive complications (Ballou & Feingold, 2022; Eldin et al., 2021), as well as mental health struggles that often go unnoticed but can significantly impact individuals and their families. Additionally, while a continually growing body of literature explores the relationship between occupational stress and turnover intentions across various sectors, such as the hotel industry (Huang et al., 2018; Hwang et al., 2014), the mining sector (Smith et al., 2025; Tetteh et al., 2020), police officers (Edwards et al., 2021; Gavin & Porter, 2024), and nursing personnel (Saifan et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021), other studies also show an alarming increase in emotional exhaustion and work-related stress among faculty staff (Renfrow, 2020).

The World Health Organization (2019) classified burnout as an ‘occupational phenomenon’ due to high levels of workplace burnout because of stress and the lack of coping mechanisms employed. According to Schoeman (2024), South African working professionals are experiencing excessive levels of workplace stress, whereby 36% of the workforce identified such and more than 71% of working professionals have identified as being disengaged at work. The *Mental State of the World Report* (2024) recognized South Africa as one of the leading countries of mental health challenges, with one of the highest percentages of stressed working professionals. Based on a meta-analysis of current literature, a deficit exists pertaining to mental health strategies employed by South African businesses, as existing literature primarily focuses on the effects of workplace stress on employees (Bowen et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2024; Magwegwe & Sithole, 2024; de Wit et al., 2024).

Karoshi, or the path leading to it, is not a method akin to extreme physical challenges like the Wim Hof method, designed to push the human body to extreme limits in pursuit of Guinness World Records (Dragičević, 2022; Ketelhut et al., 2023). Nor is it a topic that is avoided in organizational discussions, occupational health and safety policies, business meetings, or academic forums. Therefore, the question that continues to challenge researchers, occupational psychology experts, and industry professionals is why some countries struggle to reduce chronic work stress, burnout, and related complications while others make significant progress in addressing these issues? Furthermore, beyond the implementation of laws, policies, and the setting of occupational health standards (Yukawa et al., 2024), how does self-care equip individuals to take proactive responsibility and avoid falling into cycles of chronic stress, fatigue, and exhaustion? Additionally, while self-management education is an effective approach for people with chronic conditions—such as arthritis, cancer, and diabetes (Damgaard et al., 2023; Funnell et al., 2020; Kantilal et al., 2022)—can self-care or other forms of occupational health education in the workplace yield positive outcomes as a preventative strategy to protect people against chronic stress, fatigue, burnout, and exhaustion?

We acknowledge that a comprehensive review of the evidence linking chronic job stress and health and well-being outcomes cannot be based solely on studies from one country, as other researchers have also pointed out (Kawakami & Haratani, 1999). Hence, this paper aims to explore the understanding of chronic job stress through a narrative review of the literature, with a focus on Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands, countries across three different continents. Unlike systematic reviews, which typically address a focused research question using predefined methods to synthesize comparable studies, narrative reviews allow for broader exploration, drawing from diverse sources, and can be guided by overarching research questions (Sukhera, 2022). This study is guided by the following exploratory research questions:

1. How do chronic workplace stress and work-related burnout manifest in Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands, and what are the key factors influencing their prevalence in each country?
2. To what extent can self-care and health promotion initiatives mitigate the effects of occupational stress and burnout in Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands?

It is well-established that work-related stress is a contributing factor to suicides among some middle-aged workers in Japan (Targum & Kitanaka, 2012). Overwork crisis and long working hours have been among the major causes of stress and burnout among workers in various sectors in Japan (Matsushita & Yamamura, 2022). Japan's aging workforce and growing elderly population further complicate the situation, exacerbating mental health challenges among workers (Eguchi & Wada, 2018). The Netherlands is also experiencing a continuous rise in burnout cases, and workplace stress remains a significant issue in the region, despite its progressive work-life balance policies and labor laws in place (Houtman et al., 2021). Although the Dutch promote flexible working hours and employee well-being, stress-related challenges persist, highlighting the need for stronger organizational support systems to sustain efficiency and enhance mental health. While several studies exist that place emphasis on mental health, South African construction professionals have recognized that high levels of workplace stress result from factors such as, but not limited to, job demand, job authorization, and support in the workplace (Nwaogu et al., 2019). Moreover, Khan et al. (2024) and de Witt et al. (2024) identified that South African doctors and occupational therapists were experiencing workplace stress due to their high workload, ineffective health system, and low job satisfaction. Such work-related impediments have resulted in employee fatigue, strained personal and professional relationships, and increased employee irritability across the South African workforce (Bowen et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2024).

Although existing literature indicates that both developing and developed economies experience workplace stress and work-related burnout (Bowen et al., 2021; Golzad et al., 2023; Nwaogu, 2019; Thobane et al., 2024), gaining insight into workplace stress contributors and the related coping mechanisms has the potential to enhance the well-being of working professionals, resulting in enhanced business performance due to a favorable workforce (Zhang et al., 2020). This is particularly important for addressing existing gaps and deepening our understanding through comparative studies and comprehensive literature reviews, allowing for the identification of common patterns, shared challenges and effective strategies that can inform evidence-based interventions across different national contexts.

Drawing primarily from peer-reviewed sources and authoritative government and industry reports from 2000 onward, this paper explores relevant theoretical perspectives and provides an overview of chronic workplace stress across these countries. This study examines the interplay between occupational health and safety standards, corporate culture, organizational behavior dynamics, workforce development strategies, societal influences, and national traditions.

The aim of this paper is to enhance our understanding of how chronic work pressure and stress impact employee health and well-being in the context of Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands. The study also examines how organizations and governments in these countries have implemented self-care and health promotion initiatives to successfully mitigate the impacts of chronic work stress and achieve better outcomes. Moreover, by pinpointing discrepancies in how workplace stress is experienced and addressed across these regions, this review seeks to critically evaluate current practices and suggest directions for future research to develop integrated, context-specific strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Building upon and integrating existing knowledge serves as the cornerstone of academic research across all disciplines (Snyder, 2019). This section presents a comprehensive review of the literature, complemented by relevant theoretical foundations. The discussion begins by examining chronic work stress in the contexts of Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands. Subsequently, the review delves into self-care and health promotion, following the same geographical sequence. Theoretical perspectives pertinent to the objectives of this paper are presented following the

review of the literature to provide a cohesive and insightful exploration.

The World Health Organization defines workplace stress as “the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope” (World Health Organization, as cited in [Maulik, 2017, p. 441](#)). There are also other closely aligned concepts, such as chronic psychosocial stress at work, which is also theoretically associated with demand-control and effort-reward imbalance ([Siegrist, 2008](#)), [Karasek et al's \(1981\)](#) job strain model, and job burnout, which is defined as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” ([Maslach, 2003, p.189](#)).

Chronic Work Stress in the Context of Japan

A chronically stressful work experience refers to a persistent mismatch between high costs in terms of effort and demands and the low rewards or gains received in occupational life ([Siegrist et al., 1997](#)). Fatigue refers to a state in which individuals have a reduced capacity to perform tasks at their usual level due to mental and/or physical weariness or exhaustion ([Kida & Takemura, 2022](#)). The Japanese are often described as having a strong dedication to work, resembling a “worker bee” mentality ([Hiyama & Yoshihara, 2008](#)). Looking at historical trends, nationwide surveys conducted by the Japanese government every five years from the 1980s revealed that more than half of employees reported job-related distress, defined as “strong worry, anxiety, or stress at work or in daily working life,” with the proportion consistently rising from 51% in 1982 to 57% in 1992 and reaching 63% in the 1997 survey ([Kawakami & Haratani, 1999](#)).

[Saijo et al. \(2018\)](#) surveyed physicians in 1,898 town or village hospitals and clinics across five cities in Japan, with 509 respondents. The authors found that 21.8% of respondents experienced burnout, with high job demand significantly increasing the risk (OR = 1.48). Conversely, high job control (OR = 0.66) and strong co-worker support (OR = 0.88) were protective effects. Additionally, 10.4% of respondents intended to resign, with dissatisfaction with income (OR = 3.63) and being from another town in the same prefecture (OR = 3.53) as key factors. What contributes to experiencing burnout and work stress are varied and can be examined from different lenses. For example, while some researchers have examined the effects of rewarded vs. unrewarded and voluntary vs. involuntary overtime on worker well-being ([Beckers et al., 2008](#)), a study of 59,021 Japanese employees across 117 companies found that longer overtime hours were significantly associated with increased irritability, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms in both men and women ([Kikuchi et al., 2020](#)).

[Enoki et al., \(2017\)](#) examined 538 call center employees (167 males, 371 females) to assess the link between work-related stress and autonomic nervous function via ECG. Male employees reported higher job demand, job control, and supervisor support than females. Lower coworker support was also correlated with QT index elevation, indicating its potential role in stress-related autonomic imbalance. No significant associations were found among female employees, suggesting that male employees were more physiologically affected by work stress. A longitudinal study of 471 Japanese employees with young children found that work overload increased work-to-self conflict, while supervisor support facilitated work-to-self balance. Work-to-self conflict was linked to higher psychological distress and lower happiness one year later ([Demerouti et al., 2013](#)). Work-self conflict refers to the extent to which demands from work interfere with personal interests, while work-self facilitation occurs when work involvement enhances engagement in personal activities ([Demerouti et al., 2016](#)). In addition to psychological distress and other physical consequences of work stress and burnout, lower happiness can lead to the intention to leave. In contrast, a study on 480 Japanese nurses showed that the intention to stay on the job was more strongly associated with satisfaction in “working conditions,” and that the organizational culture of each hospital played a

role in influencing the relationship between job satisfaction and the intention to stay on the job (Kudo et al., 2006).

Asgari et al. (2016) noted that while Japan values hard work and loyalty, excessive work can blur the line between productivity and overwork, leading to serious health issues, premature death, or suicide. The authors highlight the concern that the health impacts of heavy workload and burnout can be severe and not immediately apparent.

Workers may present no obvious symptoms or signs of heart or brain problems, but can be visibly present with depression or burnout syndrome, such as joint and neck stiffness, frequent headaches, weight changes, lack of concentration, insomnia, fatigue, or chronic depression (Asgari et al., 2016, p.50).

Self-Care and Health Promotion in the Context of Japan

Japan's super-aging society requires an integrated support system to help people live longer and independently in their communities (Hibino et al., 2023), with occupational health playing a key role in promoting overall well-being. According to Brandberg (2014), Japan's declining birth rate is expected to result in a loss of 38.5 million workers from the workforce between 2005 and 2055. Shinkawa (2012) further indicated that during the same period, the proportion of the population aged over 65 is projected to increase from 20.2% to 40.5%. The rapid aging of Japan's population and workforce should prompt policymakers, employers, and organizations to place greater emphasis on health promotion at both the individual and organizational levels, ensuring that the current workforce meets occupational health and well-being standards.

Recent research has explored similar concerns by examining the relationship between workplace health support and employee well-being. For example, Kurogi et al. (2021) conducted a cross-sectional survey of 27,036 Japanese workers and found that higher perceived workplace health support (PWHS) was associated with better health-related quality of life (HRQOL); the study suggested that interventions such as health promotion programs, working hour management, stress check programs, and workplace exercise initiatives may enhance PWHS. Kotera et al. (2022) also conducted a cross-sectional survey where 165 Japanese workers completed self-report scales and their study found that among Japanese workers, higher self-compassion was significantly linked to fewer mental health problems, with reduced amotivation partially mediating this relationship.

Over the past 2 decades in Japan, efforts to address the karoshi phenomenon began with exposing the absence of clear and fair criteria for determining work-related deaths. This became evident when, between 2009 and 2014, court rulings overturned 74 cases in which worker deaths had initially been ruled unrelated to karoshi. These reversals, which challenged the original conclusions of the labor standards inspection office, were primarily the result of legal action that required a reassessment of the circumstances surrounding each worker's death. The government's investigation into karoshi and other work-related issues was scheduled to begin in 2015, focusing initially on reviewing workers' compensation claims linked to cases of karoshi (Asgari et al., 2016).

Iavicoli et al. (2020) highlighted the role of the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology (EAOHP) in advancing occupational health psychology (OHP) by shaping research, education, policy, and practice. They noted that PRIMA-EF, a best-practice framework for psychosocial risk management promoted by the World Health Organization, has informed policy and practice in several countries, including Japan. This indicates that Japan has incorporated internationally recognized approaches to occupational health, aligning its efforts with global developments in psychosocial risk management.

[Legislative Council Secretariat \(2025\)](#) reported that recent measures under the Labor Contract Act and the Industrial Safety and Health Act require Japanese employers to prioritize employee mental health, including compliance with the Worker Mental Health Guideline, amended in 2019, which mandates a Health Committee to develop workplace mental health plans. Furthermore, employers are responsible for ensuring compliance with these mental health measures, including establishing the Health Committee and implementing education and training initiatives. Additionally, a 2015 amendment to the Industrial Safety and Health Act introduced mandatory annual stress checks for workplaces with at least 50 employees, encouraging smaller enterprises to adopt them voluntarily. Despite these improvements, especially in health promotion, prevention, education, and training, many Japanese companies have yet to adopt work-style reforms or comply with policy changes, as they remain unconvinced that such changes would enhance workplace mental health, as earlier studies have suggested ([Kotera et al., 2020](#)).

A study conducted by University of Tokyo researchers, [Kurosawa et al. \(2024\)](#), suggested that accessible, low-intensity self-care interventions focused on self-compassion, delivered via smartphone apps, may be a feasible approach to improving mental health and work performance among Japanese workers. Interestingly, if we consider [Kotera et al.'s \(2020\)](#) emphasis that Japan and the Netherlands represent 'two culturally contrasting countries: collectivistic and success-driven Japan, and individualistic and quality-oriented Netherlands' (Hofstede et al., 2010, as cited in [Kotera et al., 2020, p. 512](#)), research also suggests that in Japan, self-compassion traits are largely influenced by cultural factors ([Montero-Marin et al., 2018](#)). In collectivist cultures like Japan, self-compassion may be enhanced by the cultural emphasis on empathy and social harmony, as individuals are taught to care for both others and themselves. However, whether these cultural factors are effectively considered and leveraged in health promotion and self-care education for Japanese workers remains relatively unexplored in the literature.

Some researchers in Japan have demonstrated that health promotion strategies, such as the use of digital devices for health tracking and personalized feedback from pharmacists, can effectively drive behavioral change and improve community health outcomes ([Hibino et al., 2023](#)). This approach, which involved participants in self-managing their health data (e.g., blood pressure, body composition, activity levels) with support from community pharmacies, led to positive changes in lifestyle habits and subjective health status. This strategy could also be adopted in workplaces to raise awareness about the dangers of chronic work stress and burnout by allowing workers to track their health data and receive personalized feedback, ultimately improving well-being, job satisfaction, and work-life balance across various sectors.

Chronic Work Stress in the Context of South Africa

In South Africa, working professionals experience three types of work strain such as psychological, physiological, and sociological effects ([Bowen et al., 2021](#)). According to [Bowen et al. \(2021\)](#), these strain effects are experienced simultaneously by construction workers, where an employee may experience physiological effects such as continuous headaches and digestive and cardiovascular disorders; psychological impacts entailing enhanced irritability, depression, and anxiety; and sociological effects comprising decreased personal and workplace relationships. This was further acknowledged by [Zhang et al.'s \(2020\)](#) research study, which indicated that construction professionals were experiencing physiological effects such as failure to relax and disrupted sleeping patterns.

[De Witt et al. \(2024\)](#) also recognized that 71% of 261 occupational therapists in South Africa had an overwhelming workload that heightened their workplace stress. Such a workload relates to reviewing and developing reports, managing administration, conducting research, and attending meetings. Within the higher education domain, [Muthumuni and Mokoena \(2024\)](#) conducted a

qualitative study in which 15 academics were interviewed. The results revealed that there was insufficient time to complete the workload. Additionally, academics experienced high workloads with a lack of rewards or incentives, thus resulting in an unmotivated workforce. This was further recognized by [Ngirande \(2021\)](#), who identified that occupational stress negatively influences academic work commitment.

Importantly, it must be noted that workplace stress is experienced differently by different genders in South Africa. [Bowen et al. \(2020\)](#) reported that male professionals experience higher levels of fatigue and irritability than female professionals. On the contrary, females experience a lack of confidence due to the effects of workplace stressors. [Magwegwe and Sithole \(2024\)](#) further recognized that females were found to have higher levels of job insecurity due to their high workload, resulting in enhanced anxiety.

Self-Care and Health Promotion in the Context of South Africa

Interestingly, South African working professionals engage in a diverse range of coping mechanisms to reduce work-related stress. Such coping mechanisms are implemented primarily after working hours in order to enhance self-care at home. According to [Bowen et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Zhang et al. \(2020\)](#), construction working professionals are practicing coping mechanisms such as listening to music, physical exercise, shopping, and increased travel. However, such authors further identified a significant increase in caffeine intake. [Kocak and Bakker \(2022\)](#) argued that these coping mechanisms practiced after working hours are known as leisure activities that involve mental involvement when engaging with such. [Kocak and Bakker \(2022\)](#), who conducted a quantitative study comprising 65 employees, identified that playing video games after working hours can reduce work-related stress and replenish energy sources the following morning. Thus, the negative stigma associated with video gaming can be eliminated.

Moreover, as the South African literature suggests that workplace stress is experienced differently among genders, [Magwegwe and Sithole \(2024\)](#) argued that South African businesses should develop gender-specific coping mechanisms to encourage lower levels of workplace anxiety across both males and females. This was further acknowledged by [Zhang et al. \(2020\)](#) investigation, which concluded that workplace stress and the selection of the coping mechanisms were experienced differently across genders. Existing literature within a South African context presents a gap, as there is currently a lack of focus on how businesses are enhancing employee well-being during working hours ([Bowen et al., 2021](#); [Kocak & Bakker, 2022](#); [Magwewe & Sithole, 2024](#)). [Magwewe and Sithole \(2024\)](#) and [Muthumuni and Mokoena \(2024\)](#) recommended that businesses should employ coping mechanisms such as workplace training that focuses on digital technologies to improve employee work-related confidence and reduce workplace stress.

According to [Thobane et al. \(2024\)](#), to mitigate the gap in South African research, emphasis must be placed on the upliftment of employees' mental well-being, with a central focus on balancing the workload through task sharing. This was also identified by [Muthumuni and Mokoena \(2024\)](#), who suggested that there should be an increased delegation of the administrative duties in academic institutions. On the contrary, a recent study conducted by [Mtetwa et al. \(2025\)](#) argued that South African construction businesses should employ a strategy in which employees wear sensing technology to monitor work-related stress levels, which would address the lack of evidence required for health claims resulting from work-related stress.

Chronic Work Stress in the Context of the Netherlands

Workplace stress has gained traction among mental health researchers as a major concern for a myriad of lifestyle diseases. It has become a global concern and has begun to affect organizational efficiency. The Netherlands is a country known for its relatively strong work-life

balance policies and progressive labor laws; however, stress-related issues are still present across various sectors. From burnout to absenteeism, workplace stress has a way of manifesting in multiple ways that severely affect both individuals and organizations.

[Meynaar et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a survey among intensivists following the COVID-19 crisis to assess burnout rates within this group. Using an online survey with validated measures for burnout, work engagement, and resilience, the study found that 8% of respondents met the criteria for burnout, while 38.9% reported high engagement. The findings indicated a negative association between burnout, engagement, and resilience, suggesting that intensivists with higher levels of engagement and resilience were less likely to experience burnout. This may reflect the presence of stronger coping mechanisms, workplace support, and systemic factors that help Dutch intensivists manage stress more effectively.

Another study by [de Wijn et al. \(2022\)](#) examined stress-related outcomes and well-being among 701 Dutch emergency nurses across 19 hospitals. With a response rate of 74%, the study found that despite reporting job satisfaction and engagement, many nurses experienced high levels of stress and turnover intentions. The authors suggested that reducing workload and workplace aggression while promoting professional growth can enhance well-being and retention. Similarly, [Mutambudzi and Henkens \(2020\)](#) analyzed data from 6,793 Dutch workers to explore the link between chronic health conditions (CHCs) and work-related stress. Their findings indicated that conditions such as cardiovascular disease, arthritis, diabetes, respiratory disorders, and sleep disorders were associated with at least one stress domain. These results underscore the impact of CHCs on work stress, highlighting the need for targeted workplace and public health strategies to support older workers' health and well-being. Both studies highlighted the impact of workplace conditions on stress and well-being, with [de Wijn et al. \(2022\)](#) focusing on job-related factors like workload and aggression among emergency nurses, while [Mutambudzi and Henkens \(2020\)](#) examined the role of chronic health conditions in work-related stress among older employees.

In 2020, a survey conducted among employees reported that mental fatigue complaints due to work were most prevalent in pedagogical occupations like teachers and educators or those employed in creative fields. Overall, 16% of all employees experienced burnout symptoms. High workload and low autonomy were key factors, whereas employees with high workload but autonomy reported lower fatigue (23%). Managers reported lowered fatigue despite higher workloads due to greater control. Full autonomy in the workplace can guarantee better management of work-related mental fatigue ([The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021](#)).

Among Dutch millennial consultants in high-performance organizations, [Bouwmeester et al. \(2021\)](#) explored work-life balance experiences and the policies supporting it. Through interviews with 24 consultants working in both high-performance strategy firms and general management consulting firms, the study found that consultants in high-performance strategy firms experienced higher workplace stress, which was mitigated through weekly monitoring of work-life balance, task outsourcing, and various compensation methods. However, the effective structure of policies to balance stress levels without negatively impacting performance remains uncertain. Both studies by [de Wijn et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Bouwmeester et al. \(2021\)](#) highlighted the role of workplace factors, with the former focusing on stress and turnover among emergency nurses and the latter examining stress management policies in high-performance organizations.

A study by [LaMontagne et al., 2014](#)) explored workplace mental health through the perspectives of protection, promotion, and management. The research highlights that mental health issues are prevalent and costly, affecting up to 20% of workers in OECD countries, with depression and anxiety being the most common. Job stressors like low control and high demands are linked to 13-17% of work-related depressive episodes. The study calls for policy changes and employer

initiatives to create healthier workplaces and reduce mental health-related absenteeism and lost productivity

What seems to be a major concern in the Netherlands is career insecurity, particularly among young workers reliant on vocational and higher education for their career paths. Job insecurity is notably higher in flexible career roles, which, according to [Wielers et al. \(2022\)](#), is a significant factor contributing to burnout complaints. Young workers in career jobs experience greater insecurity about their job stability, leading to higher burnout complaints than those in student jobs. The study highlights the negative impact of insecure career prospects on mental well-being and underscores the need to address this issue to reduce burnout risk.

These studies collectively highlight the significant impact of workplace factors on stress and burnout. [Meynaar et al. \(2021\)](#) and [de Wijn et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrated that higher engagement and workplace support reduce burnout, whereas [Bouwmeester et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasized the importance of stress management policies in high-performance organizations. [Wielers et al. \(2022\)](#) identify job insecurity, particularly in flexible roles, as a key contributor to burnout among young workers, highlighting the need for secure career prospects. According to [Thobane et al. \(2024\)](#), to mitigate the gap in South African research, emphasis must be placed on the upliftment of employees' mental well-being, with a central focus on balancing the workload through task sharing. This was also identified by [Muthumuni and Mokoena \(2024\)](#), who suggested that there should be an increased delegation of administrative duties in academic institutions. On the contrary, a recent study conducted by [Mtetwa et al. \(2025\)](#) argued that South African construction businesses should employ a strategy in which employees wear sensing technology to monitor work-related stress levels, which would address the lack of evidence required for health claims resulting from work-related stress.

Self-Care and Health Promotion in the Context of the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, maintaining a healthy and safe working environment is both a legal obligation and a key factor in ensuring employee well-being and organizational success. A workplace that prioritizes health and safety fosters motivated employees with lower stress levels and increased productivity, ultimately leading to lower costs related to employee leave. Dutch workplace safety is governed by the Working Conditions Act (*Arbeidsomstandighedenwet*), the Working Conditions Decree (*Arbobesluit*), and the Working Conditions Regulations (*Arboregeling*), which outline the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees. Employers assume primary responsibility for ensuring safe working conditions, conducting risk assessments, implementing preventive measures, and keeping employees well-informed. They are also encouraged to establish an up-to-date occupational mental health policy, ideally in collaboration with a works council or employee representation, to ensure that stress management and mental well-being are integral to workplace culture. Meanwhile, employees are obligated to engage in self-care, recognize early signs of stress, and utilize workplace mental health resources, fostering a shared responsibility for psychological well-being ([Warmerdam & Schouteten, 2002](#)).

Workplace Health Promotion Programs (WHPPs) are strategic initiatives designed to improve employees' lifestyles, thereby enhancing their health, work capacity, and productivity. Systematic reviews of intervention studies often report modest effects, with evaluations hindered by significant heterogeneity in intervention and study populations. For example, a study assessed the implementation of an integrated WHPP, finding that while activities were introduced, at least 22% of the employees felt uninvolved, and a lack of formal policies hindered progress. HR, supervisors, and employees led efforts, but management support and resources were crucial for success. This underscores the need for structured policies and stronger engagement ([Smit et al., 2024](#)). A 5-month multilevel WHPP improved vitality, work performance and reduced sickness

absence among Dutch insurance employees. Through training, workshops, and coaching, employees showed better health on a self-rated scale, increased healthy behaviors, and lowered absenteeism, especially in teams with strong organizational support and supervisor involvement. However, they did not report significant effects of workload perception. This study highlights the need for long-term strategies and leadership engagement for sustainable workplace health improvement ([Hendriksen et al., 2016](#)).

A study by [Zimbile et al. \(2024\)](#) explored the implementation of the Stepped Care Model (SCM) in Dutch Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services, which successfully improved access, coordination, and self-care through digital integration. This model, which links self-help tools, virtual counseling, and professional support, offers valuable insights for workplace mental health programmes. By adopting a similar approach, workplaces can create scalable, structured mental health initiatives that reduce stigma, lower costs, and shorten waiting times, ultimately improving employee well-being.

Handling workplace stress and mental health requires a multi-level approach that integrates organizational policies and self-care initiatives. High workload, job insecurity, and low autonomy contribute to burnout, making Workplace Health Promotion Programs (WHPPs) and models like the Stepped Care Model (SCM) essential for coordinated support. The Netherlands has strong work-life balance policies; as earlier research has demonstrated, growing job strains necessitate targeted mental health strategies. This suggests that health promotion and self-care initiatives should prioritize structured interventions and the cultivation of a culture of psychological safety. Through these efforts, organizations can mitigate stress, enhance resilience, and foster a healthier, more productive workforce.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Understanding workplace stress and its long-term consequences requires a strong theoretical foundation. Several established theories have provided valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying chronic occupational stress, its effects on individuals, and potential mitigation strategies. This section outlines five key theoretical perspectives relevant to the study: the Job Demand-Control (JDC) Model, the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and Andragogy—the Theory of Adult Learning.

The Job Demand-Control (JDC) Model ([Karasek, 1979](#)) is one of the most widely used frameworks for understanding occupational stress. It posits that job strain arises from the interaction between job demands (e.g., workload, time pressure) and job control (the degree of autonomy an employee has over their tasks). When job demands are high and job control is low, employees experience increased stress, leading to burnout and adverse health outcomes ([de Lange et al., 2003](#)). This model is particularly relevant to understanding workplace environments where excessive demands and rigid hierarchies limit employees' ability to manage their workload effectively.

The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model ([Siegrist, 1996](#)) extends this perspective by highlighting the role of social reciprocity in workplace stress. According to this model, stress arises when individuals' efforts at work exceed the rewards they receive in return, whether in terms of salary, recognition, or career opportunities. Prolonged exposure to such an imbalance can lead to adverse health effects, including cardiovascular disease and depression ([Kivimäki et al., 2002](#); [Siegrist, 2008](#)). Given that workplace stress often results from perceived inequities in effort and compensation, the ERI model provides a useful lens through which to examine stress-related health outcomes in different cultural and organizational contexts.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)) offers another perspective,

focusing on how individuals manage and preserve their personal and professional resources (e.g., time, energy, self-esteem). When employees face prolonged stress, their resources are depleted, leading to exhaustion and burnout (Halbesleben et al., 2014). This theory is particularly relevant to discussions on self-care because it emphasizes the importance of resource recovery strategies—such as rest, social support, and workplace interventions—in mitigating the negative effects of chronic stress.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) shifts attention to the cognitive processes individuals employ to appraise and manage stress. This model suggests that stress is not merely a response to external pressures but is shaped by how individuals perceive and interpret stressful situations. Employees who view workplace challenges as threats rather than opportunities are more likely to experience stress-related health issues (Biggs et al., 2017). This model underscores the importance of psychological interventions and self-care education in helping employees develop adaptive coping mechanisms.

The role of Andragogy—the Theory of Adult Learning (Knowles, 1980) is particularly relevant when considering the potential of self-care education as a preventative approach to managing chronic workplace stress. Andragogy argues that adults learn best when education is self-directed, problem-centered, and immediately applicable to real-life situations (Knowles et al., 2015). This aligns closely with the concept of self-care training in workplaces, as employees are more likely to engage with and benefit from strategies that they perceive as practical and relevant to their immediate well-being. Other related theories, such as Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which emphasizes critical reflection leading to behavioral change, and Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Zimmerman, 2002), which focuses on individuals' ability to manage their learning and development, further reinforce the importance of structured educational interventions. These frameworks also connect to COR Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping because they highlight individuals' potential to develop resilience and resource-preserving strategies through structured learning experiences.

RESEARCH METHOD

Reviews do not introduce new data; instead, they evaluate and synthesize existing published or presented research (Gregory & Denniss, 2018). While systematic reviews are preferred and optimal for answering narrow and highly focused research questions (Sukhera, 2022), narrative reviews are better suited to exploring broader topics and providing an overview of diverse perspectives (Baethge et al., 2019). This narrative review approach aligns with our study on chronic workplace stress and health promotion across Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands, as it allows us to examine the issue in terms of its cultural and contextual richness, without the constraints of predefined criteria. Unlike systematic reviews, which impose rigid inclusion and exclusion criteria, narrative reviews allow for a more holistic and critical discussion of existing research. This approach is particularly beneficial when examining complex and multidisciplinary topics in which contextual factors must be considered (Greenhalgh et al., 2018).

To ensure a comprehensive review, each of the three authors independently conducted searches using the following keywords, tailored to the context they reviewed: stress management, self-care tools, workplace stress, work burnout, *karoshi*, work overload, health promotion, occupational health, and employee well-being. Variations in the search techniques were used. For example, in databases where an advanced search was feasible, we searched for Work Burnout, Stress Management, and Japan. These keywords were selected through brainstorming sessions to refine the selection of terminologies and improve search effectiveness. We also conducted online meetings to discuss our write-up and the integration process, focusing on the findings from the literature.

We searched Scopus, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar for relevant literature. Abstracts were screened for alignment with the research objectives, and the full texts were assessed for methodological rigor. We focused primarily on studies published within the last 5–10 years (from 2015 onwards). Studies published before 2000 were excluded unless essential for theoretical or historical context. Poorly designed, unclear, or low-quality papers, including those from questionable sources, were also excluded to ensure a rigorous synthesis of empirical and theoretical insights. Government data and industry reports were included only when necessary.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the literature review highlight several key patterns and distinctions in the manifestation of chronic workplace stress and burnout across Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands.

A significant commonality across all three countries is the prevalence of high job demands coupled with insufficient rewards or control, leading to chronic stress and burnout (Siegrist et al., 1997; Kawakami & Haratani, 1999; Houtman et al., 2021). In Japan, the concept of *karoshi* exemplifies extreme cases of overwork-related fatalities, demonstrating the severe consequences of prolonged work stress (Ishikawa, 2022; Asgari et al., 2016). Similarly, South African professionals, particularly in high-demand sectors like construction and healthcare, face overwhelming workloads, leading to physiological and psychological distress (Bowen et al., 2021; de Witt et al., 2024). The Netherlands, despite having progressive labor laws and work-life balance policies, continues to experience growing rates of workplace stress, particularly in high-performance organizations and among professionals with limited job autonomy (Bouwmeester et al., 2021; The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Another shared theme is the impact of workplace culture and management support. Studies indicate that organizational support, whether in the form of job control, social backing from colleagues, or structured health promotion initiatives, plays a crucial role in mitigating stress. Japanese studies emphasize the protective effects of job control and co-worker support (Saijo et al., 2018), whereas South African research points to the need for more structured workplace interventions beyond personal coping strategies (Muthumuni & Mokoena, 2024). In the Netherlands, autonomy in job roles is linked to lower stress levels, suggesting that workplace policies promoting self-regulation can be beneficial (Warmerdam & Schouteten, 2002).

However, the reviewed literature also revealed distinct national variations. Japan's deeply ingrained work culture, characterized by long hours and social expectations of workplace dedication, contributes to its high stress levels (Kawakami & Haratani, 1999). South Africa's workforce experiences stressors rooted in systemic inefficiencies, such as resource constraints and high job insecurity, particularly among female professionals (Magwegwe & Sithole, 2024). In the Netherlands, stress tends to be associated with specific job sectors and individual job autonomy rather than a nationwide cultural norm of overwork (Mutambudzi & Henkens, 2020; de Wijn et al., 2022).

Our review reveals common themes of high job demands and burnout across Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands, but notable gaps emerge in how each context addresses these stressors. Specifically, Japan's entrenched work culture, South Africa's systemic resource constraints, job insecurity, and the Netherlands' sector-specific challenges highlight divergent approaches to occupational stress management.

Strategies for Mitigating Employee Burnout and Chronic Stress

Drawing from the findings of this literature review, several practical measures can be taken to reduce workplace stress and its more severe outcomes, including *Karoshi*.

Enhancing Workplace Autonomy and Job Control

We propose that when employees have more control over decisions and more flexibility in how they organize their work, their stress levels tend to decrease. Data from the Netherlands show that greater job autonomy is linked to lower levels of mental fatigue, highlighting the value of workplace policies that balance structure with flexibility ([The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021](#)).

Structured Health Promotion Programs and Mental Health Interventions

Workplace Health Promotion Programs (WHPPs) support employee well-being, especially when management plays an active role. In the Netherlands, multi-level health interventions, including training, coaching, and supervisor support, have led to encouraging outcomes ([Hendriksen et al., 2016](#); [Smit et al., 2024](#)). That said, the success of such support systems often hinges on trust, confidentiality ([Ebrahimi, 2024a](#)), and an organization's ability to build coaching capacity ([Ebrahimi, 2024b](#)), as these elements play a key role in shaping employee engagement and overall effectiveness.

Task Sharing and Workload Redistribution

Our review revealed that in South Africa, professionals in both academic and health care settings often face heavy workloads. One way to address this pressure is through improved task delegation and thoughtful job redesign. Task-sharing models used in mental healthcare have shown promising results, indicating that similar strategies might also offer relief in other high-stress fields as well ([Thobane et al., 2024](#); [Muthumuni & Mokoena, 2024](#)). We suggest that Task Sharing and Workload Redistribution could serve as valuable approaches to reduce employee burnout and chronic stress, with applicability across different cultural and national environments.

Legislative and Policy Interventions

Our study showed that Japan's legal reforms aimed at curbing excessive work hours and preventing *karoshi* have established a foundation for progress, but effective enforcement is also essential ([Yukawa et al., 2024](#)). In South Africa, policies addressing stress are still evolving, and there is a need for more defined regulations that hold employers accountable for managing workplace stress ([Khan et al., 2024](#)).

Digital Health and Self-Care Monitoring

Emerging technologies, including wearable devices for stress monitoring and digital self-care solutions, are showing potential for monitoring employee well-being. Japan's application of digital health tracking in community health initiatives could be adapted for workplace environments worldwide, enabling early intervention for stress-related health concerns ([Hibino et al., 2023](#); [Mtetwa et al., 2025](#)).

Gender-Specific Stress Management Approaches

Studies from South Africa highlight gender-based differences in stress experiences, indicating that tailored interventions, such as leadership development programs for women or structured support systems for men facing burnout, can lead to more effective outcomes ([Magwegwe & Sithole, 2024](#); [Bowen et al., 2021](#)).

Our analysis also highlights a significant gap. The effectiveness of such strategies varies considerably across countries. For example, while workplace autonomy plays a crucial role in

mitigating stress in the Netherlands, Japan's cultural inclination toward overwork and South Africa's structural challenges necessitate more specific, context-driven measures. Bridging these differences requires the development of innovative, tailored frameworks that leverage the strengths of each system. Researchers could play a key role in developing effective frameworks and strategies, contributing to the development of evidence-based, context-sensitive guidelines for managing chronic work stress, which is an important area for future research that extends beyond the scope of our current study.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature reviewed highlights that workplace stress and burnout are pervasive global issues, yet they manifest in culturally distinct ways. Japan grapples with deeply ingrained overwork norms, South Africa faces systemic job insecurity, and the Netherlands experiences sector-specific stressors despite its progressive policies. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines legislative reforms, organizational culture shifts, and strategies for individual self-care. By integrating best practices drawn from the experiences of each country, a more comprehensive model for mitigating workplace stress can be developed, fostering sustainable employee well-being and productivity. This article outlines strategies with broad implications for alleviating employee burnout and chronic stress, promoting health, and enhancing human capital across diverse sectors and work environments.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

A potential limitation of this study is the exclusion of unpublished studies and those not available or translated into English, which may have led to missing relevant evidence on the topic in the context of Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands. Another limitation is that the absence of a systematic review and selection process may have introduced bias in the inclusion of studies. However, there are no formal guidelines or strict inclusion and exclusion criteria for narrative reviews (Gregory & Denniss, 2018). Additionally, "narrative reviews do not aim to be inclusive of all literature addressing the phenomenon of interest" (Sukhera, 2022, p. 415). While the non-systematic selection process may introduce bias, this study's originality lies in its unique exploration of chronic workplace stress and health promotion strategies across three distinct countries, offering valuable insights in a holistic manner into varied national contexts.

Future research should explore the effectiveness of the proposed strategies for mitigating chronic workplace stress and burnout across diverse cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could assess the impact of workplace autonomy, health promotion programs, and legislative interventions on employee well-being in Japan, South Africa, and the Netherlands. Additionally, research should consider the role of industry-specific factors and gender dynamics in stress experiences and coping mechanisms, as well as the potential benefits of integrating digital health tools into various organizational settings.

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