A cross sectional observational study of the prevalence of psychological distress in secondary school teachers working for a large Scottish education authority, and of the help seeking behaviour and factors affecting that behaviour, in teachers reporting psychological distress

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ABSTRACT

Method: A cross sectional observational study, using postal questionnaires.

Population: All 2,486 mainstream secondary school teachers in Glasgow City Council schools of all grades, part time and full time.

Sampling: A sample size calculation was carried out which allowed for a low response rate. A sample of 536 teachers was randomly chosen using a proportional sampling method, from all secondary schools in Glasgow City Council.

Results: Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS 15 software. Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals were calculated using an online calculator and Spearman ranked correlation coefficients were calculated by SPSS 15. P values were calculated using the Fisher exact test, two tailed.

Response: The response was low at 42.5% despite offering entry to prize draw and 2 reminders. 228 questionnaires were returned completed.

Conclusions: The Secondary teachers in this study have a high prevalence of self reported psychological distress, and the prevalence of psychiatric illness using the GHQ-12 questionnaire is significantly higher (27.1%) than that of the general working age Scottish population (13-18%). Significantly fewer teachers have “normal” mental health using a zero score on GHQ-12, compared to the working age Scottish population.

There appeared to be an underestimation of their level of psychological distress by teachers themselves.

The prevalence of psychological distress was higher in those who had previously been psychologically distressed, in more experienced and older teachers, in men and in those with lower Distress Disclosure Index scores.

Evidence was found of low levels of help seeking behaviour when psychologically
distressed with low contact with line management (32.6%); occupational counselling services (5.2%), welfare department (0%), occupational health service (16.1%); peer support groups (6.6%); unions (13.2%); outside counselling services (6.6%); general practice services and mental health services (7.9%). Most sought help from friends, relatives or colleagues (75%).

Low levels of reporting of sickness absence (3.1%) were noted in this psychologically distressed group of teachers suggesting that “presenteeism” was operating.

Positive correlations were found between high levels of distress disclosure, and an increased tendency to speak to line managers about their distress, the feeling that they could raise stress issues easily at staff meetings, the reporting of discussion with relatives, friends and colleagues about their distress, and answering “yes” to a larger number of the help seeking behaviour questions in the general questionnaire. There is a negative correlation between Distress Disclosure Scores and GHQ-12 scores and the reporting of current psychological distress, i.e. high levels of distress disclosure are correlated with low GHQ-12 scores and normal mental health.