Framework for the project "The Complex Experience of Suffering from Stress - An Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis"

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Stress is one of the fastest-growing diseases in the world; according to DTS, 29% of Danes in 2021 scored high on a stress scale, up from 25% in 2017 (Sundhedsstyrrelsen, 2022). With nearly a third of all Danes suffering from stress, it is an important subject to explore further and try to revise the origin of stress, what can be done about it, and how to prevent it. Gaining more knowledge about a disease so widespread in our society that it is called a "folkesygdom" is very important for two up-and-coming psychologists who plan to work as practicing psychologists. We will most likely meet many people in our work suffering from stress. Being able to provide the best treatment and understand what symptoms and problems our clients go through is very beneficial for further practice within the field.

There is also the empirical aspect; while our Thesis calls stress an illness or disease, it is not classified as such in ICD-10 or 11; it is often seen as a pre-stage to anxiety, depression or burnout, and not its own diagnosis. While it is not recognized as such in ICD-11, stress as a sickness is used widely within the population, and it is possible to be declared sick from stress. We found this discrepancy between the societal and academic views of stress intriguing. What effect could this discrepancy have on the treatment and experience of stress? Looking through the published literature about stress, we also found very few empirical studies on the experience of long-term stress specifically, leading us to our research question.

Research question:

How do people who have been on long-term sick leave due to stress experience stress as a phenomenon?

The research question is meant to highlight stress as a phenomenon to avoid determining whether or not it is an actual illness in advance. While remaining focused on the experience of the ones suffering from it for a longer period, which is why we have included long-term sick leave.

Outline on the framework for "The Complex Experience of Suffering from Stress - An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis"

In the following paper, we will introduce a more in-depth explanation of our preconceptions, different conceptualizations of stress and explain some of our methodical choices and considerations that could not be unfolded within the limits of an article. We will present our preconceptions, a possible conceptualization for stress, further elaboration on the exclusion of three of our participants, ethical consideration, provide more information on our literature search, introduce our interview form, give an introduction to IPA roots in phenomenology and hermeneutics, then provide a more in-depth description of our analysis than there were room for in the article - hopefully making the process even more transparent for the reader, suceeded by information on criteria of quality and an abstract for our article.

Our preconceptions about stress

As psychology students, we have encountered stress in various ways and with different theoretical and practical understandings as part of our education, alongside some private understandings from encounters with stress in our personal lives. In the following part, we will disclose some of these understandings that could have impacted the research presented in this paper.

One of the researchers in this paper has been on AAU´s "Modern work psychology" (MAP) program, where stress is treated like a separate entity similar to that of diagnoses and explained by a complex relationship between multiple factors on all levels from individual, group, organizational to

societal. The program introduced multiple classical theories and models of stress, like the demand/control theory by Karasek (1979), with or without social support as a mitigating factor. As well as an explanation of stress caused by illegitimate tasks due to it being an assault on one's dignity within the "Stress-as-Offense-to-Self" (SOS) perspective (Semmer et al., 2015) and more. It introduced different characteristics of modern work contributing to stress and focused on organizational factors as a reaction to the individualization and treatment of symptoms seen within modern work health psychology. Furthermore, it has focused on specific stressors from different work fields or characteristics of certain work types and coping strategies on multiple levels to counteract the individual focus. It introduced treatment of stress on an individual level based on an understanding of stress as a condition mirroring the stress history of the individual, including specific social, work-related, or organizational strain from stressors, as well as focusing on the concrete stress reactions of the individual. Yet, it stressed the importance of looking for solutions on higher levels for interventions due to a somewhat negative view of capitalism as exploiting workers and an understanding that teaching coping on an individual level will risk causing enhanced exploitation to maximize profit rather than solving the problem itself - since it can be argued that stress on that large a scale is hardly caused solely by vulnerability and inadequate coping on individual level.

The other researcher has been on AAU´s Khare program, where the focus on stress, is more on the individual level, and how to treat it on the individual level, with society as a secondary factor that plays into stress, but not as something that is viewed as being able to be changed besides changing the environment of the individual.

Alongside the two different perspectives from our Uni program, we also carry preconceptions from societal and personal experiences with stress, having known people suffering from stress and following their progress with the system and personal development.

The fact that stress seems to be the common term for the illness, while not being an actual diagnosis within ICD-10, leaves us perplexed and nervous regarding the treatment of stress. How can an illness be treated before it is properly understood and defined in its own terms? Many related diagnosable illnesses exist, like anxiety, depression, burnout, PTSD, and adaptation disorder. There seems to be a disagreement on whether stress is simply an adaptation disorder in daily language or is simply to be seen as something capable of causing psychiatric illness depending on individual resilience, as presented in the diathesis-stress model (Møhl & Simonsen, 2017). Moreover, does the word stress have multiple connotative meanings, further complicating the matter.

We are curious as to how people suffering from stress experience the phenomenon and whether this obscurity in the theoretical understanding of stress has an impact on their experience both concerning their personal experience and regarding that experience in the meeting with health care professionals, friends, family, the system or society in general.

Conceptualization(s) of stress

In the work *What is stress*, by Cooper et al (2001), they have attempted to identify different ways stress is perceived and handled empirically and how the perception can impact the definitions and empirical process in which stress is being explained.

Cooper et al (2001) explain how the concept of stress has been defined as an independent variable, dependent variable, and a process, combined with the fact that stress as a term is used within Social science, medical science, and behavioral science, which has led to different definitions and ways of handling stress within science overall. They proceed to divide stress into four different types of definitions.

The response based - here stress is viewed as a response to threatening or disturbing stimuli and is considered as a dependent variable needing stimuli to initiate it. The response-based

definitions are often rooted in medical sciences and have a physiological expression (Cooper et al., 2001).

Stimulus-based definitions of stress - Taken from engineering, and operates under the rationale that stress is an external force that is disrupting the organism in some way, where it can have multiple stressors that lead to an implosion of the system that shuts down due to the stress (Cooper et al., 2001).

Stress as an interaction - This approach is often described as structural and quantitative, where the relationship can be correlational and is considered to be between a stimulus and a response to the stimuli (Cooper et al., 2001).

Stress as a transaction - In this definition, stress is viewed as a transaction within the psychological mechanisms and cognitive appraisal and coping with an underpinned stressful encounter. This definition requires a person to go through two appraisal systems to get to stress. The first appraisal is the experience that something is at stake, called primary appraisal, this appraisal gives meaning to the encounter being experienced. Once an appraisal deems an encounter to be dangerous, the secondary appraisal process begins by attempting to identify any available coping resources to deal with the danger. From this point of view, stress is not seen as an environmental or individual process but is embedded in an ongoing process where appraisals are being made of encounters and attempting to cope with issues that arise (Cooper et al., 2001).

Based on which of these four definitions of stress an empirical study is done, the method, and procedures are affected, which provides different results and different understandings of how to deal with stress. This can impact how we as a society deal with stress, since each definition provides different answers and is used interchangeably within all fields that work with people suffering from stress.

Even with the different definitions of stress, the symptoms of stress align a lot more in terms of what is present during a stress episode. They can be divided into three types of symptoms: Behavioural, which can include; sleeplessness, indecisiveness, insensitivity or increased use of substances. Psychological, that can include; Tiredness, irritability, depression, anxiety, and memory loss. And Physiological where the symptoms can include; Heart racing, tiredness, headache, chest pain and dizziness (Andersen, 2007). These are just a few examples of what kind of symptoms might occur for a person suffering from stress, and as stated, there seems to be an overall agreement across the definitions about the symptoms being the same.

Method

In this following section, we will describe in more detail than was possible within the limits of an article, our method, and the more theoretical roots of the methods. We will also aim to further explain some of our choices, like the one below, regarding the exclusion of participants.

Further elaboration on the Exclusion of Participants

As mentioned in the article of this paper, during the phase of getting familiar with the material, we decided to exclude three of our interviews from being analyzed as part of the paper. We would like to further elaborate on this decision to be clear in our thinking behind this decision.

The first interview we decided to exclude was interview 6; this interview ended before the complete interview could be performed due to our interview person having made other arrangements, meaning we did not get to be as thorough as in the other interviews, leaving some questions out, providing a smaller scope of this person's experience.

The second interview we excluded is interview 1; our decision to exclude this interview has been made on the grounds of this participant having a mixed borderline and avoidant personality disorder, and following her narrative regarding her experience of stress, it became clear to us that we

could not separate what stems from the personality disorders, and what would be attributed to stress, leaving us to deem her experience to be beyond the scope of this paper, as we wish to research stress, with a stronger homogeneity.

The third and last interview we decided to exclude was interview 5, this interview was excluded again during our phase of getting familiar with the material. As we dived deeper into the narrative of this interview, we noticed that COVID-19 played a very big part in the picture of the symptoms. The narrative was so intertwined in the imagery of her sickness that we could not untangle and decipher which part of her symptoms was due to stress or which were aftereffects of COVID, which again would have been outside the scope of this research paper.

Excluding data is not an easy decision, and it should be done on a well-thought foundation, which we believe we have done in these cases. We could have avoided the issue in interview 1 if we had better vetted our participants during the recruitment phases by having more exclusion criteria beforehand. This would have saved both us and our participant time, which is regrettable, but we had not expected a narrative this intertwined between two illnesses beforehand.

Ethical considerations and thoughts

When conducting research it is important for the researcher to think about the ethical implications of the research, this goes even more for psychological research that involves other people and potentially vulnerable subjects. As a researcher, you are obligated to ensure that you are treating your participants with respect and are not causing them any strain or harm beyond what is considered ethically acceptable within research (King, 2019).

In the UK they have a stand code of ethics for psychological research and conduct (BPS), this code covers both psychological research and professional practices in four principles: Respect, Competence, Responsibility, and Integrity (King, 2019). Under these guidelines, there are some

questions psychological researchers must consider in their research; Informed consent,

Confidentiality, Right to withdraw, Assessing risk of harm, Deception limitations to researchers role,

use of incentives, and honesty and integrity in the research process.

In the following part, we will explain how we have taken the above mentioned questions into

consideration in our paper.

The first question, informed consent, means that the participants in the research are aware

of the consent to participate in the research and get provided information about the background for

why the research is being performed alongside information about their rights in terms of publishing

and withdrawal from the research (King, 2019). It is a requirement that the participant is of a sound

mind and has the cognitive ability to understand what they are consenting to.

For our paper, we wrote a consent form based on a template provided by AAU (See appendix

- Consent form), in which we, in written form, explained our research and our participants' rights,

asking for a written agreement upon the interview being recorded and being used in the paper. As

well as being made public afterward, expect for the transcriptions. The participants were handed this

form while being encouraged and allowed time for any questions about the form before the

interview was conducted. Alongside the written consent, at the end of each interview, the

participants were asked verbally if they still consented to participate in our research and if they had

any further questions about the scope of our paper or their rights. Following this process, we deem

to have given ample information and opportunity for our participants to understand, consider, and

withdraw consent.

While our research group is all people who have experienced or have stress, which can

impact cognitive functions, we have in our correspondence with our participants, not seen any signs

of them having a limited cognitive ability to such a degree that they were not aware of their own

consent or did not understand what they were consenting to. Given that our participants contacted us upon seeing our bulletin looking for participants, we deem all of our participants to have a functional cognitive level to which they understood what they were consenting to.

Second question; Confidentiality; means how are you treating the information your participants are giving you, and how do you ensure that none of the personal information is traceable or recognizable. Ensuring the anonymity of your participants is something that needs to be done as soon as you get the information (King, 2019).

Keeping our participants´ confidentiality was something we were keenly aware of from the beginning. Our starting contact was on our student emails or facebook messenger, depending on the platform our participants decided to initiate contact on. This is, of course, an issue, because these platforms are not confidential in a way we have any control over; however, we decided to delete the message while copying any information we needed over to a pen and paper block, and from here into a document with all information stripped down or censored to ensure their anonymity as to protect the information to the best of our ability.

For our transcriptions, we got a secure VPN folder through our university's IT department, to which only we had access. As further precaution, we changed the names of our participants and their next of kin while removing or replacing any names of places, educational degrees or other items that could be recognized and traced back to our participants. We have decided to keep the ages of our participants the same, alongside job experience that is relevant for background knowledge or personal narratives to the experience of our participants, with the expectation of interview 5, where the participants' education is so recognizable that we decided to censor it.

With these precautions, we find that we have done everything within our capabilities to ensure that our participants´ information is confidential and secure.

The third question concerning our participants' right to withdraw their dataset from our study, we encompassed this by including their right to withdraw in our consent form, given to them before the interview, informing them in writing that they have a right to withdraw their consent at any time before our due date since withdrawing their data afterward would be near impossible for us. We furthermore chose to inform our participants after the interview of their right to withdraw, while also asking if we still had their consent at the current time to use their data set for our paper. By informing our participants in both verbal and written form multiple times, we would consider our responsibility of informing participants about their right to withdraw as satisfying the ethical demands and responsibility laid upon us as researchers.

Fourth question is risk of harm, meaning if our participants could take physical or psychological damage partaking in our research. With our research design being semi-structured one-to-one interviews, the risk for physical harm to our participants is low, seeing as we do not ask them to perform any physical acts or have anything physically enforced upon them. Seeing as as a symptom of stress is fatigue, there was a risk of our participants feeling fatigued from engaging in a long conversation, so we tried to combat this by verbally stating that if our participants were in need of a break or feeling ill at any point, they should tell us, and we would attempt to accommodate any needs that may have arisen during the interview. We also informed our participants of our estimated time schedule for the interview while attempting to plan around their personal schedule for the interview date as a way of giving them control of how they used their energy and felt comfortable in having excess energy to perform the interview.

In terms of psychological damage, we verbally informed our participants about their right to refuse to answer any question, and we would not require reasoning or explanation other than they

did not want to answer. We attempted to stay aware of any sensitive subjects or changes in mood, to adjust our questions pace to accommodate the feelings of our participants during the interview.

Due to how we found our participants through various social media groups for people suffering from stress, they already seemed to have set up a large support network of both professionals, family and social relations. During the interview, we also asked about the support from these various groups, as to ensure that the feelings of support were present, and we could be safe in letting them go from there.

Due to the above-mentioned reasons, we judged that the risk to our participants´ well-being were at a level that performing the interviews were safe for them both physically and psychologically.

From risk of harm to the participants, the fifth question is about the researchers' safety. We were engaging with people we did not know, and we could only access very little information about their personalities before meeting them, leading us to having to make sure that we, as researchers, do not get put in a situation where our well-being is at risk. While our study was performed in Denmark, considered one of the safest countries in the world, we decided that all interviews would be performed with both of us there, such that we were each other´s security net.

According to BPS (King, 2019), the sixth question regarding deception is only permissible if there is a reason behind why the researcher might want to disguise parts of the reason behind their research. In the case of our paper, we had some preconceptions and understandings about stress, that we did not wish to disclose to our interviewees in case our preconceptions and understandings could alter the way our participants would answer and thereby not give us their experience of stress, but their experience seen through what they believed we wished to hear from them. We did not hide any secret agenda. We just merely did not want to have them biased by our understanding. To counteract our initial lack of disclosure, we decided to be fully honest post-interview about our

intentions, preconceptions, and understandings and what sparked our interest in the research subject while allowing for further questions from our participants.

This leads us to the seventh question, debriefing; we have promised our participants that if we find the paper to be sufficiently anonymized to share outside our exam room, we would share our paper with them so they can see the end result of what they agreed to partake in, while also given them the option to constant us for further questions or withdrawal of consent. Post interview, we also asked our participants if they had any further questions for us; as we were closing down, we encouraged them to contact us if anything came up. We also did a short mood assessment, ensuring our participants were stable before we left.

The eighth question we as researchers have to be aware of is our own limitations when doing research; seeing as we, as psychological researchers researching stress are interacting with people who can be in a sensitive mental state, we have to take into consideration how we ask questions, and make sure the line between interviewer and psychologist are not crossed, while also making sure, that we take care of our participants well being and are not leaving them in a bad mental state, with no help (King, 2019).

The ninth question we are to consider according to BPS (King, 2019) is the use of incentives, this means if we in any way are compensating our participants for their contribution to our research.

We decided not to use any kind of incentive other than our thanks, and the participants willingness to partake in our research. This choice was made partly due to monetary reasons, as we are both students with limited funds to provide any monetary compensation but also to not coerce someone into participating. We decided that we would meet our participants where it was most convenient for them, rather than demanding they relocate for us. Doing this we were considering

their condition of stress, where long travel times can cause fatigue further limiting our participants abilities to perform the interview.

The last question to take into consideration is honesty and integrity in the research process, not only to the participants but for the entire process; this includes disclosure about points of conflict, acknowledgment of all participants in making the paper, and avoidance of manipulating the date (King, 2019). By thoroughly describing every point in the process and providing pictures of our data analysis and what sparked our interest in the research, we find it to be sufficient coverage for both disclosures of conflicts, acknowledgment of participation, and giving the tools to the reader to judge if we have tampered with our data in a way that could be considered manipulative.

Literature search

For our literature search, we first did a not-so-structured search, trying to figure out our point of focus and how to do the proper search. This caused us some trouble since "stress" as a concept is very broad and bears a lot of different meanings both within psychology but also in a broader sense like mechanical science and so forth, and therefore, it is pretty hard to get a proper search from it without getting an overwhelming number of results. We got some help from a librarian, and we worked on a way to narrow this down and ended up with one formal search string, which we used on APA Psychnet, which also served as a way of narrowing down the results by keeping it within the psychological domain of research.

Besides this, we initially looked through our old course plans for any relevant literature to get us started and try to formulate where our interest in the subject had started in a professional curiosity sprung by the various very different conceptualizations and understanding of what "stress" means.

APA Psycnet

On APA Psycnet, we used the APA Thesaurus to figure out which stress-related terms should be included, working from the viewpoint of a working research question: How do people who have been on long-term sick leave due to stress experience stress as a phenomenon?

Moreover, an understanding of stress as being a somewhat separate disorder even though it is not a separate diagnosis as such because one can be on long-term sick leave due to stress. Initially, some of the terms were ruled out based on the fact that it was deemed irrelevant to our research question because of the focus for instance, "diathesis-stress model" or "disorder of extreme stress not otherwise specified (DESNOS)" which both deal with forms of stress that are different from what we were looking for. Some others were ruled out based on not being relevant for our population group by focusing specifically on stress due to factors like minorities. Since we were not going to focus on stress due to discrimination etc., we excluded them.

Later, some more words were ruled out or included due to the written definition - others were either included or excluded due to a look at the results it brought. Unless otherwise specified below, the words included were included as index terms because we wanted to search for them under the thesaurus classification to attain articles where the words were classified underneath that understanding of the stress-related term and not simply being mentioned in a random article. Excluded in the following does not mean we wanted to avoid articles with it. However, it means the term itself was insufficient to get an article included and, therefore, not included in the final search string.

Regarding stress-related terms on APA, we decided to include "Burnout" since it is a stress-related term that is sometimes used almost synonymously for stress and because it seems to bring out relevant articles with a similar focus of research area as we were considering.

We also included "Academic stress" because it fit our working research question and seemed to cover many stress factors and be relevant for the individual vs. social viewpoints towards stress.

We also included "Chronic stress" because it seemed to provide the best description of the kind of stress that we wanted to explore in our study.

We included "job stress" because our working research question has an addendum about having had a leave from work. Therefore, we included it to ensure that we did not miss out on studies about stress related to jobs as a factor.

Furthermore, we included "Perceived stress" because we wanted to understand better how people perceive and understand stress. Since perceived stress has to do with one's perception of stress, it was included to explore one's perception and the underlying evaluative process in perception.

We also included "Psychological stress" because we were interested in the psychological aspects of stress more than the biochemical or other kinds of stress. Therefore, we included this term to make sure to get psychologically relevant perspectives and to rule out some of the "noise" of simply using "stress" as an overall term. Psychological stress seemed somewhat broad and had a lot on both illness and trauma-related situations. However, it also seemed to hold relevant articles, so we included it to be on the safe side since it did not enhance the number of hits that much, and we were not sure that the relevant articles would show up if this was not included.

We included "Adjustment disorder" since it was the closest we got to a stress diagnosis in the ICD-11 manual when it was not to focus on trauma like PTSD, for instance. It had a lot of relevant symptoms and descriptions from what we were thinking.

We excluded "Financial stress" because it did not fit the kind of stress we wanted to investigate. While we do acknowledge it as a potential factor in people's experience of stress and as a stressor as a term, it gave too many irrelevant results.

We also excluded "Social stress" because it seemed to be a subterm of "academic stress" and "job stress" and did not seem to bring relevant results that would not show on those terms. Also "social stress" was related to "pres" in Danish, which is not the condition of stress but more like the stress (pres) you are under socially.

We excluded "Stress and Coping Measures" because it seemed to focus more on the treatment and how to deal with stress rather than the feeling and understanding of it, which were our focus, and some of the results we already had from other search words.

Therefore, we also excluded "Stress management" because it primarily tests treatments for stress, and since the treatments themselves are not our focus, it was excluded.

Furthermore, we excluded "stress reactions" because it seemed to be more related to trauma and to reactions to specific trauma trickers, which were not our focus.

Lastly, we also choose to exclude "Stress" as an overall term. We were absolutely not sure about this since it was our subject, but at the same time, the term was simply too broad and gave too many results without the right focus.

In the end, we also added "AND Leave*" because our working research question had an addendum about having sick leave from work due to stress. Therefore, we wanted to add the word to make our search more relevant and narrow the results from 30.000+ to about 700. To narrow it down further, we choose to use sick leave* since "leave" has multiple meanings irrelevant to our research questions. We did not use this as an index term because the thesaurus did not have it as a term in itself and suggested using "employee benefits" instead, which, in relation to our research

question, we found odd and besides the point - and, therefore we did not include any synonyms because all the ones we came up with seemed to focus on entirely different aspects. Ultimately, we decided that sick leave should be mentioned in the abstract to narrow it down and ensure that it was a relevant focus of the included articles. Last but not least, we included that we only wanted peer-reviewed journals.

The final search string for APA Psychnet was: 172 Results for Index Terms: {Chronic Stress} OR {Occupational Stress} OR {Perceived Stress} OR {Adjustment Disorders} OR {Academic Stress} OR {Psychological Stress} OR {Burnout} AND Abstract: Sick leave* AND Peer-Reviewed Journals only.

Rayyan and the selection process

The 172 articles were uploaded to Rayyan. We evaluated the headline and abstract separately and decided for each article whether to categorize as include, exclude, or maybe with blinded results. When we both had been through, the blinds were lifted. Then we first went through the conflicted ones, which we had categorized differently through this project. The first 77 articles were excluded because of either foreign language (anything besides Danish or English), wrong population due to focus on either physical or other psychiatric disorders, focusing more generally on sick leave, and research that focused on measures of stress and therefore focused more on the effect of psychiatric measurement than stress as a phenomenon.

This left 95 to be sorted; some of these were related quite broadly to our topic e.g., articles that focused on tests and treatments, which are related but different from the focus of this thesis. We tagged them with the help of subject terms to be able to sort them out later and to be able to draw on relevant articles later on if necessary.

We went through the articles together again and wrote notes on the abstracts to get an overview of the literature and relevant sub-topics; by this, we cut down the number of articles to 24

to read as inspiration for our interview guide. Because they were similar to our project in method, topic, or both, or we simply wanted to look at the questionnaires for relevant inspiration and to include them in the review. One was excluded due to focusing too much on developing the questionnaire, and we did not have access to it.

Semistructured interview

Our data collection has taken the form of semi-structured one-to-one interviews, which is typical for IPA studies (see below) because it allows for the interview schedule to be used flexibly, allowing the participants to influence what is covered (Smith et al., 2022).

Our interview-guide and the wording of questions

Our interview guide is divided into two columns: a Theme/Emne column to the left and a question/Spørgsmål column to the right. The Theme column provides an overview of the subject of the experience of stress, the question column is meant to attempt to explore. There are eight themes.

1. Introduktion
2. Selve stress forløbet
3. Symptomer
4. Hjælp og behandling
5. Andres opfattelse
6. Identitet
7. Stressforståelse
8. Afsluttende spørgsmål

These themes will be in the left column and marked with bold writing. Under these main themes, we have subthemes, meant to indicate a focus point that fits under the main theme, such as "håndtering

af symptomer" under the theme symptoms- These sub-themes will be marked in the text with a - in the left column, as an indication.

We have attempted to structure the themes in a way we thought would make sense to get an overview of the informants' experience; the structure was subject to change depending on the reactions and answers of our informants. We have attempted to make an order of them if the informant starts with a different theme. We have been open to diving into this subject with the idea of this subject having an essential meaning for the experience of this informant; therefore, the themes' order may be changed between different interviews to best fit the participant's narrative.

In the right column, we have the questions within the theme set by the left column. The questions are split into an overall open question, meant to be an open question that allows the informant to take the question in the direction they find important to their experience. These are the questions we wish to use when opening up a theme. These overall questions will be marked in bold and fat writing, with a black dot indicating it as the overall question for the theme. An example would be:

- **Hvad synes du er særligt vigtigt i forhold til dit stress forløb.**

Below these overall questions, we have more focused questions, which we plan to explore and have asked most of during the interviews. Following the interview flow, these questions are subject to change in order and wording. They are meant to help us, as the interviewers, to have prepared questions to explore the overall questions and help us try to get our informants to explore their experience further. These questions will be marked with a black dot as an indication. An example would be:

- Hvad har du modtaget af behandling?

Beneath the more focused questions, we have some more explorative questions, which we will use if our informants cannot answer them themselves when asked the open question.

Below these questions, we have some supportive questions that are prepared to help us explore the theme, get an overall view, and dig deeper into the theme or help the informant explore their experience by making it more concrete to a situation or time frame and show interest in a more detailed story. These questions will be marked with a white dot; see the example below.

- ○ Hvornår

The last symbol in our interview guide indicates inspirational examples of things we, through our literature search, have seen others use as aid, get aid from, or have thoughts about during their stress experience. These questions will be marked with a black square; an example would be

- ■ Familie?

Going through our interview guide and going down, we start with the open questions that revolve around a theme; the openness of the question is meant to let the informant dive into what they find essential within that theme to their experience. From there, we go down to sub-themes that are less open questions meant to help the interviewers ask more into the informants' experience, depending on their answers. From there, the guide goes into the more concrete questions that might be situation or timeframe-specific, and help explore the theme further and show interest in the informant's story. At the bottom, we have inspirational examples, purely for the interviewers, containing subjects we have seen from literature.

Some of our questions can be answered with a simple yes or no; while these types of questions do not open up for our informants to explore their experience, we found them useful to sort out the other questions for relevance, like asking more about the experience of the families reaction are not necessary if the informant does not have a family.

The wording of the first overall question, "Hvad synes du er særligt vigtigt for dit stress forløb?" is chosen because we find it very open, with the opportunity for the informant to bring up any subject or experience they deem to be important in their experience, without leading them towards talking about a specific topic, such as symptoms, treatment or feelings towards the labor market. We will then explore the rest of the themes from these questions in varying order.

We constructed our interview guide from interviews used in other stress research while also trying to make it possible for our informants to provide their stories rather than us trying to get answers from research that has already been done. Our interview guide is different in the part where most former studies about stress tend to be limited to one theme or a certain work population or condition. Our interviews are not limited to a specific work population, gender or age.

The first topic is a general introduction to the interview, where we explain the purpose of the study, introduce the informant to their GPDR rights, and the consent form, called sammetykkeerklæring in written form. We also requested formal information here, such as the informant's age, gender, education level etc. If the informant themselves does not start a story from their experience of long-term stress leave, we end this topic with the question "Hvad synes du er særligt vigtigt for dit stress forløb?" to open up the interview. However, some informants had already started a narrative at this point.

Our interviews

Our interviews took place in either the homes or in a chosen quiet place by our participants to ensure privacy. We were both present and could, therefore, supplement each other at the end of the interview with further questions. During the interviews, we made use of our interview guide to facilitate the questions but adjusted this to the specific interview and tried following our participants as much as possible to focus on what was important to them in particular. In one of our interviews

one participant had for instance difficulties in comprehending the very broad and open questions, sometimes causing the need for adjustment.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

We chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as our method. IPA is an idiographic method that focuses on one or a few individuals to say something specific and values subjectivity and particularity in phenomenons, which leads to a focus on details and depth of analysis (Shaw, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). This leads to IPA being about "understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). Because of its focus on the experience from within, an analysis will build upon an interpretation of what is in the data rather than being based on theory or other reading (Smith et al., 2022).

IPA is not built upon a single philosophical idea but uses an eclectic approach by choosing selectively and widely from a range of ideas (Smith et al., 2022). IPA has roots in phenomenology, which leads to a focus on wishing to understand the meaning of human experience and hermeneutics, which leads to the method paying attention to the interpretative activity itself (Shaw, 2019). IPA is dedicated to paying attention to each case separately in the analytical process and understanding each case as closely as possible. This does, however, not mean that IPA is limited to having one participant, though it is generally done on relatively small homogeneous samples to allow for investigating relatively small similarities and differences in detail. This leads the claims of generality to be bound by the studied group but can, under some circumstances, be extended by theoretical generalizability by allowing the reader to assess the evidence and relate it to their own professional and experiential knowledge (Smith et al., 2022).

We have chosen it because of its objective of understanding the meaning of personal or social experiences for those who experience them. It investigates an individual's experience through the description of events, objects, or relationships and related emotions. It thereby sees experience as both a specific thing and a process in which those who experience it are actively involved. This means it is inspired by a critical realist method, which assumes that we cannot get direct access although reality exists. This means that reality in the form of events is only accessible through our participants' eyes, and the access is, therefore, never direct, even though it exists (Shaw, 2019). A person can offer us their unique insight into their relationship or involvement in a given phenomenon because experience should always be understood in relation to the phenomenon and is therefore not isolated or owned by the person (Smith et al., 2022). This takes into account that access to reality is through the perspective of the person retelling it and influenced by historical, social, cultural, political, and economic context as well as the person themselves (Shaw, 2019).

Phenomenology

As the name suggests, IPA is inspired by phenomenology since it is committed to exploring an experience on its own terms. This also leads it to be an inductive approach rather than deductive since the experiences are not put in or defined by abstract categories but are presented more in their own rights (Smith et al., 2022). As a philosophical approach, phenomenology is dedicated to studying experience through an interest in what being human is like, what matters to us, and how we understand experiences. As a method, IPA is eclectically inspired by various philosophers, drawing on different ideas from varying phenomenological philosophers (Smith et al., 2022).

According to Smith et al (2022) IPA draws from Husserl on the importance and relevance of examining human experience and its perception through the central focus of the process of reflection as a way of becoming conscious of them instead of simply going with the flow of everyday

activities. This can be done through what Husserl called a phenomenological method, which leads to

a phenomenological attitude through a series of reductions that gives a specific lens to investigate

the phenomenon to ensure getting past one's preconceptions by focusing on the phenomenon

through different eyes. This included a description and a reflection of what makes a phenomenon

particular and different from other things. This idea stresses a systematic and attentive examination

of what is in the consciousness and, thereby, our lived experience and the idea of continuous

attempts at "bracketing" as part of the reflective practice. The bracketing comes from his focus on

investigating phenomena in their own right and that our use of categories can hinder this process.

However, since Husserl had this fairly intrapsychic focus on perception, awareness, and

consciousness, IPA applies the ideas differently to examine how someone might know their own

experience of a phenomenon and therefore applies them to a different matter informed by various

phenomenological philosophers (Smith et al., 2022).

This is, for instance, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, who was interested in embodiment and,

therefore focused somewhat more on the body. This has implications for IPA researchers through

that lived experience of being a body-in-the-world is essential for understanding someone's

perspective. This means that he wished to understand our being-in-the-world, like other

phenomenologists, but this is contextualized through the body. The importance of the

body-in-the-world can be examined through how people describe feelings or sensations or use

emotion-words or embodied language to indicate how they feel concerning what they care about if

something is changed or threatened. In this way, the embodied nature of our relationship with the

world gives us an individual perspective of the world because of how we are situated through

embodiment, which means that we can never indeed share their experience entirely, even though

we can have empathy (Smith et al., 2022). For instance, how it feels when one's body is suddenly

working against one because it can't do what it used to or because of pain and what this means for our being in the world.

From Sartre, IPA draws upon a more relational focus as one being in the world through personal and social relationships as being a part of our experiences through either their presence or absence, giving a more existential focus. Sartre emphasized that one is self-conscious and meaning-seeking but that this is done in active engagement with the world, which is also inhabited by others who, therefore, shape it as well. Even though the topics differ from Sartre's, IPA is inspired by his penetrating analysis of people engaged in projects in the world and the moral, interpersonal, affective, and embodied nature of encounters (Smith et al., 2022).

IPA draws from Heidegger on some of both his phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies and his critical stance on the idea that any knowledge could be collected without an interpretive process that, however, should be firmly grounded in the world and that this world held relationships, activities and more which is part of what makes it meaningful to us. The more phenomenological part, which focuses on existential questions, is the idea that humans are somehow "thrown" into a world of objects, relationships, and language and that humans' being-in-the-world (dasein) is not meaningful without it and are therefore always in the world in a temporal, perspectival and in relation to something sort of way which makes interpretation of people's meaning-making important to phenomenology and leads to a more intersubjective focus with the person always being in a context (Smith et al., 2022).

Though Husserl inspires both Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger, they also go beyond the descriptiveness and towards a more interpretative position by seeing the person as part of a world of objects, relationships, langues, culture, projects, and concerns. Therefore, the human becomes a part of the world instead of an isolated entity and should be understood through the perspectival

directedness of our involvement in the lived world, which includes our relationships with the world and others. This means that experience becomes a complex phenomenon that is not isolated to the person as an intrapsychic state but a process that holds multiple perspectives and meanings unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world. This leads to IPA often focusing on particular events, relationships, or processes in that person's world, and this process is interpretive and focuses on participants' efforts to make meaning of what is happening to them and their activities (Smith et al., 2022).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a big inspiration for IPA through its focus on interpretation. Hermeneutics is originally used for the interpretation of biblical texts. Still today it covers much more like other texts and as inspiration for many things like interpretive processes in psychology, such as IPA. The hermeneutic approach focuses on the methods and purposes of interpretation, whether one can uncover an author's original meaning or intentions, and the relation between the context of text production and text interpretation. Even though the main focus of hermeneutics is texts, it especially holds inspiration for the interpretive process used in a broad field of qualitative research (Smith et al., 2022).

As already stated, IPA draws upon Heidegger regarding both phenomenology and hermeneutics ideas due to his roots in both. Heidegger describes phenomenology as an interpretive activity that links the two philosophies together as inspiration for IPA as an interpretive phenomenological approach. Heidegger also focuses on the role of one's preconceptions and goes deeper into how this is related to the interpretative work. Fore-understandings are seen as more complex and dynamic, stating that one cannot always be aware of these and, therefore, cannot necessarily be bracketed in the way first envisioned. However, it can be done in a more

process-oriented way where it is partially done and used in a more reflexive practice in qualitative psychology. In this way, Heidegger has inspired IPA by examining how a phenomenon appears and the fact that the interpreter is actively facilitating and making sense of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022).

From Schleiermacher, IPA draws upon the idea that an interpretative analyst can offer a text perspective through interpretation, which the author cannot, that means the interpreter brings something extra. This puts into focus the language of the text as well as the subject. It points to smaller parts being part of something bigger, which influence each other. The extra from the interpreter can, in IPA research, e.g. be the product of detailed analysis in a systematic way or on a larger scale through the collective data set or through the inclusion of psychological or other theories to bring a new perspective than the original meaning from the author themselves. This also means trying to understand the writer as well as the text through a detailed, comprehensive, and holistic analysis, which IPA can be seen being inspired by. However, according to Schleiermacher, this can only happen if there is some common ground between the author and interpreter and is therefore impossible by doing particular analysis steps. In IPA this shows a light on the interpreter as to trying to put oneself in the participant's shoes as part of the process but also means that one will never be completely able to because of what they bring themselves (Smith et al., 2022).

From Gadamer, IPA draws upon his insights as well as Heidegger's concerning the relationship between one's fore-understanding and the phenomenon. The phenomenon influences the interpretation, which influences one's preconceptions, which can again influence the interpretation, and this continues back and forth and can be seen as an inspiration for the research process, especially regarding the analytical parts of the process. It highlights factors of what is involved in making sense of the text and that interpretation will focus on the meaning of the text but

that it will be strongly influenced by the moment of interpretation, which is why one should be careful to claim knowing the author's intention since the interpretation will depend on the period of time, which one should be especially careful about if there is a large gap, but it is rarely the case with qualitative research. It highlight the importance of the circumstances for interpretation playing a role besides the interpreted material (Smith et al., 2022).

The hermeneutic circle is a central idea that has influenced many of the hermeneutics writers, including the above, but is not identified by one in particular. However, it has greatly influenced many things, e.g., IPA. The hermeneutic circle describes a dynamic relationship between parts and a whole of something with a constant movement between whole and parts on different levels where wholes on one level can be parts on another, for instance, with a sentence that can be seen as a whole or as a part of a paragraph again in a text and so forth. To understand the parts or the whole, one must understand and look at the opposite so that it is seen in context, and this is for both part and whole since words is affected by the sentence and the sentence by the word. Itcan be used to describe and interpret processes in a dynamic, non-linear way. The hermeneutic circle lays the groundwork for how the IPA method works. IPA is often described as a linear process, but a key point to the analysis is that one can move forth and back regarding multiple ways of thinking about the data and that the insight gained from the data can cause further insight on the same data moving between part and whole (Smith et al., 2022). This can furthermore be used upon preconceptions as part of the research process where they can be seen as part of the hermeneutic circle in the research process it function as "part" in the meeting participants and their experience. Preconceptions might not be able to be bracketed entirely. Still, they can be acknowledged, leading to a redirected focus on the participant in the interview. Still, one can draw upon these again in the analysis mixed with the interview experience, which might have influenced these preconceptions (Smith et al., 2022).

Summary

Grounded in both phenomenology and hermeneutics as inspiration for IPA, Jonathan Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin (2022) state that the focus of both the I and P is important for IPA, which means a focus on both interpretation and the phenomenon, which they describe as essential for the method. "IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (p.1), which is why we thought it an appropriate method of investigating the experience of being on long-term sick leave due to stress. We believe that this can be stated as potentially being one of these major life experiences. When these experiences happen, people start reflecting, thinking, and feeling about it to understand its meaning and significance, which is what IPA research aims to try and understand in detail.

As a method, IPA's goal is to try and understand what it is like to be that person in that specific context; however, realizing that this is not possible since the access depends on what our participants tell us about the experience and our interpretations hereof and since both parties in an interview are active sense-making individuals and whatever accounts retrieved from an interview will be reflecting the participants trying to make sense of their experience influenced by the interview and the interviewer themselves (Shaw, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). This leads to the researcher trying to adopt the perspective of the participant. Still, it can also ask questions about what is being said and thereby move beyond what is said through interpretation by perhaps being critical towards the participants' description of events or relationships and thereby go beyond what is said through the meeting with the interpreter. However, it is vital that such interpretations are still rooted in the data. It seeks to make both analytic interpretations of the experiences as well as the one who is experiencing them. Successful IPA research is able to combine both the empathic and the questioning stance to understand the phenomenon (Shaw, 2019; Smith et al., 2022).

IPA as a method of analysis

To analyze our data we have used IPA, which is defined more by its analytical focus on the "participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences' ' rather than a prescribed method, allowing for flexibility in the analytic process (Smith et al., 2022, p. 75). It is characterized by common processes and principles that allow for flexibility in the analytical process by incorporating moving from particular and shared as well as descriptive and interpretive. Driven by a commitment of understanding the participants' point of view and meaning-making in particular contexts. It can therefore be described as an iterative and inductive cycle including different strategies (Smith et al., 2022):

- line-by-line analysis of the transcript to focus on experiential claims, understanding concerns of each participant.

- Identification of patterns of experiential material with focus on both commonalities and nuances, emphasizing both convergence and divergence within one case and potentially across cases

- It works as a 'dialogue' between the analyzed data and the researchers with the psychological knowledge guiding an interpretation into what this might mean for the participants in the specific context.

- Illustration of the relationship between experiential themes and the development of a structure or gestalt.

- Organization of material in a way that allows for the process to be traced al the way from the analyzed data to exploratory notes on the transcript to developing the experiential statement, to clustering of themes and the final structure for experiential themes and group experiential themes.

- Using collaboration, supervision or audit in creating coherence and plausibility of interpretation.

- Development of narrative through theme-by-theme walk through, potentially guided by a visual guide like a diagram, table or figure, that goes through the interpretation with the help of a evidenced trail of detailed commentary and illustrative data extracts.

- Reflection of own perceptions, conceptions and processes due to the interpreters active role of interpreting.

These strategies leave room for differences and flexibility through a complex process (Smith et al., 2022). As described above IPA uses a double hermeneutic approach, causing the analysis to be a product of both the participant and the analyst since the analyst is making sense of the participants' sense-making of a lived experience - therefore IPA is a subjective yet rigorous, systematic and dialogical endeavor of analysis allowing the reader themselves to check analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The analysis is a dynamic process that demands engagement with the transcript and is in combining different analytical processes until writing up. Until that point, the analysis might change by engagement of both parts and whole in the transcripts and in the interview between the participants and interviewer themselves.

Transcripts are according to Smith and colleagues (2022) analyzed case by case through a systematic qualitative analysis in IPA that leads to a narrative account from the analytic interpretation of the research presented in detail and supported by extracts from the verbatim transcript and thereby from the participants that secure the inductiveness of the method. This is, in large, what we have tried to do in our article and the below-described method, even though we have

been inspired by both Shaw (2019) and Smith and colleagues (2022) in regard to exactly how this analysis was to take form precisely.

Our analysis

As a researcher in an IPA study, one is active with the data in the analysis but also with the participants themselves doing the interview. We are trying to understand and interpret or make-sense of the participants' account while they themselves are describing , interpreting and trying to make sense of it to be able to explain it. This is known as double hermeneutic because both involved are in an active process of interpretation and interact with each other and their interpretation (Shaw, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). This is in part, what lays the ground for our analysis.

We kept a reflective journal, which was used to write down thoughts throughout the entire process. Doing the analysis it was especially used to make notes on thoughts on emerging overall themes or other important parts and analytical thoughts that did not make sense to put down anywhere else yet but were necessary for the understanding.

Inspired by Smith and colleagues (2022) we did an IPA analysis based on the step-by-step guide from them; however, it should be noted that even though it is here described as a linear process, we have moved back and forth between some of the steps throughout as out understanding developed. We have also in part been inspired by Shaw (2019) and the flowchart in the article is a way to visualize and give a short overview of our process, which is inspired by both.

The first step was to transcribe all our interviews verbatim and create a table for analysis with room for both transcriptions, descriptive summaries, exploratory notes and experiential statements. An example of out table can be seen in Figure 1 with descriptive summaries to the left, our transcripts in the middle, exploratory noting to the right and furthest to the right our experiential

statements:

His meeting with the system he describes as being almost comically. As if he was expected to be able to come up with a plan himself. SW had just been divorced and hadn't the resources and it wasn't motivating.	Claus:	Ja, altså det var et, et … frygteligt forkludret opfølgnings forløb fra kommunen dengang [int: ja] altså det er nærmest sådan komikkens præg undervejs. Med en socialrådgiver der i afdelingen der sagde til mig at, det … det var nemmere hvis du selv kunne komme med en plan for jeg er jo lige blevet skilt, så jeg har jo ikke rigtig noget og byde ind med. Altså det var, det var ikke motiverende [int: Nej]. Der gik lang tid og men ikke at det var hendes skyld på den led, men, men, men altså nå, men men.	"frygteligt forkludret " – frustration on municipality The SW as pushing the responsibility onto C due to her personal problems Why is C opposed to blaming the social worker?	Frustration meeting an inadequate and unhelpful municipality with a self-concerned social worker
	Int:	Det fungerede altså ikke sådan?		
He finds that the times were different from now with the system not being put under the same rules and demands, controlled by sanctions. Claus ended up finding his own internship in a residential institution and it went on for 8-9 months. He had been part of changing the culture and getting them to start documenting and they had found the money to hire him in a flex job.	Claus:	Nej, det var … men det var, tiderne var også anderledes dengang, der var ikke helt samme pres på. Altså ehm … kommunerne var ikke underlagt helt de samme rigide opfølgninger og [int: nej okay] krav fra Christiansborg om hvor hurtigt det her skal gå og hvilke sanktioner man bliver og sygdagpenge bliver stoppet og sådan og det var noget anderledes den gang øhm nej, men, men den korte version dengang er at … at så, så fik jeg at, fandt jeg selv, det var på en døgninstituion at jeg kom i et praktikforløb [int: ja] og hvor det kørte så i en 8-9 måneder eller sådan noget og der havde jeg været med til og få ændret kulturen og få noget dokumentation ind over og at der blevet gravet penge op til at, at jeg så kom i flexjob der fra, det var fra første i femte 2005 [int: ja] og der var jeg så i godt og vel 4 år indtil institutionen lige pludselig blev lukket. [int: nårh] og så blev jeg kontakt fra ungdomsskolen. Øh og blev så ansat der,	Crhistianborg as making the system "rigid" "fandt jeg selv, det var på en døgninstituion at jeg kom i et praktikforløb" – self agency C had an influence on his internship and could help shape the way of how and what was done	Political development causing rigidity within the municipalities to uphold demands from Christiansborg Self-agency regarding course of sick leave finding own internship and getting himself a "flexjob"

Figure 1: Table for analysis

This step also laid the foundation for the second step of choosing the first case through a familiarization process with both listening to, transcribing, and reading the transcripts. For us this step ended up excluding two of our interviews due to the realization of the impact of two of our participants' other illnesses, which in their case, were closely related to their narrative regarding stress and, therefore, warranted an unforeseen exclusion criterion. For further elaboration of this see the section on "Exclusion of participants".

The third step was reading and rereading the first case to make the participant the focus of the analysis. This was supplemented by the use of our reflexive journal, writing down initial thoughts.

This step was closely related to the fourth step, which was descriptive summaries. We started by summarizing the experiences described by our participants with descriptive summaries in

the left margin as part of getting to know the transcript and familiarizing ourselves with the data. Third and fourth step was to ensure focus on this particular case and the participant's experience with stress.

The fifth step was exploratory noting, which was a way of examining the semantic content and the language curiously and openly, where everything of interest can be noted and commented on freely, focusing on engaging more with the transcript than with the outcome of the comments. This step is free-floating and facilitates further familiarizing and initial interpretative practice by identifying how the participant talks, thinks, and understands an issue. The notes include comments with a phenomenological focus on what matters to the participant and the meaning of those things. They can include interpretative noting that can be used or discarded later on, which in our project was used by the question mark and the "-" to indicate thoughts from us.

Exploratory notes can, therefore, operate on different levels of analysis with both descriptive, linguistic focus like metaphors, emotion words, repetitions, and so forth, and conceptual or interrogative focus through questions as elements laying the foundation for further analysis and engagement with the data by creating a dialogue with it (Smith et al., 2022). In our project it was placed to the right of the transcript and was done simultaneously and supported by color coding to clarify connections between notes and relevant data parts of the transcript. The notes included both specific keywords from transcript, sentences and our commentary working on different levels of analysis from descriptive, interrogative to more interpretive work or language focus with repetitions or use of idioms as well as more conceptual focus. This included noting in the reflexive journals on similarities, contradictions or differences as well as major themes of the case.

The sixth step was constructing experiential statements, which can be seen as preliminary analytic entities to use in further analysis and is about consolidating and crystalizing our thoughts

while reducing the volume of detail and maintaining complexity, including the most important

explanatory notes. This step focuses on exploratory notes supported by the transcript to capture the

participants' experiences or sense-making. It is called experiential due to the relation with the

participants experiences and sense-making thereof. Statements are taken from the fact that the

analyst(s) are making statements. It involves a mix of local text parts and a broader knowledge from

making the notes and the interview as a whole. Therefore, it should try to contain a mix of

particularity from the piece of transcript and by that the experience and abstraction to be conceptual

and, in that way, take away the important parts of various notes. This can, the same as exploratory

notes, focus on different levels of analysis from descriptive to more conceptual statements. The

statements are both specific for the text piece but are also naturally influenced by the interview and

the analyst in the effect described as double hermeneutics. The statements do therefore entail both

the analyst's interpretation as well as reflect the participant's original words and thoughts in relation

to the interview as a whole (Smith et al., 2022). This was done by going through the entire transcript

one more time, focusing on both the notes and in part the transcript itself; some places contain

more statements than others due to differences of depth in the narrative and our analytical focus.

The seventh step is clustering experiential statements by searching for connections across

them. For this step we used a program called ayoa to scatter all the experiential statements randomly

across on an online whiteboard to avoid putting more weight onto the first in establishing groups.

See Figure 2 for an example:

Figure 2: Mixed experiential statements on whiteboard

This ensured an easy way of just moving them around by clicking and dragging rather than copy/pasting. Each statement got a note, and was marked by the first letter of our participants' pseudo name as well as page number to be able to check for context later. These were then sorted out in clusters with all sorts of connections. Initially the clusters were not named to maintain as open an analysis as possible by not locking us on to something specific from the beginning. We tried different combinations and moved them around multiple times before beginning step eight. See figure 3: First clustering of experiential statements

Step eight was the initial naming of clusters focusing on the connections between notes in each cluster. This again caused changes to make the units meaningful under one headline and led to

both merging and division of initial clusters.

Figure 3: First clustering of experiential statements

      For step nine this whiteboard with clusters was transformed to a mindmap using the same

programs with each cluster functioning as an upper level arm on the mindmap. See figure 4 for an

example or appendix for whiteboards for all three of our participants with the initial naming of the
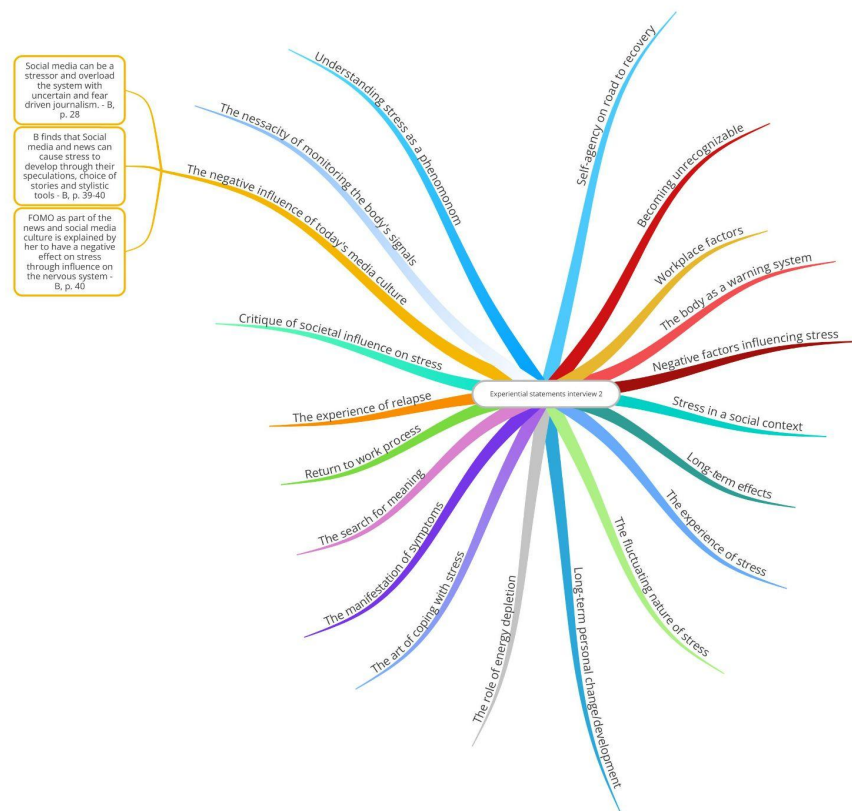
groups.

Figure 4: Inital mindmap

Each cluster was then worked with by making sub-clusters trying to further divide it into smaller units when that was meaningful which provided a secondary layer of arms on the mindmap, and in a few cases third layers. This stage included mixing some around again due to discovery of other connections by the formation and naming of sub-clusters, and therefore could include both merges and division or resolution of a cluster as the analysis moved forward.

Step ten was the naming of Personal Experiential Themes (PET), which was done on the basis of the initial name of the clusters but also in relation to the new division of subclusters. PET is a title to describe a cluster's characteristics whereby the cluster becomes the participant's Personal Experiential Themes, which means that they are personal in the sense that they are at the level of the person, they can be intimate but might not be, relational, social or abstract but will nevertheless

be based on the particular person. They are experiential because of their direct relation to the participants' experiences and their experience of sense-making. Themes stem from the fact that they are no longer tied specifically to local instances in the transcript but instead reflect analytic entities from the transcript as all, and are therefore less tied to specific parts than experiential statements (Smith et al., 2022). Out Pets has sometimes been about similarities but has in other cases been about conflict and polarizing data e.g. in our participants' description of social support which has been conflicted across cases between both experiences of support and mistrust. In this case the naming of sub-themes should make the relation clear. Some theme names are very close to our participants' experience and can focus on a metaphor or specific words used by our participants if this describes the theme. Others will be more typically theme-like highlighting the similarity of the subject. Here sub-themes will then focus on underlying similarities or contrasts within the PET.

Step eleven was about adding extracts from the transcript as a way to follow the analysis by providing an evidence trail, and check the PETs to make sure that the analysis stays true to the transcript, and that the statements were not merely taken out of context. This is done on the outer layer of the mindmaps, see the appendix PET tables for each participant for a full overview. This did sometimes lead to a few changes when the original meaning of a statement had been misinterpreted in the further analysis and this step therefore functioned as a quality check. We have chosen to use relatively large extracts since the transcripts themselves is not available for readers to protect the identity of our participants, we have therefore tried to provide large enough chunks of transcript to make the connection clear, however as stated earlier statements are both specific and more abstract and for some it might be necessary to keep in mind that it is influenced by the whole interview itself and relate it to other statements to get the full picture. The extract will however contain what prompted the statement.

Step twelve was about finalizing the PETs by being extra aware of the wording of PETs and sub-PETs to make sure it captures experience in the title as well, which led to some changes since some of the themes were quite title like. Then it was about making the mindmap presentable with a clear division of themes and sub-themes of experiential statements and their relations, as well as transcript parts to support the statements and their connections. This step included in our case the making of child mindmap to show the lower layers of the mindmap more clearly - which means that each PET was made to its own mindmap where each sub-theme had an arm each to make the mindmap more readable due to the amount of data. The large mindmap gives an overview and then one can use the child mind map to look closer on the relations (See PET table for each participant).

Step thirteen was about repeating the above twelve steps across each case, which in this ended up with three interviews. Smith (2022, p. 105) describes three as the often optimum number for an IPA student project due to the step-to-step working and the number allowing both for detailed analysis of each case ensuring a PET capturing the experience for each particular person as well as being manageable in making the GETs in a way that allows for looking for both particularity and similarity across cases allowing room for case-level divergence and more idiographic details (p. 105). In this process we tried having focus on the specific case to work with it on its own terms to do its individuality justice instead of putting them in predefined themes. However we have as Smith (2022, p. 99) expresses likely been influenced by the preceding cases as is in line with the hermeneutic understanding of analysis just like our initial for-understanding will have influenced the first one. This means that there can be seen similarities both due to our fore-understandings and due to thematic overlap due to the homogeneity of the group - however we have systematically followed the outlined step-by-step to ensure each interview its rightful focus.

Step fourteen is about working with the PETS across cases to develop Group Experiential

Themes (GETs). The aim of this step is to investigate by looking for similarities and differences across

PETs of the cases the same way as looking for this when making PETs initially. These were grouped

together in clusters like with the Experiential statements initially when there were similarities. This

combined with thinking of the major themes of experience and sense-making, and what connections

are there between each case, functioned as the initial analysis. This is to highlight shared and

particular features of experience across the contributing participants to understand and explore

convergence and divergence (Smith et al., 2022). For this we initially looked at our PET mind maps

for each case, focusing on the different PETs to get an overview and compare them on the highest

level of analysis. This led to the initial grouping of seven potential themes in new mindmaps (See

appendix potential GET groupings), one regarding: critic of the system with system representing

everything public from job center to doctors and psychological treatment. The second was about the

importance of the right diagnoses. The third was about coping in a broad sense with both immediate

and continued coping. The fourth was the experience of stress in relation to social and societal

influence. The fifth was about the nature of stress on different levels from sequale to how stress can

take a life on its own. The sixth was about the consequences of stress in both positive and negative

directions. The seventh was about the return to work process and the influence of the workplace in

all. Then, we made one for outliers, which were the ones that did not fit anywhere initially. This

grouping was made primarily from the PET level, with a few split-ups to divide sub-PETs.

Step fifteen is about clustering these in meaningful GETs like earlier with the PETs and

checking on all levels of analysis from statements to GETs and sub-GETs. We therefore continued the

analysis for the different mindmaps with the openness for moving sub PETS or even statements to

other mindmaps when appropriate since some of them fitted better under another GET and

inclusion of earlier outliers. They were initially moved around on all levels, from PET to experiential

statements, to create new categories. The statements were mixed around within the new groups

and sometimes between the potential GETs to create new sub-GETs and potentially a third layer to

create a better overview of the information when it made sense. Most of the GET and sub-GETs were

created with the focus of similarities and convergence in their experiences with the quotes

themselves as a source of further nuance and divergence between their particular experiences, but a

few was made with a focus on the divergence on sub-level comparing different reasoning between

the cases e.g. the one about different causes of stress. This is done to ensure a focus on both

convergence and divergence in line with the IPA standard (Smith et al., 2022). To make it as

transparent as possible, the levels only representing one individual have the first letter from their

pseudonym in the headline. We have as far as possible, tried to incorporate most statements, but

naturally some were excluded due to the particularity of each participant's experience. The process

caused some outliers due to the interviewees' unique experiences (See Outliers in creation of PETs).

The making of GETs has cost details on intra case level e.g. Dinas description of joy from regaining her

life; since the others did not focus on this at any point, it is not part of the GETs; however, this is not

to say it was not an important part of her narrative because it definitely were. Still, it was not a

theme on inter case level.

Step sixteen is about finalizing these GETs by naming them and sub-GETs and second layer

sub-GETs to make sure to capture part of the experience for our participants. As well as making the

mindmaps on different levels as tables of our analysis. The final GETs were "The Inadequacy of the

System'', "Experiencing a Mix of Positive and Negative Factors Influencing Rehabilitation", "The Need

for Various and Continuous Coping", "The Complex Nature of Stress'', and "Both positive and

negative consequences of stress". (See the final 5 GETs in appendix). To show our process we also included a mindmap for the final Outliers.

Step seventeen is about checking analysis with the original PETs, notes, and transcript to ensure that the GETs do represent our participants' experience.

Step eighteen is creating the narrative account by writing up the analysis part of our research article. This is about making a "full narrative account which is comprehensible, systematic, and persuasive" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 109). As suggested by Smith (2022) it was chosen to present only one GET to ensure a full narrative account since it would be significantly beyond the scope of a single paper to present all six of the GETs. It was decided to present GET-3 "The need for Various and Continuous Coping" due to it being a major theme in all three of our participants' PETs and due to their fairly even distribution for that GET showing the convergence of the theme. Furthermore, it touches a lot of the other GETs as well as following them through the entire experience from the beginning and as shown in the analysis beyond their sick leave of stress due to the continuous need for coping. The full GET was rather comprehensive, and we have had to select fewer quotes due to the scope of the article. Furthermore, some quotes were shortened. The version used in the article can be found in the appendix GET shortened for the article. The full GET with the full quotes can be seen in the appendix, along with the other GETs.

Criteria of quality

The need for a way of accessing the quality of your research and how to do it is a long standing question within qualitative research, which has been transformed multiple times through the decades of its emigration on the scientific scene (Whittemore et al., 2001). Where the quantitative methods are more standardized, the qualitative methods are more divided in terms of what and how the qualitative methods are used, which in part is due to the necessity of being

flexible enough to accommodate the fluidity of the different qualitative methods hindering a decision of a predetermined set criteria for determining quality that might not be applicable on every qualitative method (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2019).

Even with the diverse array of methods and ideas of what is good qualitative method, some researchers have attempted to put together a set of criteria of validity for qualitative research that can function as a guideline for every qualitative method and ensure some sample of structural and scientific validity in the process (Tracy, 2010; Yardley, 2008 and Spencer et al, 2003 according to Sullivan C.). The list of criteria goes as follows (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2019) ;

1. Reflexivity; What was the relationship between the researcher(s) and the research carried out?

2. Transparency and audit trail; How clear is the research process?

3. Coherence; Is there a clear thread in the research that connects it all together?

4. Value/contribution of the research; Is this research useful and applicable to the context in which it was conducted?

5. Rigour; Has the research been conducted in a systematic way?

Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez (2019) define reflexivity as largely an umbrella term for providing a foundation for the researchers to explore their relationship with the subject material and the researchers' own impact upon it. This can be in both personal ways of experiences, thoughts, and preconceptions, while also on a professional level of a researcher in terms of choice of method, questionnaires, the possible impact of own professional interest, and epistemological level of how knowledge is formed through the research the researcher(s) might have.

In our paper, we have attempted to fulfill the requirement of reflexivity on a personal level by stating our reasons for our interest and choice of research subject, and our collective

preconceptions about both topic and possible subjects that may occur in the research, that could be influenced by these preconceptions. On the researchers' level, we have attempted to fulfill it by making explicit that we are working through the IPA approach, whereas explained previously, there is a focus on "understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24), while not being built on single philosophical idea, but an eclectic approach to form the foundation for how our knowledge is created.

With the transparency and audit trail, Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez (2019) define it as a way to make clear to the reader about the way you have done your research and if it has been done in a systematic and solid way. This includes explaining the steps performed through the research and the reasoning behind each of them, alongside the impact each step might have had on the outcome of the entire process.

In our paper, we have attempted to write down, include, and explain everything we have deemed relevant in our decision-making, to improve our audit trail and transparency of our work, we will include pictures of our data analysis process to give a better understanding of the process. And include larger sections of transcript than often used in IPA to help with transparency. Our transcriptions will be available to the reader upon request, but the recordings of our interviews will not be available with the paper due to ethical considerations of the privacy of our interviewees and GDPR.

With Coherence Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez (2019) explain it as having a golden thread that goes through the entire paper, binding everything together alongside it. This includes method, theoretical choices, method of data collecting, and analysis of data to ensure everything is coherent and makes sense as a whole.

We believe that with our choice of IPA as our method and guideline for our research and making our decision from the principles outlined within this method, we have managed to ensure that the golden thread is visible throughout our work, especially because, as we mentioned earlier, the IPA method attempts to understand a particular phenomenon in a particular context. Following this guideline and repeatedly returning to it, asking ourselves if what we are doing seems to be in line with the IPA method while also rechecking if the golden thread still seems to be visible through our choices to ensure coherence throughout the entire project while adjusting accordingly if we have strayed too far away from our original research question or guideline.

The fourth point on the list of criteria for quality, Value/ contribution of our research, as Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez (2019) mention, revolves around if what our research can contribute to the specific field of science, while if what we are researching can say anything about the actual conditions of the subject matter, and what the possible consequences of it might or follow up studies might be.

In our work process, we have attempted to tackle this issue in multiple ways. At the very beginning, when we considered the subject for our research, we performed a small literature review to get acquainted with the already established work within stress research, where we found there to be a lack of research concerning the qualitative experience of people with stress, so we deem our research to be a small starting point to go deeper into researching the actual experience of stress rather than the more quantitative hard data on stress.

With our research question, we also hope to bring out how the patients who are being / have been treated for stress experience being met in a social, systematic, and personal context and through these lenses, maybe being able to find any missing flaws, improvements or outright wrong ideas of the beneficial or non-beneficial aspects of stress treatment. Due to the limitations of this

paper being a small master thesis, this seems impossible, but it could be the starting point for bigger and further; How do people who have been on long-term sick leave due to stress experience stress as a phenomenon, with more resources and a bigger more concurrent sample pool than what has been possible in this paper. With regards to whether our research is attributable to the context that it was performed in, then given that it is a phenomenological study, it is attributable to the context of our interview persons, but the experience of our interviewees might highly differ from other people's experience and can only be said to give a few small glimpses of what the experience of stress is like. It might be able to highlight some shared experiences that occur throughout all of our participants' experiences, from which a greater whole can be found and further investigated through later research.

The fifth and final point on the list provided by Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez (2019), is Rigour, by which is a checkpoint to ensure that the study is done carefully, systematically, and thoroughly to ensure the highest possible standard is met. This point can be contradictory in the way that it would suggest that there is a right method to perform qualitative studies and the need to follow a rigid method with little room for being flexible and innovative in the approach (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2019), this can be seen as a combination of all the points above it checking the end result.

As stated earlier, in the making of our paper, we have followed the IPA method, by following this, the standard of our study should be able to be considered being of the highest standard possible within qualitative research, further adding on our documentation and explanations of our decision making and reasoning ensures that the reader gets provided with as much information about our entire process to be able to judge the paper in its entirety and from there make an informed decision and validation of the quality of our paper, and by this, again ensuring a higher

standard for both the paper and the readers ability to judge to method, decision making, reasoning,

validity, and results of this paper.

Abstract

Reasons for writing: Stress is an illness that is on the rise worldwide, having huge financial, social, and personal impacts on societies. Researching and finding new ways to stump the stress rise and treat people currently suffering from stress is important for health professionals all across the world.

Problem; Stress research has largely ignored looking into the experience of people suffering from stress, while mainly focusing on symptoms, specific work areas, and work stressors and how to minimize these on a company structural level. We find this to be an oversight, and believe that there is knowledge to be found within the stories of the people who have suffered from stress, and what they experienced that can be used to explain stress on a larger scale and help halt the rise of stress in society.

Methodology; This paper followed the IPA semi-structured one-to-one interview format. Following the interview transcriptions, the data from each interview were divided into a PET, showcasing each participant's main themes through the interview; these PETs were merged together into several five GETs were created for our three participants, The Inadequacy of the System, Experiencing a Mix of Positive and Negative Factors Influencing Rehabilitation, The Need for Various and Continuous Coping, Negative Influence of Social and Societal Miscomprehension of Stress, The Complex Nature of Stress and Both Positive and Negative Consequences of Stress, where in the data from our Interviews are condensed. Finally, the GET that was found best able to represent the data by being a large theme across the PETs while having the best distribution of each participant's contribution to the GET was chosen for analysis.

Analysis; The analysis highlighted the need for various and continuous coping from our participants. The coping varied among our participants, using nature, body, and the mind in ways of

coping with their particular challenges, but there were similarities. All of our participants have

experienced being forced to adapt their lives during and after stress. Self-agency in multiple aspects

of their experience was highlighted both in regard to the right treatment and in finding the best ways

of coping both with stress and a pressuring system.

Conclusion; We found a high level of need for self-agency in treatment for our participants.

This need could possibly be tied to the harmful experience two of our participants have been put

through, having an experience of the system being directly harmful to their healing process. We

furthermore concluded that our participants have been forced to find ways of coping and adapting to

the after-effects they are having from being sick with stress, these effects persist even after returning

to work. Their lived experience of stress in a social setting and their extensive need for coping

indicate stress as being a complicated, varied and characteristic phenomenon.

Keywords; Stress, IPA, Experience of stress, Burn out, Udmattelsessyndrom, Qualitative,

Work Stress, Stressors. semi-structured one-to-one interview, Coping, Long-term stress, Adaptation

Disorder.

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The Complex Experience of Suffering from Stress - An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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The Complex Experience of Suffering from Stress - An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Stress is on the rise worldwide; according to the World Economic Forum, 43% of respondents in 100 countries reported feeling stressed in 2020, up from 38% in 2019 (Armstrong, 2021). In Denmark, the numbers were lower; 29% of respondents felt stressed in 2021; this is still an increase from 2013, when 25% felt stressed (Sundhedsstyrrelsen, 2022). Stress can lead to many other illnesses, sequela, and disabilities with severe and possibly lethal outcomes. With stress becoming more common and seeing the long-term effects it can have on people's lives, research to improve the understanding of the illness is vital to help stop the increase of stress.

Literature review

Stress has multiple connotative meanings, including being busy, emphasizing (*Stress Definition & Meaning*, n.d.), stress in a biological sense as a short-term condition enhancing the ability to react, or as something that can evolve into psychiatric illnesses (Møhl & Simonsen, 2017) or other illnesses. A Danish public health care page defines stress as a "condition characterized by tension and undesired in the individual '' (*Hvad er stress?*, n.d.) as a reaction to physical or psychological strain, and it is underlined that it is not an illness. However, one can be on long-term sick leave due to stress, which seems contradictory. Every year, stress causes 1.5 million days of absence, 30,000 hospital admissions, costs 14 billion in healthcare, and has a fatal outcome for 1,400 Danes (*Stress*, n.d.).

Studies on stress specifically seem to focus on factors regarding coping or stressors in different work arenas like policemen (Alexander & Walker, 1994), teachers (Yang et al., 2011), social workers (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016), and more. Some articles focus on organizational factors(Norlund et al., 2011) or intervention methods (Grocke & Moe, 2015; Netterstrøm et al.,

2013), but there seems to be a lack of qualitative studies focusing specifically on the experience of stress.

Stress is not a formal diagnosis in any officially accepted international diagnostic classification system. However, it has two related diagnoses in ICD-10, Burnout and "Stress belastning" which are not specified and lack a clear symptom list (Andersen, 2007), leaving the understanding of stress up to the individual. This can be problematic due to the experience of waiting to be recognized as ill. Which, according to Engebretsen and Bjorbaekmo (2019), causes people suffering from a non-biomedical diagnosis like burnout to be met with distrust by healthcare professionals, causing an experience of participating in a battle that influences their recovery negatively. Further complicating this is the experience of not having their illness recognized, causing them to be categorized as suffering from other known illnesses like depression, which can have a negative effect on the healing process (Engebretsen & Bjorbaekmo, 2020). This points to the importance of recognizing the experience to avoid adverse effects on the healing process. It fits poorly with the disorganized conceptualization of stress. A study by Ladegaard et al. (2019) points towards a lack of a common understanding of stress influencing managers' ability to handle employees returning to work, making them focus on individual circumstances and personality despite the sick leave being due to work-related stress. This points towards the possibility of a similar problem regarding stress, which has caused us to wonder how this might affect people suffering from stress and has led to the following research question:

Research question and aim of study

How do people who have been on long-term sick leave due to stress experience stress as a phenomenon?

Most studies about stress are performed using various quantitative methods, and only a few qualitative interview studies have been found. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge by using the IPA method to gain a nuanced insight into our participants' experience and sense-making regarding stress.

Method

We used the qualitative method of semi-structured interview and an interpretative phenomenological analysis to investigate the experience of stress as a phenomenon for people who have been on long-term sick leave because of it.

Procedure of data collection

To get informants to conduct our interview, we first looked around for patient associations that, unfortunately, were no longer active. Then, we contacted multiple social media forums for people with stress and asked for permission to post a notice on their site with information about our study containing our contact information. The inclusion criteria were individuals who had been on long-term sick leave due to stress and wanted to share their experience of stress (See appendix).

The notice gained nine inquiries, six of which fit our initial inclusion criteria of having been on long-term sick leave due to stress without having a personal relationship with the researchers. The semi-structured interviews were performed in the homes or a chosen private place of our participants, with both of the researchers present to supplement the others' questions at the end of each interview. The interview was guided by our interview guide (See appendix).

All interviews were digitally recorded, lasting from 1 hour and 36 minutes to 2 hours and 42 minutes, and transcribed verbatim. After revising our data, we decided not to use three of the interviews: 1, 5, and 6. We excluded interview 6 because it was incomplete because our participant had to leave. Interviews 1 and 5 were removed while exploring our data because the narrative of

their experience of stress was considerably intertwined with other illnesses, causing it to be beyond

the scope of this paper to investigate (See Framework for elaboration).

Ethical considerations

The participants were informed of the nature and method of the research and their rights

before signing consent forms. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any point in the

research process, stressing the voluntary nature of participation before and after the interview. To

ensure confidentiality, all of our participants and other names mentioned have been substituted with

a pseudonym, and identifiable data has been changed or removed.

Furthermore, we have decided to include only sections of the transcript to show the process

and allow readers to check and evaluate our analysis without giving full access to our participants'

experience through the transcript to ensure their anonymity. Contact information was provided, and

they were encouraged to contact us if they wanted to withdraw consent or had any questions.

Participants

Our three participants are different in age, one male and two females, ranging from 53 to 62,

and geographic locations spread throughout Denmark. Our participants are; Britt, a 55-year-old

female, educated school teacher with a different job, who has had stress two times, once in 2013

and February 2023, where during the interview she was still on sick leave from her job. Claus, a

62-year-old male, educated social worker, has been on stress sick leave since January 2023; in 2003,

he got a chronic stress diagnosis but has been working in a flex job since. Dina, a 53-year-old female,

higher educated, had stress for four years and is currently back in the workplace.

Procedure of data analysis

The interviews' verbatim transcripts were analyzed by using the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) inspired by both Smith (2022) and Shaw (2019) regarding the exact procedure. To introduce our procedure for data analysis, we have made a flow chart:
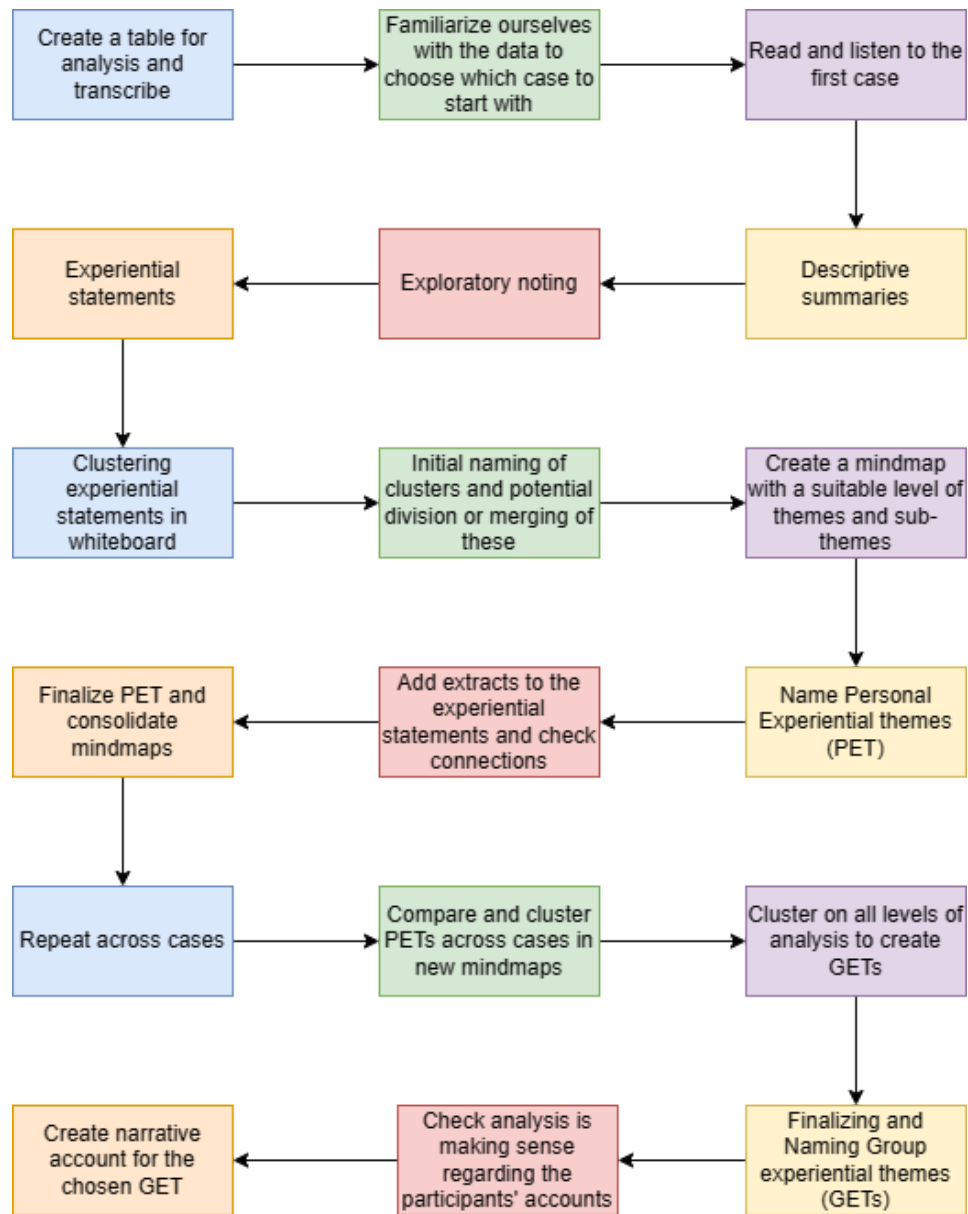

Figure 1: Flowchart of IPA analysis

The above flow chart shows a relatively linear process; however, in practice, it has been more dynamic, moving between steps to some extent in a double hermeneutic analysis both in relation to

the analysis itself and in relation to the contribution from us as researchers and our participants

through the interviews (See Framework for elaboration on our process).

Analysis

From the interviews, we have made five Group Experiential Themes (GETs):
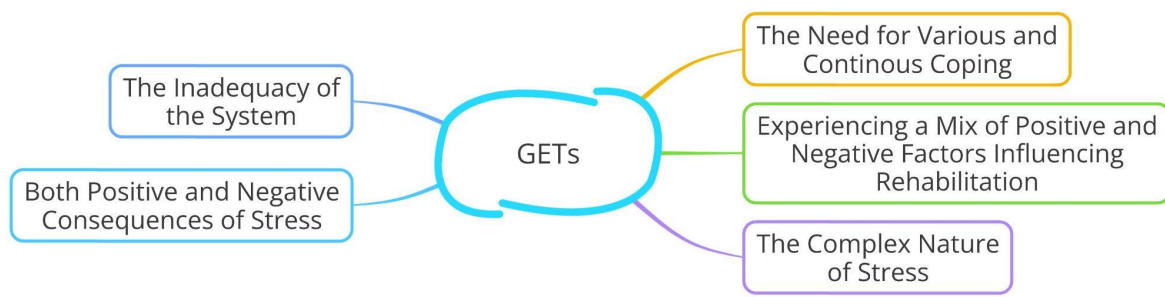
Figure 2: Mindmap for GETs

These are major themes across our participants' experiences (See appendix for PETs). Due to

the scope of the article, we have chosen to present only "The Need for Various and Continuous

Coping'' to allow for the necessary focus on the divergence and convergence that IPA demands

(Smith et al., 2022).

Our reasoning for choosing this GET is because it is relatively evenly distributed with D:35%,

C:30% and B:35%, it has threads to a lot of the other GETs, giving options to still touch subjects from

the other to provide a more detailed description of their particular experiences. The theme of coping has been a big theme across our participants' PETs, and has been constant in our participants' stories, from pre to post-stress, giving a view of their entire story.

The Need for Various and Continuous Coping

The GET provides insight into how our participants have attempted to deal with and have dealt with the immediate and continued complications produced by suffering from stress. Including external and internal complications, describing others' roles, lessons learned, and adaptations they have found to be beneficial to maintain a functional physical, social, and mental level. This GET has 10 SubGETs, which can be seen in Figure 3. Some of the SubGETs have Second-layer SubGETS, which will be presented below.

Coping by Controlling the Mind
Coping Using Nature to Relax
Coping by Calming the Nervous System
Awareness of the Body as an Alarm System
Importance of Self-agency in Coping with Stress
Get - The Need for Various and Continous coping.
Coping by Using the Body
Life Changes to Cope with Stress
Using Self-Protective Reasoning
Adjusting to the Level of Stress as Important
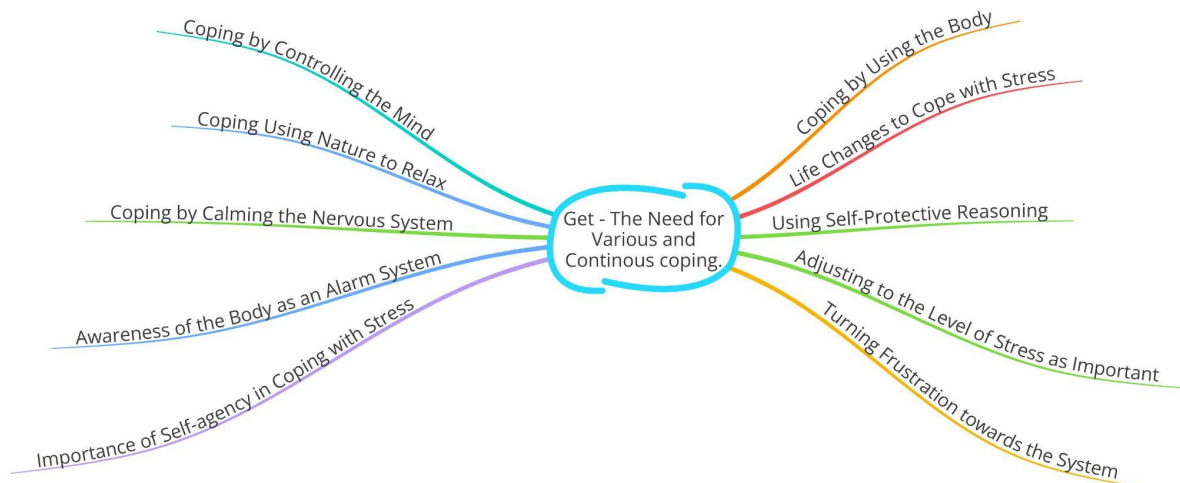Turning Frustration towards the System

Figure 3: GET - The Need for Various and Continous Coping (See appendix for the full mindmap)

Life Changes to Cope with Stress

The first sub-GET we wish to explore is "Life changes to cope with stress" which contains

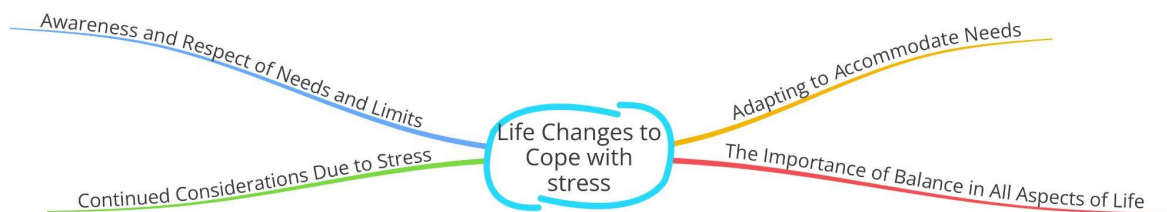Second-layer SubGETs that can be seen in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Sub-GET Life Changes to Cope with Stress

Awareness and Respect of Needs and Limits. This revolves around how our participants

have dealt with the loss of capability to perform any task during their experience with stress and how

they have responded to it when met with the challenge of setting up new boundaries for themself in

their social interactions. This can be seen in the following quote by Dina:

Det har jeg så håndteret ved netop at sige det på mit arbejde, og sige eh… nu har jeg taget

over i en periode, og og nuuu eh stopper det, fordi det kan jeg ikke, det, det kan jeg ikke

holde til. Eh [Int: nnnh] Og det har jeg ikke lyst til, ehh så så jeg er nok blevet bedre til at sige

fra eh… (D; p. 60-61)

Here Dina talks about how she has become better at saying no to protect herself, knowing

her own limits post-stress. While pre-stress, she would often say yes to any work demands, the

experience of stress has enhanced her awareness of the need to say no, when something would go

beyond her limits. Similarly, Claus shows respect and awareness of his limits when he states:

At da jeg så lige pludselig blev sygemeldt og skulle finde ja hvad skal man sige jamen så øh

sådan jamen det der kommer jeg aldrig tilbage til [Int: nnh] altså øhm og det, det har jeg jo

så fundet ud af øhm og fornuftigt synes jeg egentlig sådan med, med og … og prioritere øh

til og fra øh har jeg har jo skåret en måsse væk, jeg har ikke, jeg har ikke nær det samme

sociale liv som [int: nej] som, som jeg havde dengang (C; p 55-56).

Here, Claus is aware of and respects his own limits when he talks about having cut off many

things and that he does not have the same social life as before, further stating how he has found a

reasonable way to prioritize and accommodate for his altered state.

A similar respect is also found in Britt's narrative:

(...) Nu svømmer jeg måske 650 meter og så skal jeg lige mærke efter, er det der hvor jeg skal

700 meter, fordi det er bedre end 650? (...) har jeg brug for at at restituere. Så … Det her

med at stoppe op og spørge, altså holde pauser. Indimellem. Det behøver ikke at være sådan

timelange pauser, men bare lige at stoppe op i den aktivitet, jeg er i gang med og sige

hvordan har jeg det egentlig? [Obs: mmh]. Sådan mere eller mindre eh verbalt spørge mig

selv inde i hovedet. Hvordan har du det lige nu? "Og så mærke efter og tjekke ind efter det.

(B, p. 54-55)

In this quote, Britt gives a good view into her thought processing and reasoning while

introspecting on her own needs and limits. Should she push her body further because exercise is

good, or should she stop because of her need for rest? This constant awareness of having to ask

oneself; what is it I need at this moment to function later on? Shows Britt´s active adaption process.

As seen in the quotes above, our participants have become increasingly aware of their

lowered limits post-stress and are reflecting actively on how to deal with them in their own ways.

Continued Considerations Due to Stress. Explores how our participants plan ahead to ensure

their ability to function by preventing symptom flare-ups. Considerations like this can be seen in the

following quote by Dina:

Det er også i privatlivet, det er også i forhold til ikke at have eeen masse aftaler. Ehh hvis jeg

har en en aftale på en weekend, så er det rigeligt eh… og jeg har også massere af

weekender, hvor jeg ingenting skal. (...) [Int: mmh] Så jeg, jeg, jeg planlægger efter det, at …

der skal være en masse eh… eller der skal være fritid, ikke? Eller [Int: ja] (...) (D, p. 62-63)

In this, we can see how Dina manages her stress by considering and planning her social and

work life to ensure that she has plenty of weekends to rest in an attempt to prevent aggravating her

stress and preventing a relapse.

Similar considerations can be seen from Claus when he states:

Altså, altså det store billede har jeg jo styr på at, at, at jeg er ramt kronisk [int: ja] og det vil

aldrig ændre sig [Int mmh] så. (...) det er betydningen af det og det er i håb om at få nogle

handlemuligheder (...) og så selvfølgelig også forebygge at det bliver værre (C, p. 60)

Here it is clear that Claus's entire life is affected by stress, causing him to make

considerations. Since it is a chronic condition for him, he needs to work around it for the rest of his

life, yet still, he keeps hope for ways to expand his coping with stress, as preventive measure but also

to make his everyday function better as he has accepted his chronic stress condition.

As seen in the quotes above, considering stress by planning around it is necessary to prevent

it from escalating, causing relapse or a more severe stress response.

Adapting to Accommodate Needs. Here, we further explore some of the adaptations our

participants perform to accommodate the needs that arise due to their experience with stress and

their thoughts on how they change their coping depending on the day. This is especially visible with

Claus;

Jeg er podcast narkoman [Int: okay] [Obs: mmh] jeg hører virkelig, virkelig mange gode

podcasts (...) Jeg har også sommetider fundet en ny podcast, den vil jeg høre i dag [int: ja] og

kommer afsted på en eller anden motioner tænker jeg nej nej det duer slet ikke, så piller de

trådløse hovedtelefoner jeg stopper i lommen og går for der er ikke plads i dag (C, p. 84-85)

Here, we get to see how Claus accommodates his needs on a day-to-day basis. Claus is

passionate about listening to podcasts and does it a lot. Even with his passion for them, he will still

have days where listening to them is too much, so he decides to walk in silence, showing his awareness of and respect for his limits.

Dina adapts in a different way than Claus, where it is less on a day-to-day basis but more in a scheduling way to reduce her initial level of stress "(...) Man ska´ ligesom leve efter et skema, fordi… jo mere forudsigelig og ro, der er, for hjernen jo bedre. (...) så man skal prøve at indrette sin dag,så man gør det samme hver dag, ikke? (...)" (D, p. 44). Dina's way of adapting when in active stress is attempting to make every day as predictable and similar as possible while also trying to avoid things that can aggravate her stress response.

Britt's way of adapting is different from Dina's and Claus´, which can be seen in the quote;

Det tænker jeg er en af de ting, jeg skal have en snak med ledelsen om, at jeg i hvert fald i starten her ikke skal have nogle af dem fra ungeafdelingen, for der er simpelthen for meget tryk på, når det er 4 ugers praktikker. (B, p. 60)

Here, Britt is showing awareness of her limitations and attempts to adapt to the situation by acknowledging that taking responsibility for the youth department at her job is too hard, and that she should not be assigned to this work area at least temporarily, and will talk to her management about avoiding this. Britt is actively coping by being aware of her limits, taking charge of the situation, and informing her closest leader about her concern to avoid being put in a potentially stressful situation.

This shows that ways of adapting to stress can vary from individual to each situation from day-to-day adapting, self-checking needs, attempting a long-term approach by scheduling and planning, or predicting and preventing future stress-aggravating situations.

The Importance of Balance in All Aspects of Life. Here we explore further how our participants keep balance in their life, whether in their work and social life or their restitutional needs. Dina explains her work and social life balance as follows:

> Altså så jeg er bevidst om det der med, at der skal være den der balance sådan set hele tiden, hvor før der kunne jo godt bare køre løs iii nogle dage eller en måned eller et eller andet og så slappede man af bagefter, ikke? Der kan jeg mærke nu, at der bliver jeg nødt til at have en mere jævn balance (D; p. 62)

Here, we can see how Dina used to go full speed ahead for longer periods. However, due to her developing stress and her newfound awareness and respect of her limits, she is being forced into securing a better work-life balance to provide time for rest. We can see that same sentiment repeated by Britt in her statement;

> Men jeg har det faktisk godt med at tage på arbejde og så arbejde og så hjem og have fri (...) men ellers så arbejder jeg altid ude på min arbejdsplads. Jeg vil hellere sidde derude og så ligesom have det skel, der hedder arbejde og fritid. (B, p. 63)

Here, we can see how Britt prefers to make a hard distinction between her work life and her time off. While not against working from home, she prefers working at her office rather than bringing it home, maintaining the daily work-life balance.

While Britt and Dina mainly focus on work-life balance, Claus's focus differs: "(...) men så, men jeg har max taget en uge og så skal jeg også til X, altså [Int: ja] der er en god balance i det." (C, p. 64)

Here, instead of focusing on limiting the amount of time work takes, he is trying to balance his restitutional time away from home. This difference can be explained by where our participants were in their stress experience when we interviewed them. Claus was in the early stages of his second time in an active stress condition where a RTW was not a viable plan, while Britt and Dina were further along and had begun or had already returned to work. This shows how adaption and balance must be centered around the individuals' current stress levels and capabilities, leading us to our next subGET.

Adjusting to the Level of Stress as important

Within this SubGET, we are introduced to how our participants understand stress and adjust their coping methods to align with what part of the stress spectrum they are currently on. The notion of stress as a spectrum can be seen in:

(...) Eller til de mildere tilfælde, hvor det netop drejer sig om at få stoppet sin tankemylder eller… se tingene på en anden måde eller sådan noget, ikke? (...) Men det er igen det der med den der forståelse for, at, at deet, at det på et eller andet tidspunkt kammer over og bliver til en sygdom. (...) (D, p. 91)

Where we can see how Dina differentiates between milder and more severe cases. She explains that stress at some point evolves into an 'true' illness that does not go away easily, which is an important distinction for her and she further explains this in her statement: "(...) Hvor jeg er

blevet alvorligt syg eh, og så kan man ikke coache det væk længere eller tænke det væk, vel? Oog få

det væk ved at tænke på den rigtige måde, vel?" (D; p. 91)

Here, Dina indicates stress as being able to be coached or thought away until a certain limit,

whereafter, coaching or thought process is no longer enough, and it evolves into a severe illness. This

highlights stress as a true, severe, and distinct illness (See The Complex Nature of Stress for more

regarding the nature of stress).

While Dina's statement shows us that, in her experience, stress can evolve into a true and no

longer purely psychological illness, Britt explains that even severe stress can devolve if the right

actions are taken early on:

De første 14 dage, der lå jeg meget på sofaen og slappede af, der var jeg fysisk meget træt.

Den første uge, der lavede jeg ikke andet end at se fjernsyn, der kunne jeg ikke engang lægge

kabale (...) Men så var jeg også sådan ved at komme derhen ad igen, hvor jeg kunne komme

op og sidde (...) (B, p. 53-54)

(...) Som alt sammen er sådan noget repetitivt gentagende arbejde, og så ser jeg frygtelig

meget fjerns og film (...) alt muligt hjernedødt (...) Jeg har gjort det, at jeg har eh kan man

sige øvet min hjerne? (B, p. 24)

Here, we can see how Britt could not function and was physically extremely tired, rendering

her unable to do the simplest of tasks. However, she adjusted to her stress level, trained her brain to

cope to compensate for the reduced cognitive functions, and turned it around without reaching the

state described by Dina. This highlights the individuality of even severe stress, underlining the

phenomenon's complexity. This could show that adjusting one's behavior to stress level is paramount

to be able to avoid stress evolving into something uncontrollable in the way Dina experienced after

having been advised to ignore the signals of her body (See GET Experiencing a Mix of Positive and

Negative Factors Influencing Rehabilitation for further). Here we can also look at our GET - Both

Positive and Negative Consequences of Stress, where Britt talks about the new need for peace and

quiet leading to social sacrifices, as a way of adjusting (B, p. 36) or how Dina (D, p. 41) talks about

deprioritizing enjoyable experiences to avoid being overloaded, which again shows our participants

adjusting their behavior to their level of stress by showing respect and awareness of their current

limitations.

Coping by Controlling the Mind

In this SubGET we explore when our participants use mental techniques to force their focus

away from stressful thoughts to counteract the effect of stressors. The notion of redirecting thoughts

as helpful can be seen when Britt says:

> Vi kalder det at have åben i bekymringsbuttikken (...) Der kun et begrænset stykke tid om
>
> dagen, hvor du kan bekymre dig, resten af tiden, der er der lukket i butikken (...) Jeg tror
>
> nogle gange, så er det vigtigere, at man ikke bruger så meget tid på, men at man måske i
>
> stedet for ligesom får lukket for skabet (...) Nu skal jeg beskæftige mig med noget andet,
>
> noget der er godt for mig (...) (B, p. 47)

> Så i stedet for at rette den ind og sidde oog… undskyld mig, pille lidt navle, så i stedet for at
>
> rette opmærksomheden ud af. (...) (B, p. 46)

Here we can see how Britt is actively aware of her thought processes trying to control them by limiting time for worry and trying to focus it outwards to positive things or a train of thought that is healthy for one's self to prevent stress. Same idea can be seen with Claus and Dina when they are talking about putting their attention away from negative thoughts: "Joo altså principperne [Obs: mmh] er sådan set meget gode, dem, dem bruger jeg stadigvæk, altså det er jo blandt andet det der med at styre sine tanker og sådan noget (...)" (D; p. 87) and "(...) Jeg forsøger og, og skubbe dem lidt foran eller parkere dem [Int: ja] til fordel for og tage sådan et ret ja sådan kortidsperspektiv fordi jeg kan alligevel ikke løse de der (...)" (C; p. 22)

Here we see how both Dina and Claus acknowledge the importance of controlling their thoughts, and stir them away from a negative spiral of rumination, whereby they improve their mood and prevent further relapse into stress. Claus is currently avoiding difficult thoughts on the future and Dina uses mental techniques to control her thoughts. Similarly Britt states: "så ligger jeg mine kunder ind på hylderne. Og så [int: mnårrh] kører jeg hjem, så sige fra X [bynavn] og hjem, der må jeg ikke tænke på arbejde (...)" (B, p. 13)

Here we can see how Britt uses her mental control to perform mental imagery which she uses to let go of her work. She puts her clients on a shelf in a store on her way home and picks them up as she goes to work, using it to keep a sharp line between work and spare time.

Mental control and imaging are something all three of our participants have as part of their toolkit to deal with stress, and they all agree on it being a helpful tool in various ways, helping to cope and adapt to the pressure from stress; however, their exact use varies.

Coping Using Nature to Relax

Some of our participants have talked about how they use nature as a means to cope by relaxing in it; either by using it for walks or emerging themself in its beauty, which can be seen from Claus (C, p. 65-66 - See Shortened GET), where he talks fondly about his vacation home, close the coast with view over the sea, allowing him to take walks along the beach as much as he pleases. Claus also describes how it improves his social relationships by exploring nature and finding peace in it:

> Det har vi tit gjort [Int: ja] bare pakket en kaffekurv og så kørt uden og vide hvor vi, vi ville hen og så fundet et eller andet sted holdt og sætte os (...) det har jeg altså virkelig fintunet den her gang og fundet nye smukke steder (...) (C, p. 66)

Here, we can see the passion with which Claus talks about his vacation home, and how he uses the location to improve his mental health by changing scenery and as a place to gather his thoughts or plan trips out in nature for relaxation.

Dina also uses the outside to relax and find peace to cope with her stress:

> (...) Så er jeg begyndt at gå en tur hver dag på arbejde, og simpelthen gå en tur på en halv time - tre kvarter for at komme ud oog [Int: mmh] få noget luft og noget lys oog… få tankerne et andet sted hen og sådan noget (...) (D, p. 92)

While Dina is less passionate in her talk about using the outside as a space for finding peace and quiet, we get some insight into how she uses nature and her reasoning for doing so. Light, fresh air, and a place to control her thoughts, in a way we would assume, were away from negative

thought space to a more positive one or simply a less stressful one since she walks as breaks from work.

Based on these two accounts, we seem to be able to see that nature can provide a space in which controlling thoughts and feeling renewed is possible, and this has a positive effect on some people who suffer from stress.

Coping by Calming the Nervous System

From external sources of coping, we will now turn towards an internal source of coping in this SubGet. Stress affects the nervous system, so finding ways of calming the nervous system could have a beneficial effect on stress. Our participants have described times when they have attempted to calm their nervous system to cope with their stress, while also explaining how they view the nervous system's role in stress. The need to calm the nervous system can can be seen when Dina talks about how it feels when her system gets overloaded:

(...) man er ligesom en baby. Og det er faktisk meget rigtigt, altså jeg tror en baby har også et ufærdigt nervesystem. Det vil sig, du reagerer voldsomt på (...) ALT, ikke? [Obs: jo] Altså deet, det er faktisk, tror den samme sådan ehh følelse af, at du magter ingenting, dit nervesystem flipper ud over eh.. De mindste ting, ikke? (...) lige pludselig, så kan man bare ikke klare (D, p. 126)

Here, we can see how Dina compares the stress-induced nervous system to that of a baby, not rational and highly demanding, where even the most minor things can lead to an overreaction, and everything becomes impossible because the system has shut down.

Britt also talks about the nervous system being overloaded in her statement: "Altså stress er jo, hvad kan man sige, en kemisk ubalance, i min opfattelse en kemisk ubalance, ikk? (...)" (B, p. 46)

As we can see, Britt's way of explaining her understanding of the stress-induced nervous system is different from Dinas, focusing more on the chemical imbalance aspect of it. However, they do agree on it being overloaded and out of balance, which leads us to how they attempt to calm their system when it gets overloaded to reduce stress:

> Hvordan man får rodet, det er jo individuelt, altså så man kan sige, den nemme del er, at det handler om at få nervesystemet i ro, så skal du finde ud af, hvordan du bedst får det, ikke? Og det er jo ved at undgå de ting, der presser en, og, og gøre nogle af de god ting (D; p. 70)

Here, we can see that calming the nervous system is, from Dina's experience, something one needs to figure out as an individual regarding what works for you while recommending doing some of the "good" things, here implying that the good thing is something you need to find yourself.

We can see from this that the nervous system, and attempting to calm it, is important for our participants because it is susceptible to change and easily overloaded. Calming it requires the person with stress, to figure out what works for them and when. Here it is plausible that the aforementioned coping techniques of using nature or mental control can be helpful in calming the nervous system.

Coping Using the Body

Our participants have all talked about using their bodies in different ways for coping, using mindfulness techniques, breathing, walking, or general exercise. Their results have however been vastly different from each other. Claus (C, p. 84 See the shortened GET) compares taking away his exercise as taking away the insulin from a diabetic and of it as an addiction. Further stating that

30-45 min on an exercise bike, removes nearly all stress symptoms almost every time (C, p. 83 See the shortened GET). While Dina experienced being unable to exercise for a prolonged period because she felt it worsened her condition. She has resumed exercising (D, p.61 See the shortened GET). However, combined with mindfulness techniques, breathing, and nature, it gives a different view of how exercise plays a part in Dina's handling of stress through a broader narrative than Claus, who just needs the exercise, and the environment around plays a lesser role.

Britt also uses exercise by swimming, explaining the feeling of the water helping her relax (B, p. 25 See the shortened GET). This can be seen as a mixture of both Dina and Claus´ way of using the body, where the feeling of the water is important, like Dina's nature and mindfulness, while the mere action of doing exercise itself is also helpful, like it is for Claus.

From this, we can see that our participants' views and experiences with exercise differ from each other, from addicted to not being able to do it at all when stressed, highlighting the individuality of the illness and the need for adjusting to one's stress level, and respecting personal limits.

Awareness of the Body as an Alarm system

While the body plays a part and can be used for coping through exercise and breathing techniques, it can also be used as a warning system for early signs of stress. Our participants talked about their bodies as an alarm system for when they were in danger of a stress relapse; this can be seen very well with Britt, who states: "(...)" At man ikke identificere mange gange de her hviske- og talesignaler, og mange gange så opdager man først, at den er helt gal, når man har råbesignaler, (...)" (B, p. 14.)

Here, we can see how Britt has divided her body signals of stress into three categories: whispering, talking, and yelling, where each one is a step up in severity, and often the smaller signals

can be overlooked by accident until they start yelling and either force a reaction out of you, or in the worst case causing another stress relapse.

Claus has some of the same experience which can be seen when he states: "Nogle symptomer der begynder at buldre der, jamen så har jeg sådan en instinktiv trang til at komme ud af situationen (...) Ja komme væk for lige og få, få ro på igen" (C; p. 69)

Here we can see how when Claus experiences the symptoms starting to flare up again, he feels a need to remove himself from the situation he is in, no matter what it is, to be able to calm down and control the symptoms—showing how the body's reactions can act as a sign of needing to get out of a potentially stressful situation.

Claus experience seem very similar to Dina's experience: "(...) Jeg kender alle signalerne, og jeg ved præcis, at okay NU skal jeg til at gøre noget andet(...) jeg er på vej ud aaaf eet sted, hvor jeg i hvert fald ikke skal hen igen" (D; p. 59)

Here, we can again see a recognition of the warning signals. It is viewed as an indicator of the body trying to warn of a nonbeneficial situation for one's health, and one should withdraw from it as soon as possible. We can also see a hint of fear of returning to a state of stress when Dina talks about not wanting to return to where it felt like she was going, causing her awareness of the body's signals.

As we can see, our participants have noticed how their bodies send signals when stress seems to be boiling to the surface again. The way they act and interpret their signals are different, but they all use it as indicators of being in a situation that could provoke a stress relapse.

Importance of Self-agency in Coping with Stress

So far, we have been looking at different ways our participants have coped with stress; from here, we want to look into the role of self-agency in coping and how our participants have attempted

to find or improve their self-agency. This SubGET has Second-layer SubGETS, which can be seen in
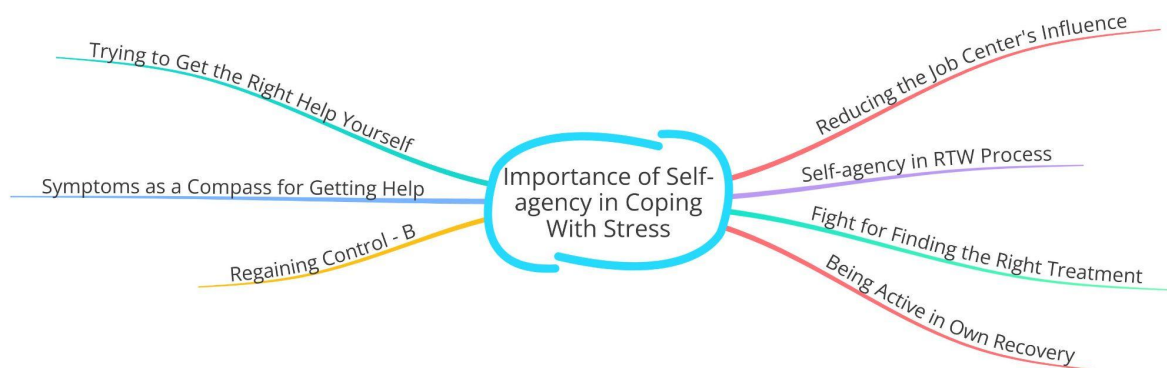
Figure 5.

Figure 5 Importance of Self-agency in Coping with Stress

Trying to Get the Right Help Yourself. Our participants have been trying to figure out what

kind of help they need to improve their situation, which they have felt a need to go outside the

system to achieve. This was especially a thing for Dina, who had much critique of the systems way of

handling stress, which can be seen in our other GET - The Inadequacy of the System, where she talks

about how stress not being a diagnostics term in Denmark, and it limits the help provided (D; p. 104),

we can also see it in her statement: "Så begyndte jeg at få taget sådan nogle private … eller sådan

nogle test hos (...) sådan nogle hormon terapeuter, hvor de tager blodprøver og måler de der

hormoner (...)" (D; p. 47)

Here, we can see how, out of desperation, she is forced to use agency to go further than the system to find treatment and a new way of looking at her illness.

We also see this with Claus, who attempts to get an medical evaluation: "Der foreslog jeg selv at, lægen henviste til en psykiater altså med henblik på sådan en, en ikke opdatering af speciallægeerklæringen [Int: mmh] fra 2003 men i hvert fald sådan en aktuel status" (C; p. 60)

Here we can see that Claus is seeking new information about the status of his illness, trying to find the best way of coping. In another quote, he gets an appointment with a psychologist from his boss (C; p. 24), in an attempt to get more help than the system provides.

Here, we see how two people who are under immense pressure, with an illness that limits their mental and physical energy, feel the need to seek out further aid for themselves because of what they view as inadequate help from the system.

Symptoms as a Compass for Getting help. We talked earlier about how our participants used their body as a warning system to when they were going down a path they did not want to go down, these symptoms also acts like a compass for getting help, we can see this from Claus when he talks about his symptom flare up: "Jeg har sådan forsøgt altså i takt med at, at symptomerne er sådan er blusset op henover tid. Altså gjort mange tanker om, hvad fanden kunne jeg at stille op og kunne trække på (...)" (C, p. 23)

Britt also talks about something similar when she said: "Jeg har mærket til det, og så har jeg hver gang kunne gribe det i opløbet (...) Så har jeg taget fat i den der stresscoach jeg kender og sagt nu er den gal i (...)" (B; p. 12)

Here, we can see how two of our participants use the symptoms flare-ups as a guideline for when to get help and contemplate the best course of action.

Reducing Job Center´s Influence. Through their time suffering from stress, our participants have met the Job center at various times and been forced to work together or deal with the treatment they have put forward, even when they have found it unhelpful. This shines through a lot for Dina who tries to limit its influence:

Der måtte jeg selvfølgelig lægge sådan nogle strategier for, hvordan jeg havde de samtaler med sagsbehandleren og skrive ned på forhånd, at det jeg siger, jeg prøver hele tiden at svare på en lukket måde (...) der er ikke noget nyt, det er det samme som sidste gang (...) og hele tiden prøve og gøre de samtaler så korte som muligt(...) Så fik jeg bare flere og flere stresssymptomer og så tog det mig flere dage at falde ned igen (...) (D; p. 95-96)

Here, it is evident that Dina planned her interaction with her SW to be as short as possible to minimize the harmful effect by taking back some control. If we look outside our GET, this is also visible in how the system's actions are viewed as harmful to her (D; p. 88-89 See The Inadequate System).

Britt has some of the same experience with the job center as Dina, not in the extremely harmful way Dina perceives her meeting to be, but still enough that Britt attempts to avoid contact as much as possible with the Job center: "Men fordi at jeg så allerede nu har været i gang med at snakke praktik, så har jeg jo allerede haft fat i mit jobcenter inden for at snakke om, at nu skal i praktik (...)" (B; p. 74-75)

Here, we can see how Britt preemptively attempts to limit the time with the job center, showing self-agency by finding an internship herself, and startingthe whole process faster. Here it is worth noting a difference in Britt's and Dina's backgrounds. Britt works within the system related to

stress aid and is, therefore, knowledgeable enough to limit their influence. Dina does not share the same knowledge of the system and is, therefore, unable to do the same, presumably worsened by the severity of her stress in contact with the system.

From both our participants, we can see how they gain self-agency by limiting their exposure to the job center or preemptively finding ways to do the job that the job center normally would do.

Self-agency in the RTW process. In this Secon-layer SubGET, we explore what our participants have said about their RTW process, and how they have attempted to gain self-agency in the process.

We see it clearly with Dina, when she talks to us about her actions leading up to her current work back from stress:

(...) kan jeg nu blive ved med at klare det her oog melder jobcentret mig rask og hvad sker der sååå? Og så har jeg ikke nogen indtægt oog… (...) og derfor havde jeg søgt det her job, jeg havde set som jeg synes var spændende. Samtidig med jeg tænkte, det er fuldstændig urealistisk, jeg ka´jo ikke tage det her job, det var et fuldtidsjob (...) man må jo ikk søge job, når man er sygemeldt, men det havde jeg altså gjort alligevel (...) (D; p. 118)

Here we can see how even when Dina is fully aware of her not being allowed to reply to job applications while on sick leave, she has done so to avoid being in a limbo and financially pressured situation due to fear of the system's future actions. She also acknowledges the situation as unrealistic, showing doubts about whether she can even take on a full-time job with her current situation, showing her desperation in her actions. This shows how Dina has attempted to gain agency in her own life by eliminating some of the stressors she had.

With Claus we see agency in RTW gained through making his own opportunity: "(...) og der havde jeg været med til og få ændret kulturen og få noget dokumentation ind over at der blevet gravet penge op til at, at jeg så kom i flexjob" (C; p. 11)

We can see how Claus created his own chance by influencing the work culture, digging up funds, and getting documentation of his work, enabling him to get a part-time job.

We can see from this that gaining some agency and control over their situation can influence RTW process, and sometimes it may even be faster or easier than if the system has to be involved.

Fight for finding the Right treatment. With self-agency in treatment of stress, there also comes choice of which treatment advice one should take, and which treaters you should listen to when it comes to picking options, we can see the struggle with such choice a lot in Dina: "Jamen jeg har jo… stort set prøvet alt både offentligt og privat." (D; p. 39) "Nej, nej der har været mange - jeg tror ikke engang jeg kan huske dem alle sammen" (D; p. 45) "Det var også hele tiden sådan et valg, hvad skal jeeg; hvem skal jeg lytte til, hvad skal jeg gøre, ikke? Så jeg har prøvet mig rigtigt meget frem i den der jungle" (D; p 48)

Here we can see how Dina compares the treatment of stress to a jungle, and having tried so many different treatments that she cannot remember all of them—indicating how much of a fight finding the treatment was to her.

Claus bring some of the same sentiment stating: "Altså medicinsk behandling vil jeg jo heller ikke udelukke selvom jeg ikke har meget lyst til at gå den vej" (C; p. 60). Showing how there is a shared feeling from Claus and Dina about having tried many treatments in vain and being forced to look at other options.

The mess of treatment are further explored in Dina's statement: "(...) opsøgte forskellige behandlere ehh… som egentlig alle sammen, når jeg ser i bakspejlet, sagde nogle rigtige ting. (...)

men der var bare ikke noget af det, der var nok (...) det var jo et… kæmpe puslespil, når man i

forvejen er totalt udmattet" (D; p. 47-48)

This statement supports Dina's former statement of the treatment for stress being a jungle

and highlights how navigating while exhausted can be extremely difficult. It also highlights the issue,

of some treatments working but not being enough. This we can relate to our the Second-layer

SubGET, unhelpfulness from box thinking, in the GET - The Inadequacy of the System, and also the

SubGET, Importance of the right diagnosis from GET - The Complex Nature of Stress, where finding

the right treatment for you gets showcased as an important part of stress rehabilitation and how

when the system uses box thinking in treatment of mental illness its effect can be harmful.

People who are suffering from stress, with low physical and mental energy have to fight to

find the right diagnosis while also fighting a system that attempts to put them into a box that feels

like it does not fit; finding the right treatment becomes harder, further pressuring the person

suffering from stress.

Being Active in Own Recovery. As explored in the statement above, finding the right

diagnosis is essential and being active in one's own recovery process, both in learning about stress

and seeking out the aid needed to recover, is important.

Being active in seeking knowledge about stress we can see in Dina's qoute:

(...) da jeg blev, altså, virkelig kollapsede oog jeg begyndte og sætte mig ind i, hvad stress er

og lære noget om det, og opsøge nogen, der vidste noget om det… Så blev jeg jo ret bitter

over det, fordi så kunne jeg jo se, at, at jeg havde gjort alt det forkerte (D; p. 10-11)

From this, we can see how Dina decided to expand her knowledge as she had her complete stress collapse due to receiving poor advice from her doctor and depression group therapy. While searching for knowledge, she also discovered that the advice and the things she had done had been harmful for her rehabilitation, causing her to become bitter towards her former actions. While also giving her the knowledge to move forward.

Another way of being active is by practicing and doing exercises to counteract the effects of stress:

Jeg har gjort det, at jeg har eh kan man sige øvet min hjerne? Eh ved at lægge kabaler, som for mig er sådan overblikstræning (...) Et vendespil, memory spil. Og jeg har også eh spillet med mig selv en del gange simpelthen for at træne min hukommelse i, hvor ligger de her ting (...) (B; p. 24)

Here, we can see how Britt's approach is more direct, with training her brain to be better at remembering and having an overview of multiple things directly to counteract the effects of stress.

From this, we can gather that being active in one's recovery, be it through seeking knowledge or finding small games to train one's memory and brain in various ways, is a tool some of our participants use to help with rehabilitation.

Regaining Control - B. For Britt, the loss of control she felt through her stress experience were very important, and a lot of the ways she tried to cope with stress revolved around getting back control in the areas she felt, she had lost it: "Men for mig er det tab af kontrol [Int: ja] (...) hvad er det for nogle ting, der er tabt kontrol på. Og hvordan, kan man sige, etablere kontrol på de ting jeg kan"

Her need to gain back control went so far as to make a system to track her symptoms to avoid future relapse:

Jeg er begyndt at lave sådan en registering af alle mine symptomer. (...) simpelthen for at

lære at genkende dem her, for jeg kan ikke overskue dem ellers (...) Nu er det blevet sådan et

excel ark. (..) så har jeg simpelthen sat krydser ud fra, kan man sige, alle de her ting. Og så

har jeg sat de gode ting, jeg gør ovre i den anden side (...) (B; p. 88)

In the quote above, we can see how important it is to Britt to have a feeling of control,

making an excel ark of symptoms every day and how she counteracts them, to help herself stay

aware and avoid relapse due to her understanding of her current relapse being due to her not being

able to recognize the symptoms and stopping in time.

Turning Frustration Towards the System

Another way our participants has been coping with, is finding flaws in the system and turning

their anger and frustration towards it. Claus is especially vocal about this: "(...) man iværksætter et

øhm et kontrolsystem der ofte vil vil virke helbreds forværrende (...)" (C; p. 13-14)

Der er nogle forfærdelige eksempler på, på borgere der er blevet fastholdt i sådan nogle

meget, meget omfattende, årelange perspektivløse afklaringsforløb (...) Så længe de forløber

bliver, bliver fasthold, så kan kommunerne hæve penge i refusion [int nårh okay] men hvis

de tildeler førtidspension [Int: ja] så bliver det en udgift for kommunen (...) det kan rent

faktisk betyde, vanvittigt meget for mennesker der er sygemeldt med stress eller lignede (C;

p.15)

Here, we can see how Claus has much pent-up frustration towards the system, a system he believes to be directly harmful to the citizens rather than helpful, due to the way the refusion system is set up. This subject is explored further in our GET - The Inadequacy of The System.

Dina shares Claus´ view of the system as harmful, while not being on a social level in her critique, her story is more personal:

(...) jeg kan huske jeg på et tidspunkt simpelthen tog en beslutning om, nå men bliver jeg nødt til oog, altså… jeg bliver nødt til at lade være med og lade systemets syn på mig eh… altså tage det ind [Obs: ja], fordi --- og så begyndte jeg at blive vred, og det var meget bedre for mig (D; p. 94)

Fordi hun havde en læge, der ligesom tog hånd om det og sagde: sådan her skal det være, og hun fik den der periode med ro. (...) Det er noget jeg har haft virkelig svært ved at acceptere, at jeg… jeg endte med at være sygemeldt 4,5 år, og det kunne have taget 3 måneder, ikke? (...) Hvis jeg bare havde fået af vide, hvad det handlede om. (...) (D; p. 72-73)

Here, we can see how Dina found that getting angry about the system helped her rather than sitting by passively. We can also see how Dina found the system's view of her to be wrong, and it impacted her mental wellbeing, supporting Claus´ idea that the system as it is set up now, can be harmful to the citizens rather than helpful. We also see the bitterness Dina has, from getting the wrong doctor, while her friend who had stress got over it in 3 months, Dina had to spend 4,5 years with stress, which she reasons could have been avoided with better information and a doctor with more knowledge about stress and how to treat stress.

From this, we can gather that the system impacts how people suffering from stress get treated and that the effect of this can often be health deteriorating while evoking negative feelings in the people being treated in the system.

Using Self-protective Reasoning

Our participants has expressed some views, that we find to be built to protect themself from further harm or to defend the way they have reacted in the situation, such a situation can been seen from Claus: "Det var ikke bare mig jeg tror at 5 ud af 9 endte med langtidssygemeldinger med alvorlige konsekvenser" (C; p. 33) "Nej [Int: nnh] det vi ljeg ikke sige, nej, nej, det, det ikke jeg snakker ikke specielt [Int: nej] Ud fra personlige erfaringer her (...) Det siger noget om, om min stress overfølsomhed at jeg for nyligt fik en kraftig symptomsopblusen (...)" (C; p. 17)

Here we see how Claus uses the number of people who got sick as a defense for him also getting sick. At the same time, we also see how he refuses to talk from personal experience about health deteriorating from the system while then proceeding to talk just that.

We can see something in a similar vein from Dina: "Fordi man jo ikke har den her graduering af stress. Så kan man jo også siige, dem der kommer hurtigtest til arbed --- tilbage på arbejdsmarkedet, det var nok dem, der ikke var så sige til at begynde med, ikke?" (D; p. 76)

Here, we see Dina defending her stress level and later RTW with a differentiation in stress level as an explanation to soften the blow for herself in her sickness, stressing the severity of her symptoms as opposed to the ones returning fast.

We also see it from Britt when she is talking about if she had any negative or dismissive reactions from others while suffering from stress:

Nej overhovedet ikke. (...) Altså jeg var nede ved min læge for lang tid siden (...) og så sagde til dem, jeg lider jo engang imellem lidt af noget stress (...) Siger jaja stress, det har vi jo alle sammen [sagde lægen] Og siden har jeg ikke rigtigt snakket med hende (...) Jeg synes det er sådan en træls holdning at have (...) (B; p. 72)

Here, we see a direct contradiction in Britt's narrative; she denies having had bad experiences or dismissive reactions from anyone, giving us an example of having just that on a level, causing avoidance due to the doctor's dismissive reaction.

As we can see through our analysis, our participants have found ways of coping in a wide range of ways, from internal to external. From the beginning of their experience with stress to continuous coping post-stress to avoid symptoms or relapse.

Discussion

In this study, we found that our participants had to cope in various ways and that stress has caused a need for continuous coping through adaptations of their everyday life even after they return to work to avoid relapse and control stress symptoms. We have presented eleven sub-GETs related to this coping; one focused on matching the treatment and coping towards the level of stress, which highlights stress as a spectrum and reveals an understanding from Dina of an illness that takes on a life of its own becoming increasingly physical and thereby immune to her mental development causing a need for other treatment (See Dinas PETs for elaboration on this). Some sub-GETs focus on their specific coping choices like using nature, controlling the mind, or using the body in multiple ways, both regarding handling stress levels and as an alarm system. This highlights stress's influence on them through increased awareness of bodily symptoms, which they all describe as a compass regarding their limits.

Both Dina and Claus showed frustration and anger towards the system. Claus both regarding some very unfortunate encounters with a non-helpful SW and the system prioritizing money causing health deterioration. Dina reacted towards both the system's pressure through a SW, where she actively had to prepare for damage control in meetings, and the doctor causing her severe stress levels. Her experience with the doctor is in line with a study by Engebretsen and Bjorbækmo (2019) showing that individuals suffering from medically unexplained syndromes report being marginalized by health professionals and that this causes it to be a battle (see GET The inadequacy of the system for further on this).

Frustration towards the system can be seen as coping because turning the anger outside instead of internalizing it can be beneficial due to avoiding negative feelings towards oneself and due to anger being an energy-producing emotion (Izard, 2013), which is in line with Dina's experience of feeling better and more capable of coping with the system. Other than turning their frustration towards the system, Claus also seemed to defend his own reaction through numbers. Dina argued for shorter sick leave due to a lower stress level in defense of her own longer sick leave. Our participants' need to defend their sick leave is in line with research on burnout by Maija and Katri (2019) showing that suffering from burnout does not automatically give a legitimately sick role causing them to have to explain their situation and involves a loss of status.

At the same time, Claus and Britt both rejected negative personal experiences one moment, then gave an example of precisely that. This is seemingly counterintuitive but can potentially be explained through the personal/group discrimination discrepancy by Taylor et. al (1990) which describes that members of a group have a tendency to perceive a higher level of discrimination towards the group as a whole than at themselves as individual members. This causes individual experiences to affect their perception more towards the group than the reverse. This could be a

reason for both Britt and Claus to describe group discrimination clearly but still initially oppose to having had negative experiences themselves.

The dissatisfaction with the system can also be seen through their need for self-agency, which on the whole can be seen as a critique of a system causing inadequate help, causing them to have to compensate despite their lack of resources at the given time.

The lack of resources can be seen through their description of the necessity of life changes to cope with stress, where they describe a continuous impact of stress through the body as an alarm system, as is the case for Britt and Dina, or the chronic nature as is the case for Claus, causing a need for continuous coping. They all highlight the need for balance in different aspects of their lives to avoid causing stress symptoms to flare up. This causes the need for awareness and respect for their needs and limits and has for all of them meant social consequences due to the need for energy management and the bill that has to be paid when the limit is breached.

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

This study contributes to the knowledge of stress with a considerable focus on the experience of the one suffering from it. The qualitative approach offers a nuanced understanding and important insight into how stress influences their lives, continuously demanding extensive coping. While the system is working opposite the needs of people suffering from stress due to an insurmountable amount of demands and pressure or inadequate medical knowledge and acknowledgment of their experiences, causing even more pressure and health deterioration (see GET - The inadequate help from the system for elaboration on this part). Our participants described having to cope with the system as well as the illness, causing the system to be seen as a threat rather than a help, which aggravated stress.

The study has been limited in the gathering of its participants to volunteers who were willing and had the ability to share their stories of their experience with stress. This limitation is somewhat dictated by the subject group themself, seeing as people who have had or are suffering from stress, are at high risk for lowered cognitive abilities and energy depletion finding participants who had the energy and ability to be interviewed for a prolonged period.

In this context, another limitation is the small sample size and especially the inability to include the last two participants due to their narratives being intertwined with other illnesses, causing it to be difficult to differentiate their narratives. This was not a foreseen obstacle due to the nature of stress already being considerably mixed with other illnesses due to the diffuse conceptualization. However, their illness did not seem directly linked to their stress, yet both seemed to affect each other, which caused it to be beyond the scope of this study.

Future research

This could, however, be cause for future research with more homogenous groups potentially within populations with these specific illnesses compared with people without investigating how stress might influence the other illness or the other way around, or if it even does. This could pave the way for a discussion or comparison between suffering from a "proper" illness with a diagnosis and suffering from stress through investigating if they have experienced a difference and how this has affected their sense-making.

As stated earlier, we have created more GETS containing more themes that did not make it into this article due to the page limit set for this project. It could be beneficial to do a similar analysis of those GETs and then review them in a literature review to combine them into one big view of the stress experience of our participants to ensure that anything we might have missed in the project is taken into consideration in line with IPAs focus on the full and nuanced experience.

More research done into the effect the system has on the experience of stress could also be beneficial; from our interviews, we can see a lot of frustration and anger towards the system for being dismissive, giving the wrong diagnosis, or being harmful in the treatment, which could indicate errors in the system leading to these harmful effects.

Conclusion

In this study, we concluded that our participants have experienced being forced to adapt and find ways to cope with the aftereffects of having stress that affects them even after returning to work. Our participants showed a strong need for self-agency in the treatment of stress, which could be tied to the encounter with the healthcare system that they experienced as inadequate at best and health deteriorating at worst. The extensive need for coping and the experiences of stress in a social context point toward stress as a multifaceted and complex yet distinct phenomenon.

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