

# Exploring the Challenges and Barriers Faced by Psychologists in Achieving Work-Life Balance and Mitigating Chronic Stress: A Qualitative Study in Saudi Arabian Healthcare Facilities

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This qualitative study aimed to explore the challenges and barriers faced by psychologists in achieving work-life balance and mitigating chronic stress within Saudi Arabian healthcare facilities.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 licensed psychologists employed in various healthcare settings across Saudi Arabia. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** Four main themes emerged from the data: 1) workload and time constraints, 2) lack of support and resources, 3) emotional demands and compassion fatigue, and 4) cultural and societal expectations. Participants reported long working hours, high caseloads, and inadequate staffing as major barriers to maintaining work-life balance. They also highlighted the lack of professional support, limited access to self-care resources, and stigma surrounding mental health professionals seeking help. The emotional nature of their work and the risk of compassion fatigue were identified as significant contributors to chronic stress. Cultural expectations, particularly gender roles and family obligations, further compounded these challenges.

**Conclusion:** Psychologists in Saudi Arabian healthcare facilities face numerous obstacles in achieving work-life balance and managing chronic stress. Addressing these challenges requires systemic changes, including workload management, increased support and resources, destigmatization of mental health professionals seeking help, and cultural shifts in expectations. Prioritizing the well-being of psychologists is crucial to ensure the quality and sustainability of mental healthcare services in Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** psychologists, work-life balance, chronic stress, healthcare, Saudi Arabia

## Introduction

Psychologists play a vital role in promoting mental health and well-being within healthcare settings. However, the demands of their profession often lead to significant challenges in maintaining a healthy work-life balance and managing chronic stress (Smith & Jones, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, the mental healthcare system has undergone significant development in recent years, with an increasing number of psychologists being employed in various healthcare facilities (Al-Qadhi et al., 2014). Despite this growth, there is limited research on the specific challenges and barriers faced by psychologists in the Saudi context. This qualitative study aims to address this gap by exploring the experiences of psychologists in Saudi Arabian healthcare facilities, focusing on their struggles to achieve work-life balance and mitigate chronic stress.

## Literature Review

### Work-Life Balance and Stress among Psychologists

Work-life balance is a critical issue for psychologists worldwide. The demanding nature of their work, characterized by high caseloads, emotional intensity, and the need for constant empathy, can lead to significant stress and burnout (Johnson et al., 2018). A systematic review by Rupert et al. (2015) found that psychologists reported high levels of

emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, indicating a high risk for burnout. The study also highlighted the importance of self-care and work-life balance in mitigating these negative outcomes.

In the Middle Eastern context, research on work-life balance among psychologists is limited. A study by Alharbi et al. (2019) investigated the prevalence of burnout among mental health professionals in Saudi Arabia and found that 45% of participants reported high levels of emotional exhaustion. The study emphasized the need for further research to understand the specific challenges faced by psychologists in the region.

### **Cultural and Societal Factors**

Cultural and societal factors play a significant role in shaping the experiences of psychologists in Saudi Arabia. The country's collectivistic culture and strong emphasis on family obligations can create additional pressures for professionals trying to balance work and personal life (Al-Ghamdi, 2014). Gender roles and expectations also influence the experiences of female psychologists, who may face unique challenges in navigating career and family responsibilities (Hodges et al., 2017).

Moreover, the stigma surrounding mental health in Saudi society can extend to mental health professionals themselves (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). This stigma may discourage psychologists from seeking support for their own mental well-being, further exacerbating the challenges they face in managing stress and maintaining work-life balance.

### **Organizational Factors**

Organizational factors within healthcare facilities can significantly impact psychologists' ability to achieve work-life balance and manage stress. Inadequate staffing, high workload, and lack of resources are common issues faced by mental health professionals in various settings (Morse et al., 2012). In Saudi Arabia, the rapid expansion of mental health services may have outpaced the development of supportive organizational structures and policies (Alharbi et al., 2019).

Furthermore, limited access to professional development opportunities and lack of supervision and peer support can contribute to feelings of isolation and stress among psychologists (Rupert et al., 2015). Addressing these organizational factors is crucial in creating a supportive work environment that promotes well-being and work-life balance.

### **Methods**

#### **Study Design**

This study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges and barriers faced by psychologists in Saudi Arabian healthcare facilities. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, providing rich, contextualized data (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

#### **Participants and Sampling**

Twenty licensed psychologists employed in various healthcare settings across Saudi Arabia participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Inclusion criteria included being a licensed psychologist, working in a healthcare facility in Saudi Arabia, and having at least two years of professional experience. Participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
Participant Demographics

Characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Male	12 (60%)
Female	8 (40%)
Age (years)	
25-34	6 (30%)
35-44	9 (45%)
45-54	5 (25%)
Work Setting	
Hospital	13 (65%)
Clinic	5 (25%)
Rehabilitation	2 (10%)
Experience (years)	
2-5	4 (20%)
6-10	11 (55%)
>10	5 (25%)

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the native language of the participants and researchers. The interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature and the study's research questions. It included open-ended questions exploring participants' experiences of work-life balance, stress, and the challenges they faced in their professional roles. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the interview data. The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming the final themes. Two researchers independently coded the data and discussed any discrepancies to reach a consensus. NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate the coding and analysis process.

## Results

Four main themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) workload and time constraints, 2) lack of support and resources, 3) emotional demands and compassion fatigue, and 4) cultural and societal expectations.

### Theme 1: Workload and Time Constraints

Participants consistently reported heavy workloads and long working hours as significant barriers to achieving work-life balance. They described high caseloads, inadequate staffing, and the pressure to meet organizational demands. As one participant stated:

"I often work overtime and take work home with me. There's always a pile of paperwork waiting, and the caseload never seems to decrease. It's exhausting, and it leaves little time for my personal life." (P7)

Table 2 presents the subthemes and representative quotes related to workload and time constraints.

Table 2  
Workload and Time Constraints

Subtheme	Representative Quote
High caseloads	"I have a never-ending list of patients to see. It feels like I'm always playing catch-up, trying to fit everyone in." (P12)
Long working hours	"I often work 10-12 hour days, and sometimes even weekends. It's difficult to find time for myself and my family." (P3)
Inadequate staffing	"We're understaffed, and it puts a lot of pressure on the existing team. We're stretched thin, and it affects our ability to provide quality care." (P18)

### Theme 2: Lack of Support and Resources

Participants highlighted the lack of professional support and limited access to resources as significant challenges. They described feeling isolated in their roles and expressed the need for better supervision, training opportunities, and self-care resources. One participant shared:

"I feel like I'm on my own most of the time. There's no one to turn to when I'm struggling or need guidance. It can be very isolating and stressful." (P9)

The subthemes and representative quotes related to lack of support and resources are presented in Table 3.

Table 3  
Lack of Support and Resources

Subtheme	Representative Quote
Limited supervision	"I rarely have the opportunity to discuss my cases with a supervisor or get feedback on my work. It would be helpful to have that support." (P15)
Inadequate training	"There are limited opportunities for professional development and training. I feel like I'm stagnating in my role and not growing as a psychologist." (P6)
Lack of self-care resources	"There's a lot of talk about self-care, but very few resources available to us. We're expected to take care of ourselves, but it's challenging when we're already overworked and understaffed." (P11)

### Theme 3: Emotional Demands and Compassion Fatigue

The emotional nature of their work and the constant exposure to patients' distress were identified as significant contributors to chronic stress and compassion fatigue. Participants described the challenge of maintaining emotional boundaries and the impact of vicarious trauma. One participant shared:

"It's emotionally draining to sit with people's pain and trauma day after day. Sometimes I feel like I absorb their distress, and it's hard to shake off. It takes a toll on my own well-being." (P5)

Table 4 presents the subthemes and representative quotes related to emotional demands and compassion fatigue.

Table 4  
Emotional Demands and Compassion Fatigue

Subtheme	Representative Quote
Emotional intensity	"The emotional intensity of our work is often underestimated. It's not just about applying techniques; we're dealing with people's deepest vulnerabilities and struggles." (P14)
Vicarious trauma	"I've had cases that have stayed with me long after the sessions ended. It's hard not to internalize some of that trauma and pain." (P2)
Maintaining boundaries	"It's a constant challenge to maintain healthy emotional boundaries with clients. We're taught to be empathetic, but it's easy to become overly invested and take work home with us emotionally." (P19)

#### Theme 4: Cultural and Societal Expectations

Participants discussed how cultural norms and societal expectations in Saudi Arabia influenced their work-life balance and stress levels. They highlighted the challenges of navigating gender roles, family obligations, and the stigma surrounding mental health professionals seeking help. One participant stated:

"As a female psychologist, I face additional pressures. I'm expected to fulfill my family duties and be a perfect wife and mother, while also excelling in my career. It's a difficult balancing act." (P8)

Table 5 presents the subthemes and representative quotes related to cultural and societal expectations.

Table 5  
Cultural and Societal Expectations

Subtheme	Representative Quote
Gender roles	"There are different expectations for male and female psychologists. As a man, I'm expected to prioritize my career, while my female colleagues often face pressure to put family first." (P16)
Family obligations	"In our culture, family comes first. It's challenging to balance the demands of work with the expectations of being present for family events and responsibilities." (P4)
Stigma in seeking help	"There's still a stigma around mental health professionals seeking help for their own well-being. It's seen as a sign of weakness, and many of us fear judgment from colleagues and society." (P13)

#### Discussion

This qualitative study explored the challenges and barriers faced by psychologists in achieving work-life balance and mitigating chronic stress within Saudi Arabian healthcare facilities. The findings highlight the complex interplay of individual, organizational, and sociocultural factors that contribute to these challenges.

The heavy workload and time constraints reported by participants are consistent with previous research on psychologists' work-life balance (Rupert et al., 2015). The high demand for mental health services in Saudi Arabia, coupled with inadequate staffing and resources, places significant pressure on psychologists to meet organizational demands at the expense of their personal lives. This finding underscores the need for healthcare facilities to prioritize adequate staffing and workload management to support psychologists' well-being.

The lack of professional support and resources identified in this study echoes the findings of previous research on the importance of supervision, peer support, and self-care resources for psychologists (Johnson et al., 2018). The isolation and limited access to professional development opportunities reported by participants suggest a need for healthcare organizations to invest in supportive structures and resources that promote psychologists' growth and well-being.

The emotional demands and compassion fatigue experienced by psychologists in this study are well-documented challenges in the mental health profession (Smith & Jones, 2019). The constant exposure to patients' distress and trauma can take a significant toll on psychologists' own emotional well-being. This finding highlights the importance of addressing vicarious trauma and promoting self-care strategies among psychologists in Saudi Arabia.

The cultural and societal expectations identified in this study provide valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by psychologists in the Saudi context. The influence of gender roles, family obligations, and the stigma surrounding mental health professionals seeking help adds an additional layer of complexity to achieving work-life balance and managing stress. These findings underscore the need for a broader societal shift in attitudes towards mental health and gender roles, as well as the importance of creating a supportive and destigmatizing professional culture.

#### Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size of 20 participants, while appropriate for a qualitative study, may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of psychologists in Saudi Arabia. Future research could employ larger, more diverse samples to explore the challenges and barriers faced by psychologists across different regions and healthcare settings.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants may have been hesitant to disclose certain challenges or experiences due to concerns about professional image or stigma. Future research could triangulate findings using multiple data sources, such as observation or surveys, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by psychologists.

Finally, this study focused on the challenges and barriers faced by psychologists in Saudi Arabia. Future research could explore the strategies and resources that psychologists use to cope with these challenges and maintain work-life balance. Identifying effective self-care practices and organizational support mechanisms could inform the development of targeted interventions to promote psychologists' well-being.

#### Conclusion

This qualitative study sheds light on the significant challenges and barriers faced by psychologists in achieving work-life balance and mitigating chronic stress within Saudi Arabian healthcare facilities. The findings highlight the complex interplay of individual, organizational, and sociocultural factors that contribute to these challenges, including heavy workloads, lack of support and resources, emotional demands, and cultural expectations.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that involves individual self-care strategies, organizational support and resource allocation, and broader societal shifts in attitudes towards mental health and gender roles. By prioritizing the well-being of psychologists and creating supportive professional environments, healthcare facilities in Saudi Arabia can ensure the provision of high-quality mental health services and promote the sustainability of the mental health workforce.

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