Stress and wellbeing: Qualitative exploration of senior secondary school teachers' symptoms, management and use of digital support tools

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Background

- The working population's experience of stress is of particular interest due to the individual and the economic consequences.
- In a study of 26 professions **teaching came in the bottom six on measures of physical health, psychological well-being and job satisfaction** (Johnson et al 2005).
- The current wellbeing emphasis in schools is almost entirely on that of students (*Future in Mind,* 2015; Kidger et al 2016). Teachers are expected to meet the needs of student wellbeing with little provision for managing their own stress.
- Web and mobile applications (apps) and wearables (together 'mHealth') have been shown to increase the psychological determinants of wellbeing, and in particular help to manage stress (Calvo 2014).
- Yet mHealth usefulness in *specific* contexts in the wild has received little scrutiny. Various studies on mHealth support for non-specific workplace stress reduction have been evaluated quantitatively. Optimisation of mHealth design still needs to be informed qualitatively by the end user's context and culture: their workplace related symptoms, behaviours and current management techniques.
- The school context is known to have unique stressors (McCarthy et al 2016). **The ubiquity of consumer available mHealth tools provides an exciting opportunity to explore their potential for targetted stress reduction.**

Aims

The aims of this study were to engage with senior teachers from state secondary schools and
(1) identify their **psychosocial and contextual stress symptoms**
(2) understand their **current stress management behaviours in the context** of their work and
(3) explore their **familiarity with and current use of mHealth** to ascertain potential receptivity to technology support for stress reduction.
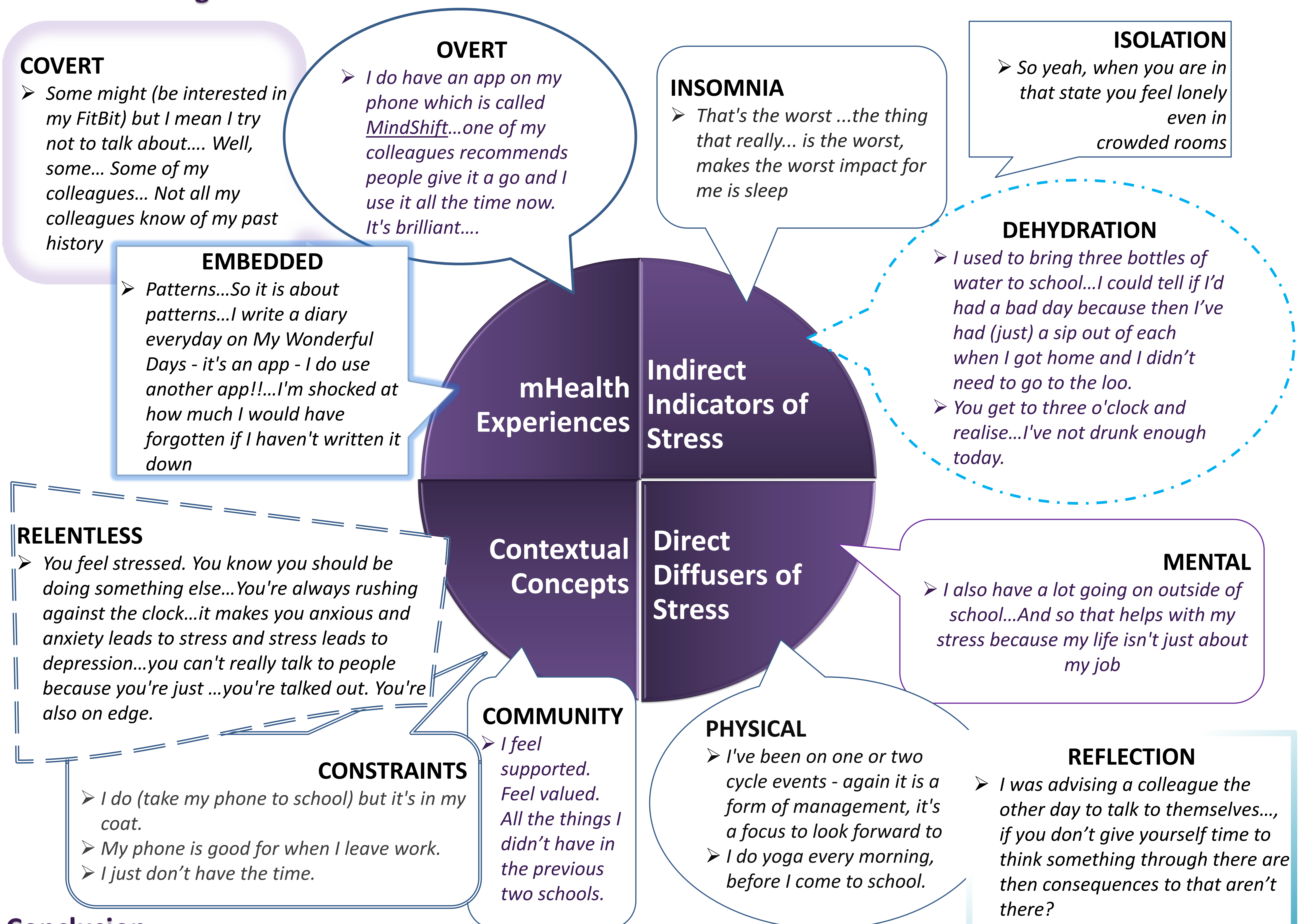The findings will inform subsequent studies.

Method

Senior secondary school teachers were recruited through the researcher's networks. Inclusion criteria were:
i)   comprehensive secondary school teacher;
ii) in a position of leadership (e.g. senior leadership team, head of department or head of house) or
iii) staff member who had previously held one of these roles.
Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with N=14 teachers for the purpose of qualitative exploration and analysis.

Identified categories and themes so far

COVERT
➤ *Some might (be interested in my FitBit) but I mean I try not to talk about…. Well, some… Some of my colleagues… Not all my colleagues know of my past history*

OVERT
➤ *I do have an app on my phone which is called MindShift…one of my colleagues recommends people give it a go and I use it all the time now. It's brilliant….*

INSOMNIA
➤ *That's the worst …the thing that really… is the worst, makes the worst impact for me is sleep*

ISOLATION
➤ *So yeah, when you are in that state you feel lonely even in crowded rooms*

EMBEDDED
➤ *Patterns…So it is about patterns…I write a diary everyday on My Wonderful Days - it's an app - I do use another app!!…I'm shocked at how much I would have forgotten if I haven't written it down*

DEHYDRATION
➤ *I used to bring three bottles of water to school…I could tell if I'd had a bad day because then I've had (just) a sip out of each when I got home and I didn't need to go to the loo.*
➤ *You get to three o'clock and realise…I've not drunk enough today.*

mHealth Experiences

Indirect Indicators of Stress

Contextual Concepts

Direct Diffusers of Stress

RELENTLESS
➤ *You feel stressed. You know you should be doing something else…You're always rushing against the clock…it makes you anxious and anxiety leads to stress and stress leads to depression…you can't really talk to people because you're just …you're talked out. You're also on edge.*

CONSTRAINTS
➤ *I do (take my phone to school) but it's in my coat.*
➤ *My phone is good for when I leave work.*
➤ *I just don't have the time.*

COMMUNITY
➤ *I feel supported. Feel valued. All the things I didn't have in the previous two schools.*

PHYSICAL
➤ *I've been on one or two cycle events - again it is a form of management, it's a focus to look forward to*
➤ *I do yoga every morning, before I come to school.*

MENTAL
➤ *I also have a lot going on outside of school…And so that helps with my stress because my life isn't just about my job*

REFLECTION
➤ *I was advising a colleague the other day to talk to themselves…, if you don't give yourself time to think something through there are then consequences to that aren't there?*

Conclusion

Teachers' symptoms of stress included indirect indicators that might be considered proxy measures of the stress experienced. Many of those with prior stress-related major crises had clear, defined stress alleviation strategies. Contextual constraints includes inaccessibility of smartphone and apps during the day, which needs to inform potential mHealth interventions and approaches. Stigma around admitting stress is still prevalent, so the variation in willingness to use or display mHealth stress support tools requires consideration. These themes will be explored in further studies.

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