

**INTERPRETING FOR ROMANIA – STRESS MANAGEMENT****INTERPRÉTER POUR LA ROUMANIE – GESTION DU STRESS****INTERPRETÂND PENTRU ROMÂNIA – GESTIONAREA STRESULUI****Maria-Cristina OLT**Department of Foreign Languages and Communication  
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca  
Maria.Olt@lang.utcluj.ro**Maria Augusta SZASZ**Department of Foreign Languages and Communication  
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca  
Augusta.Szasz@lang.utcluj.ro**Abstract**

*Conference interpreting, especially simultaneous interpretation, has been included in the category of highly stressful professions. The aim of this article is to raise the awareness of Romanian interpreters about how work-related stress can influence their work, their health and, in the end, their well-being. In order to do that, first, we identify the sources of stress in the interpreter's work and investigate the implications of the cognitive, psychological and physical stress experienced by interpreters. Next, we discuss about some stress management techniques that could be implemented by Romanian interpreters in order to reduce stress levels and improve coping skill. In the end, we invite all Romanian stakeholders to be inspired by the positive examples provided by other countries.*

**Résumé**

*L'interprétation de conférence, en particulier l'interprétation simultanée, a été incluse dans la catégorie des professions très stressantes. Le but de cet article est de sensibiliser les interprètes roumains à la façon dont le stress lié au travail peut influencer leur travail, leur santé et, finalement, leur bien-être. Pour faire cela, d'abord, nous identifions les sources du stress dans le travail de l'interprète et étudions les implications du stress cognitif, psychologique et physique éprouvé par les interprètes. Ensuite, nous discutons certaines techniques de gestion du stress qui pourraient être mises en œuvre par les interprètes roumains afin de réduire les niveaux de stress et d'améliorer leur capacité d'adaptation. Finalement, nous invitons tous les acteurs roumains à s'inspirer des exemples positifs fournis par d'autres pays.*

**Rezumat**

*Interpretariatul de conferință, și în special interpretariatul simultan, a fost inclus în categoria profesiilor extrem de stresante. Scopul acestui articol este de a crește gradul de conștientizare a interpreților romani cu privire la modul în care stresul profesional le poate influența munca, sănătatea, și în final, chiar starea de bine. Pentru a face aceasta, în primul rând, vom identifica sursele de stres din activitatea interpretului și vom analiza implicațiile stresului cognitiv, psihologic și fizic pe care îl resimt interpreții. În continuare, vom trece în revistă unele tehnici de gestionare a stresului care ar putea fi implementate de interpreții români pentru a reduce nivelul de stres și pentru a-și îmbunătăți abilitățile de gestionare a acestuia. În cele din urmă, invităm toți actorii români să se inspire din exemplele pozitive oferite de alte țări.*

**Key words:** *simultaneous interpretation, occupational stress, stress management*

**Mots clés:** *interprétation simultanée, stress professionnel, gestion du stress*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *interpretare simultană, stres ocupațional, gestionarea stresului*

## **Introduction**

If we were to ask the Romanian citizens what positive changes they have noticed in the last 25 years, they would probably mention free movement, economic development, access to internet and technology, and many more. But what if we were to ask Romanian conference interpreters what has changed in their field of work? Well, one thing they would probably mention is the *perception* people have about their work- an increased awareness about their role and responsibilities. Are they fully aware? Of course, not. But at least no one is still believing that those tiny plastic devices, called headsets, are miraculously rendering the translation. So, what does a conference interpreter do? Even though they are called *interpreters*, they do not sing, they do not play an instrument, but they do another amazing thing: they facilitate understanding and communication among people who do not speak the same language. Yes, it is a highly rewarding profession, but all comes at a price. That is why we have decided to dedicate this article to a few sensitive issues like stress, burnout, and stress management techniques.

## **“Interpreting” stress**

We should probably begin by explaining how a conference interpreter facilitates understanding and communication among people who do not speak the same language. A conference interpreter’s job is to convey the message spoken in one language into another one, through simultaneous, consecutive or whispered interpretation. In our more than 10-year experience we have noticed that simultaneous interpretation is preferred in international conferences, professional trainings or multilingual meetings. That is why we have decided to dedicate our article to the stress experienced by conference interpreters who do simultaneous interpretation. Thus, hereafter, the terms *interpretation* and *interpreter* should be understood in the context of simultaneous interpretation.

As you might have guessed, knowing two or more languages, or being bilingual, doesn’t mean that you can do simultaneous interpretation. Besides linguistic competences, an interpreter needs also other skills like language fluency, pleasant voice, good diction, good memory, analytic capacity and stress resistance. To describe this complex process, we are going to use Francois Grosjean’s (GROSJEAN, 2011) portrayal of conference interpretation. “Simultaneous interpreting involves careful listening, processing and comprehending the input in the source language, memorizing it, formulating the translation in the target language, and then articulating it, not to mention dual tasking, i.e. letting the next sequence come in as you are outputting the preceding one. [] Researchers have reported that interpreters overlap speaking one language while listening to another up to 75% of the time.” No wonder that it is considered to be one of the most demanding and stressful professions on the labor market.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies focusing on the cognitive and psychological stress induced by simultaneous interpretation. Some researchers even say that there has been a shift from a product-oriented research on conference interpreting to a process-oriented research. That means the focus is no longer only on the output, on the quality of the translation, but also on the process, on what happens in the interpreter’s mind and body.

For example, AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters) Research Committee organized a survey on how the interpretation service is perceived by users. Respondents were asked what profession comes to mind if asked to compare the demands it makes upon its practitioners with those made on interpreters. The replies varied widely but show that interpretation

is seen as a fairly stressful and demanding occupation. For example, some of the professions mentioned were pilots/air traffic controllers, surgeons/emergency department medics, reporter/journalists, and actors. When asked what they considered to be particularly difficult about the profession, most respondents mentioned concentration and stress, delivery speed, the need for interpreters to constantly update their knowledge, and the process of simultaneous listening, processing and speaking.

Even though some beneficiaries of interpretation services seem to know what is required of an interpreter, they are probably not aware of the stress levels experienced by an interpreter while doing his/her job. According to Zeier (ZEIER, 1997), not even the interpreters are fully aware of the psychophysiological effects of their work load. Based on the assessment of interpreters' psychophysiological stress reactions and performance, which were comparable to those of air traffic controllers, Zeier's research concludes that work overload can affect translation quality as well as the interpreter's perception of his work – it seems that at a certain fatigue level, the job is taken less seriously and a certain carelessness sets in. The author considers it to be “an effective self-defense mechanism against mental overload caused by situations such as increased time on task, extremely fast speakers, unintelligible speakers, and long working hours; and it seems to occur rather automatically, without being noticed by the performing interpreter.”

On the other hand, the AIIC Workload Study on interpreter stress and burnout, which investigated four sets of parameters: psychological, physiological, physical and performance as well as the interaction between them, did not find significant correlations between the physiological and physical data and performance levels. A possible reason might be that experienced interpreters develop coping mechanisms that allow them to maintain a high level of performance even in stressful situations. However, the focus of this study was not only on performance levels, but rather on the stress and burnout experienced by interpreters. The measurement of stress levels during the interpreters' working day (blood pressure, heart rate and salivary cortisol levels) confirmed that interpreting is a highly stressful profession, which may lead to physiological exhaustion, post-work stress and burnout.

Although some interpreters questioned by AIIC perceived work-related stress as positive and useful, exposure to sustained, or excessive stress in the workplace can lead to health problems and burnout. Similarly, the American Institute for Stress makes the distinction between *good stress* (eustress), which can enhance productivity or performance, and *bad stress*, which, if left uncontrolled, can affect our long term-health and well-being. For example, the 2014 data presented by the American Institute for Stress show that the top cause for stress in the USA was job pressure, while more than 70 % of people experienced physical and psychological symptoms caused by stress. Even though there is no satisfactory definition of stress, because people perceive stress differently, stress is usually defined as a “physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension”, caused by the experience of a threatening and strenuous situation or by the uncertainty as to one's ability to cope with the situation. Therefore, a general advice is that one should first understand and identify stress and then learn to develop stress management strategies.

That is why the previously mentioned AIIC Workload Study aimed at identifying both the interpreter's stress levels and the sources of stress in the interpreter's work (work-related and environmental). The study concluded that the main factors contributing stress can be grouped under three headings: 1) textual and delivery difficulties (fast speaker, speaker reading from text, undisciplined speaker, frequent change of subject matter, difficult accents); 2) poor booth conditions (booth discomfort, poor visibility of speaker and visual aids, poor equipment); 3) preparation difficulties (lack of background material, too little time to prepare). In the end, the study presents a set of recommendations meant to improve the interpreters' work environment, to reduce stress levels and thus to cater for the interpreter's well-being.

According to Hardy (HARDY, 1998), these would fall under the umbrella of workplace interventions. Hardy claims that stress management is an “umbrella term”, which encompasses a wide range of methods designed to reduce stress levels, reduce burnout and improve coping skills,

and can be divided into individual interventions and workplace interventions. If we take a look at the Romanian workplace environment and compare it with the recommendations made by AIIC in at least two documents (Workload Study and Factors that affect interpreters' health) we see that there is still a lot to be done for Romanian interpreters. As professionals in this field, we are aware that technical conditions like booth location, booth ventilation, light, and sound are important because they have repercussions on interpreters' health (fatigue, eyestrain, headaches, respiratory problems and even stress). As we said in the beginning of this article, things have been improving in Romania. However, the booths we use are not all ISO compliant; they often lack proper ventilation, a good quality sound system, or they are placed in such a way that interpreters have an obstructed view of speakers and of the screen used for presentations. We know that the quality and reliability of the equipment determines the quality and reliability of the interpretation, but we should keep in mind that they also influence the stress level perceived by interpreters.

From the previously mentioned researches and studies we have seen that simultaneous interpretation is a stressful profession, even when it is carried out in standardized conditions. If we add to that the characteristics of the Romanian working environment, it seems clear that Romanian interpreters need to become aware of the consequences stress and burnout can have on their health, as well as to develop stress management techniques that could improve their general well-being.

There is a wide range of methods designed to reduce stress levels and improve coping skills, and they are usually divided in the following stages: identification and acknowledgement of the problem, choice of measures to implement, implementation and evaluation. Considering the complexity of occupational stress interventions and stress prevention in general, we decide to mention hereafter only some of the stress management techniques that could be used by Romanian interpreters. In the identification phase one should identify stressors (overload, poor working conditions, unrealistic expectations of the interpreter, and unrealistic expectations of the interpreter by others) and monitor symptoms (concentration, memory, trouble maintaining accuracy and completeness, irritability, sleeplessness, headaches, anxiety, increased blood pressure, and decreased immunity). When it comes to choosing the best stress management technique to implement, there are a lot of options: breathing exercises; muscular relaxation; meditation; positive thinking and creative visualization; problem-solving skills training; or changing perception of work stressors via cognitive restructuring. In the end, in the evaluation stage, one should keep in mind that managing stress is a process based on accrued knowledge and personal experience; it is not an outcome, but rather a process of transformation over time (SEAWARD,2015).

We need to acknowledge that stress is going to be a constant presence in our professional life, but the way we manage it is up to us. By increasing self-awareness, by developing stress buffers, by improving coping strategies we can enhance our stress resilience. Being a process it means that it is not going to happen overnight. That is why we agree with Kurz and other researchers (for example Hubscher-Davidson) who suggest that interpretation courses should provide, besides linguistic competences, also stress management and workload management competences. Students should be trained to evaluate the psychological effects of stress and to develop positive coping strategies that would enable them to find functional ways to deal with stress and anxiety. Unfortunately, in Romania, the conference interpreting master programs do not have stress management courses in their curriculum. Thus, students are left to discover on their own, when entering the labor market, what stress management is and how it works.

It is not enough to know about the concept of stress management. One needs to be able to effectively apply it in every-day life situations. It is a skill that can be learned and enhanced, for example, by participating in stress management workshops and trainings. For instance, the Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, offers a short (9 h) Stress Management Course for Interpreters. This course is designed for interpreters who wish to learn how to better deal with stressful, distressing or confronting experiences encountered during interpreting assignments and it features professionals with expertise in professional interactions, stress management, self-care and mindfulness. Another positive example is the AIIC “Seminar on mindfulness for interpreters”, a

workshop in which interpreters will discover how mindfulness can help them reduce stress, anxiety and irritability; avoid burn-out and improve overall health; respond to stressful situations; improve working memory, attention span and stamina; and in the end, enjoy life more fully.

### Conclusions

Occupational stress and burnout should not be ignored, but rather addressed. Romanian professional interpreters as well as trainees should be aware of the physical and psychological effects of stress and should be able to develop coping mechanisms and personal stress management techniques that would mitigate the negative effects and ensure their well-being. As we have previously mentioned, stress management is a transformation process and we hope that all the stakeholders of the Romanian conference interpreting field (interpreters, trainees, teachers, professional organizations, conference organizers, etc.) are willing to play their part in this process.

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### Online resources

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- American Institute for Stress, <https://www.stress.org/daily-life/>
- Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, *Stress Management for Interpreters*, <http://www.monash.edu/>

