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*Mental Well-being and Sense of Meaning in Life and Burnout
Syndrome of the Officers of the Prison Service. Preliminary
Research*

Dobrostan psychiczny i poczucie sensu życia a wypalenie zawodowe funkcjonariuszy Służby
Więziennej. Badania wstępne

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ABSTRACT

Mental well-being is important for mental and physical health as well as for professional efficiency of employees, it also converts into measurable benefits for the workplace. The results of bad state of mental health are loss of efficiency, costs associated with the absence or non-efficient performance of duties. A special case of mental health worsening, that is a succession of sustained, unresolved stress connected with work, is burnout. This syndrome occurs especially often in people who are exposed to strong stressors at work and are responsible for the safety of themselves and others. An occupational group especially exposed to burnout are officers of the Prison Service. The purpose of the research was to determine the relations between the level of occupational burnout and the feeling of happiness and meaning in life of the officers of the Prison Service. The study examined 60 people employed in 3 penitentiaries. It turned out that occupational burnout, measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory, was negatively correlated with sense of meaning in life measured by The Meaning in Life Questionnaire. Positive relations occurred between the feeling of happiness measured by the Steen Happiness Index and the reduced personal accomplishment measured by the MBI.

Keywords: burnout; the Prison Service; mental well-being; sense of meaning in life; sense of happiness

Burnout is a specific set of symptoms that usually occur in people with professions that require constant and direct contact with other people (Kraczla, 2013). Usually, this denotes the mental or physical state of exhaustion. This condition differs from alienation, existential crisis or depression as it is the final effect of a gradual loss of illusion of discovering the meaning in life in professional work (Sęk, 2000). A characteristic triad of symptoms creating the burnout syndrome is emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is manifested by fatigue, loss of energy and a sense of excessive mental burden on official duties. Depersonalisation is manifested in attitudes of indifference or resentment and instrumental treatment of clients or wards. A reduced sense of self-accomplishment is linked to the employee's conviction of his or her incompetence, unproductivity and helplessness (Okła, Steuden, 1998). Burnout often involves aversion or escapist behaviour in professional, family and social functioning (Znańska-Kozłowska, 2013), reduces efficiency by introducing schematism and routine in the performance of professional activities (Przybyliński, 2005).

The action of harmful stressors provokes a reaction in the body, which task is to protect it from the danger. Usually this is manifested by arousal, internal tension, state of increased readiness, in extreme cases it leads to mental and physical health problems. People performing high-risk occupations, professions from the dispositional group, people employed in paramilitary organisations, i.e. where there is a chronic and strong stress in the working environment are vulnerable to burnout (Harasim, 2018; Wait, 2015). Prison officers undoubtedly work in such a profession.

Previous research indicates that one of the most common and strongest stressors reported by prison staff is the fear of physical aggression of prisoners (Basiński, Basińska, 2004; Grabowski, et al., 2019). This problem is intensified by the increase in the number of violent criminals entering prisons and by an increased sense of impunity in prisoners (Keinan, Malach-Pines, 2007). The stress of a physical attack is exacerbated by the fear of intentional injury by a person who is, for example, a carrier of HIV, HBV or other contagious disease (Piotrowski, 2014).

Other problematic behaviour of prisoners as well as the need to come into contact and engage in problems of highly demoralised or dangerous people are also stressful. In the prison institution, there are acts of disobedience, insults and threats, manipulations by detainees or even inmate misconducts. While ensuring the safety of prisoners, the officer must also be in a state of high alertness to intervene appropriately in situations of suicide attempts, brawls, beatings, self-harm (Nawój, 2006; Piotrowski, 2010).

The work of prison staff is accompanied by a conflict of roles and ambiguity of the role. Officers must carry out their tasks by reconciling the conflicting expectations of decision-makers and the public opinion towards their work. This is not uncommon in a situation of a serious conflict between the tasks assigned to

the officers and the views and values, or emotions experienced by them. There is also a conflict of orders between maintaining discipline and order in prison and the humane treatment of prisoners. It is often accompanied by a sense of ambiguity of the role, in the absence of full information or being entrusted with work incompatible with qualifications and expectations, and the lack of social support and the necessary resources to accomplish the task.

Occupational stress is also associated with work overload. The Prison Service in Poland belongs to a dispositional group of professions. In practice, this means readiness to work, as well as working overtime. It is often associated with inability to take a vacation at a convenient time. Combined with staff shortages, this generates a state of constant fatigue and frustration in officers (Pałka, 2015).

Prison Service officers must also take into consideration the restrictions in the sphere of private life, which apply not only to them, but also to their closest family members and their non-professional contacts (Poklek, 2010). Stress at work is often accompanied by the fear for the safety of themselves and their families (Barczykowska, Muskała, 2011).

Previous meta-analyses (Ogińska-Bulik, 2009) also confirm the important role of negative organisational factors affecting the sense of stress and burnout, which are direct results of the specificity of the subordinate-superior relationship in paramilitary institutions. The organisation of the work of officers of the Prison Service is similar to the one of soldiers and officers of the police. Relations are, therefore, dominated by the use of vertical communication, and officers are obliged to fully comply with the orders of superiors (Poklek, 2015). Polish and foreign studies indicate the presence of such organisational problems as: ineffective management methods, lack of support from superiors, blocking of promotion, excessive bureaucracy and imprecise legislation in prison institutions (Keinan, Malach-Pines, 2007). An additional stressor are low wages and prestige of the profession, resulting in staff turnover and staff shortages. Staff stress is also supported by density of prisons and work under adverse conditions, i.e. noise, stench or dirt (Wieczorek, 2017). The occurrence of burnout is also influenced by personality predictors, which include neuroticism or a lack of the sense of effectiveness (Szygit-Kowalkowska, et al., 2017).

Despite being active in the work environment, objectively harmful external stimuli do not always lead directly to burnout. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the subjective interpretation of a stressful situation is crucial, depending on the sense of activity, which depends on the assessment of whether this situation is a motivator or an obstacle. This means that, in a similar situation, one person can interpret the situation as a challenge (eustress), and another can perceive it as an obstacle and experience distress. Eustress leads to personal development and is positively correlated with life satisfaction and well-being. It manifests itself in focus on a challenge, excitement and motivation to act. It can lead to the

achievement of state of flow, which is “the most joyful, happiest and most blissful, moment of life”. In a state of “flow”, a person becomes absorbed in work, accompanied by high productivity, absorption, pleasure and internal motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, Nakamura, 2014). Strong, long-lasting distress is harmful to functioning. It causes a number of problems, disrupts the ability to do work, brings suffering, reduces the quality of work and satisfaction. According to Kalimo et al. (2003), inefficient strategies used by an individual to deal with distress at work lead to burnout.

Previous research has focused on stressors contributing to burnout. This knowledge, despite its undoubted usefulness, does not fully explain why this problem affects people doing the same work to varying degrees. It also has limited use in the prevention of burnout. Removing the factors that cause burnout from many working backgrounds is usually impossible. Regardless of the preventive action taken, prison service officers will continue to be exposed to strong stressors, immanently related to the nature of the work performed. However, there is still a lack of analyses identifying protective factors that reduce the damage caused by risk factors, taking into consideration a wider range of variables that increase the effectiveness of coping with stressors in the working environment. Little is also known about the role of personal resources such as: a eudaemonic sense of happiness, or a sense of meaning in life, in the formation and development of burnout. However, there are many studies indicating the effect of positive emotions on success in life or on health (Linley, Joseph 2007; Czapiński, 2004; Trzebińska, 2008). It has also been proved that it is more common to overestimate the psychological effects of bad events than the effects of positive events (Czapiński, 2004; Isen, 2004). Moreover, positive emotions can correct or eliminate the effects of negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Borucka, Ostaszewski, 2008). This means that positive emotions can lead to the formation of new better structures. Their role is crucial for the motivation to positively change, therefore, emotions explain the mechanism of relatively good functioning despite adverse conditions and experiences (Luthar, Zelazo, 2003).

METHOD

Participants

The purpose of the research was to determine whether there is a relationship between the level of burnout and the sense of happiness and sense of meaning in life in employees of the Prison Service. The research was carried out in 2019, during a diploma seminar. 60 questionnaires from 21 female officers and 39 male officers of the Prison Service aged 24–60 (mean age 38.4 years) with work experience from one to 43 years of service (mean 11.5 years) were used for the analy-

sis. The majority (57%) of the officers surveyed have a master's degree, 9 people (15%) are undergraduates, and 16 people (26.7%) completed secondary education. The vast majority of the officers surveyed (85%) declared that they are currently married, 6.7% unmarried, 5% divorced and 3.3% widowed.

Measures

1. Maslach Burnout Inventory Questionnaire (MBI). This is one of the most popular tools for studying this phenomenon. It is highly accurate and reliable. It includes 22 items consisting of 3 scales: emotional exhaustion – 6 items, depersonalisation – 5 items and reduced personal accomplishment – 8 items. High results in the scale of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation and low on the subscale of reduced sense of personal accomplishment, indicate burnout to a significant extent (Tucholska, 2001).
2. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, Kaler. The scale consists of 10 questions that make up two dimensions: the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life. The scale shows satisfactory psychometric properties (Kossakowska, et al., 2013).
3. Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL) in the adaptation of Kaczmarek. It refers to the concept of eudaemonic well-being, which consists of “A Life Full of Meaning” (the Meaningful Life) and “Committed Life” (the Pleasant Life) (Seligman, 2005). It consists of three subscales describing the ways to achieve true happiness: the Pleasure scale (a pleasant life), the Engagement scale (an involved life, of optimal experience, developing the capabilities of the subject well) and the Meaning scale (a sensible life that includes broadening the knowledge, spreading good, but above all believing that life is more than a normal existence). The Scale of Full Life is the sum of the results from the above-mentioned scales, creating an overall result – a maximised sense of happiness. The scale has satisfactory psychometric properties (Kaczmarek, et al. 2010).

Data Analysis

In the concept of Maslach (Kęk, 2000), burnout is a syndrome that follows chronic exhaustion and a lack of interest in work. It manifests itself in symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of the variables analysed on the group of 60 Prison Service officers surveyed. The results obtained by the MBI Burnout Questionnaire were compared with those carried out in other paramilitary professional groups. It turned out that the surveyed prison officers obtained higher results in the burnout questionnaire (MBI) than the fire officers

surveyed by Ogińska-Bulik and Kaflik-Pieróg (2003). On the “Reduced personal accomplishment” scale, the fire officers achieved a mean score of $M = 23.49$ at standard deviation $SD = 10.43$. On the “Depersonalisation” scale, they achieved a mean of $M = 3.55$ at $SD = 4.30$, and in “Emotional Exhaustion” $M = 8.36$ at $SD = 6.39$. The prison service officers surveyed performed lower at the level of burnout than police officers investigated by Lach and Helka (2016), whose mean score on the “Reduced personal accomplishment” scale was $M = 38.80$ $SD = 8.51$, at the “Depersonalisation” $M = 5.06$ $SD = 6.72$, and on the “Emotional Exhaustion” subscale $M = 28.97$, $SD = 12.3$. The burnout of the prison service officers examined also turned out to be lower than those of representatives of other professions: nurses (Dębska, Cepuch, 2008) or managers (Apple, Borkowska, 2005).

The results of the Maslach Burnout Inventory scale measurement were also lower in all three subscales than the results of prison service officers tested by Piotrowski (2010), whose mean score on the “Reduced personal accomplishment” subscale was $M = 34.82$, $SD = 9.28$, on the “Depersonalisation” subscale $M = 16.80$ $SD = 7.84$, and on the “Emotional Exhaustion” scale $M = 28.10$ $SD = 11.83$. However, differences in results are most likely due to different selection of the sample. In the presented own research, the majority were officers and non-commissioned corps, possessing higher education and performing the role of educators or serving in the administrative division. In the research of Piotrowski (2010), the majority of the respondents were people with secondary education serving in the security department.

It also examined whether there is a link between the burnout dimensions measured by the MBI Maslach scale and demographic variables such as age, seniority and gender. The analysis of variance carried out for this purpose did not reveal significant differences in this field.

The second scale used was The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). It measures the sense of meaning in life in two dimensions: “Searching for the meaning in life” and “The presence of the meaning in life”. It turned out that the mean result obtained by prison officers on the “Searching for the meaning in life” subscale was $M = 27.58$ with standard deviation $SD = 4.9$, and on the “The presence of meaning in life” subscale, the mean score was $M = 25.63$ at a deviation standard $SD = 5.11$. The measurement results obtained by The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) were found to be similar to those obtained by Kossakovska, Kwiatek and Stefaniak (2013) on a sample of 397 students and adults of Tri-city residents (Searching for meaning in life $M = 25.28$, $SD = 5.68$; The presence of meaning in life $M = 26.71$, $SD = 4.88$). A high score on the subscale of the current meaning in life is seen as a positive phenomenon associated with mature personality traits, positive emotions of self-esteem, spirituality and meaning in life. The search for the meaning in life, in American research (Steger, et al. 2008), correlates negatively with well-being and was associated with unpleasant emotions such as fear, sadness and shame. Polish

and Japanese studies indicate, however, that the search for and finding the meaning in life are not mutually exclusive, having a positive and developmental nature (Kossakowska, et al. 2013). Due to the differences in studies in the American, Polish and Japanese populations regarding the relationship between the subscales of the search for meaning in life and the presence of meaning in life, it was also examined whether and what correlations existed between the surveyed group of Prison Service officers. It turned out that between the searching for the meaning in life and the presence of meaning in life there was a statistically significant ($p = 0.001$) strong positive correlation ($r = 0.51$).

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of the variables analysed

Name of the questionnaire	Subscales	Mean	standard deviation
		(M)	(SD)
Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)	Reduced personal accomplishment	24.08	8.99
	Depersonalisation	10.37	5.87
	Emotional exhaustion	18.90	9.61
The Meaning of Life Questionnaire (MLQ)	Searching for meaning in life	27.58	4.90
	The presence of meaning in life	25.63	5.11
Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL)	Pleasure	12.63	1.92
	Engagement	23.82	3.11
	Meaning	20.38	3.03
	Total score	56.83	7.37

The third tool used in the study was the Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL). The surveyed Prison Service officers obtained in the results for the entire scale mean a score of $M = 56.83$ with a standard deviation $SD = 7.37$, which turned out to be lower than the temporary norms for the SHI-PL scale created on the basis of 456 students, obtained on mean $M = 64.88$ at $SD = 11.73$. This result was also lower than the norms for the English version of the SHI questionnaire ($M = 64.25$, $SD = 11.27$) (Kaczmarek, et al., 2010). Perhaps this difference is due to the age of the subjects. It is worth recalling that the prison officers examined are mostly much older (mean age 38.4 years) than people in the standardisation group. It was, therefore, examined whether there was a link between the age of the officers surveyed and the subscales of the Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL). It turned out that this compound was statistically significant ($p = 0.05$) only on the positive scale and indicated a weak and negative correlation ($r = -0.297$) of this subscale with age.

After checking the parameters of the schedules, Pearson's correlations were calculated between the results obtained in the Burnout Questionnaire subscales

and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and the Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL). The obtained results are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Correlations between the subscales Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Subscales of The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL)

subscales	emotional exhaustion	reduced personal accomplishment	depersonalisation
Searching for meaning in life	-0.447**	0.309*	-0.303*
The presence of meaning in life	-0.206	0.057	-0.068
Pleasure	-0.186	0.276*	0.012
Engagement	-0.223	0.328*	-0.032
Meaning	-0.263*	0.286*	-0.062
Total score	-0.251	0.328*	-0.036

** Significant correlation at 0.01 (bilaterally).

* Significant correlation at 0.05 (bilaterally).

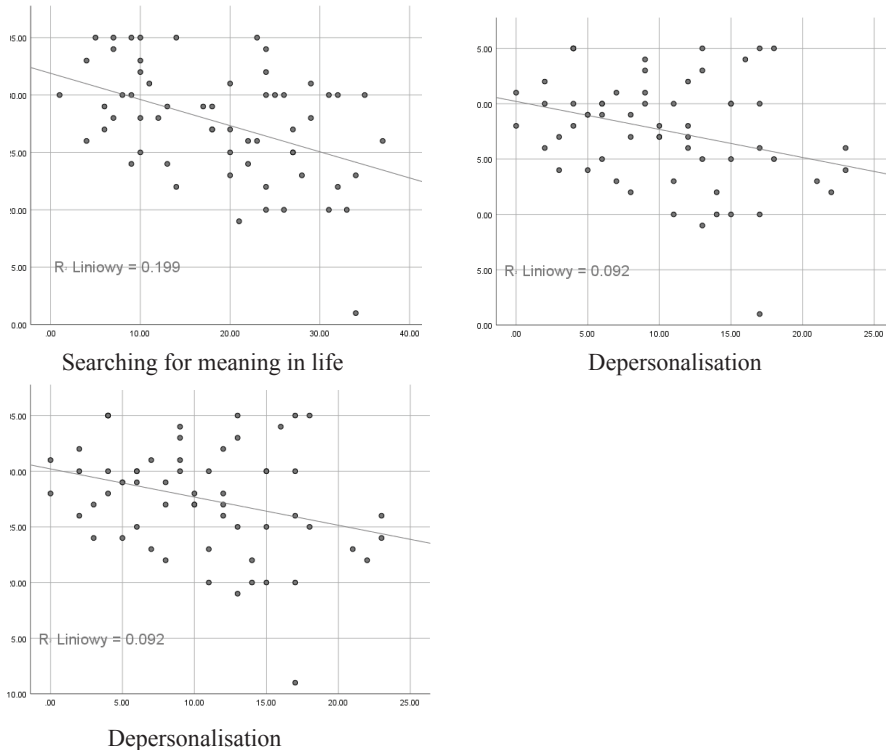


Figure 1. Relationship between the subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the subscales of The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)

The analysis of the correlation between the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) subscales and the subscales of The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) revealed a negative link between burnout levels and the search for meaning of life. It turned out that the search for meaning in life was significantly correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.447$), a reduced personal accomplishment ($r = 0.309$) and depersonalisation ($r = -0.303$). There was no significant correlation between burnout and the presence of meaning in life.

After calculating the most popular correlations of the created scatter charts with the line position fitting, a matching real linear function can be detected. Graphs for the significant correlations below.

The analysis of the graphs indicates a weak statistical link between burnout measured by the MBI scale and the Search for Meaning in life as measured by The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and the subscales of the Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL). The value of the R2 determination factor has also proved unsatisfactory in all cases.

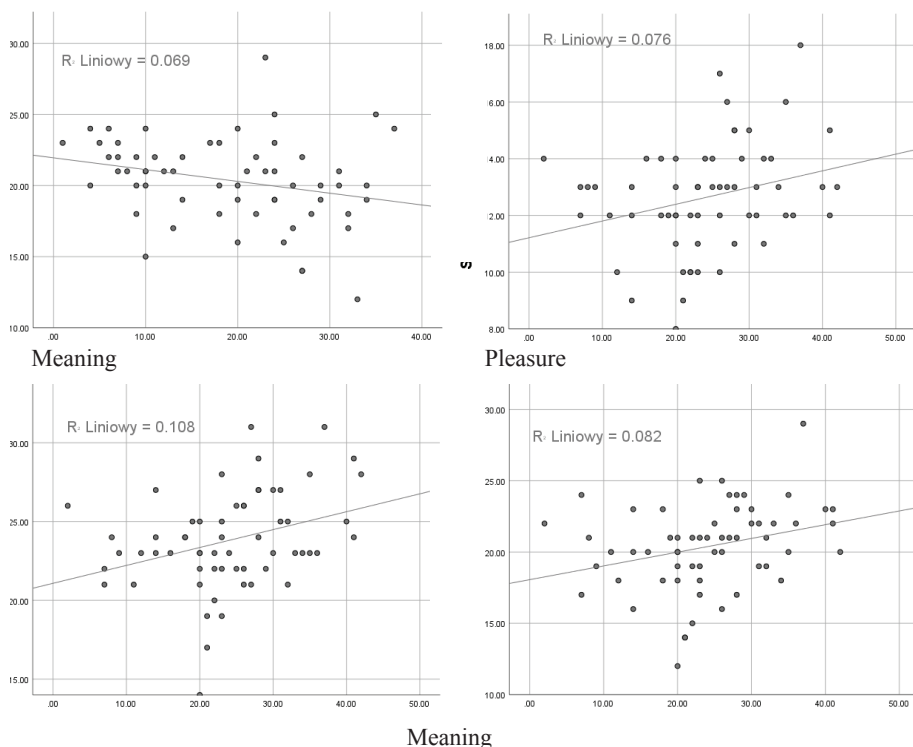


Figure 2. Relationship between the subscales Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Subscales of the Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL)

In order to identify a group of factors that would explain the relationship between burnout and mental well-being and sense of life, linear regression analysis was performed using the SPSS package. Unfortunately, it was not possible to obtain a model that would satisfactorily explain the relationship between Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the subscales of The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and The Steen Happiness Index (SHI-PL).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the research was to establish links between burnout and eudaemonic sense of happiness and meaning in life in the prison staff. The results show that the sense of happiness and meaning in life is poorly and negatively related to burnout.

The level of burnout, in all three dimensions of the MBI questionnaire, was associated with the search for meaning in life measured by the MLQ scale. There were no significant links between burnout and the presence of meaning in life.

According to Frankl (1984), the search for meaning in life is more related to mental health than to having it. Park et al. (2010) believes that the search for meaning in life is purely cognitive and is associated with greater life satisfaction, greater happiness, and less depression. It is associated with the need to set life goals and affirmation of life and leads to constant search and finding it in life, even if such a sense has already been gained by the individual as a result of previous experience or reflection (Kossakowska, et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the search for meaning in negative experiences and the search for meaning in life under the influence of negative experiences (Park, et al., 2010). However, the conducted research does not determine what the search for meaning in officers' life results from. Research also does not explain the direction of dependence, whether it is the search for the meaning in life that reduces the level of burnout, or whether the occurrence of symptoms of burnout contributes to the crisis in valuation causing a sense of hopelessness, senselessness and loss of illusion of finding meaning in life at work.

The results only partially confirmed the hypothesis that a high sense of happiness was significantly associated with less burnout. Significant correlations indicate a weak relationship between the eudaemonic sense of happiness and the positive assessment of one's own achievements measured by the MBI scale. A weak and negative but important correlation also occurred between the sense of meaning measured by the SHI scale and emotional exhaustion. However, it is worth paying attention to the fact that officers of the Prison Service, before being admitted to the profession, are subjected to examinations checking their predispositions to practice the profession. The selection is negative and candidates who are suspected of not being able to cope with future work are rejected.

It is, therefore, worth considering other professional groups in the planning of subsequent studies.

The weak relationship between the sense of happiness and the dimensions of occupational burnout (depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion) may also indicate that the surveyed Prison Service officers primarily satisfy their psychological needs outside of work and gain experience building their sense of well-being.

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STRESZCZENIE

Dobrostan psychiczny ma istotne znaczenie dla zdrowia psychicznego i fizycznego oraz efektywności zawodowej pracowników, przekłada się bowiem na wymierne korzyści w miejscu pracy. Skutkami złego stanu zdrowia psychicznego są utrata wydajności oraz koszty związane z absencją czy nieefektywnym wykonywaniem obowiązków. Szczególnym przypadkiem pogorszenia się stanu zdrowia psychicznego, będącego następstwem długotrwałego, nierozwiązanego stresu związanego z pracą, jest wypalenie zawodowe. Syndrom ten występuje szczególnie często u osób narażonych w pracy na silne stresory, na których spoczywa duża odpowiedzialność za bezpieczeństwo swoje i innych. Grupą zawodową szczególnie narażoną na wypalenie zawodowe są funkcjonariusze Służby Więziennej. Celem badań było ustalenie zależności pomiędzy poziomem wypalenia zawodowego a poczuciem szczęścia i sensu życia u funkcjonariuszy Służby Więziennej. Przebadano 60 osób zatrudnionych w trzech zakładach karnych. Okazało się, że wypalenie zawodowe mierzone Kwestionariuszem Wypalenia Zawodowego jest ujemnie skorelowane z poszukiwaniem sensu życia mierzonym Kwestionariuszem Sensu Życia. Pozytywne zależności wystąpiły również pomiędzy poczuciem szczęścia mierzonym Kwestionariuszem Poczucia Jakości Życia SHI-PL a poczuciem własnych dokonań mierzonych Kwestionariuszem Wypalenia Zawodowego.

Słowa kluczowe: wypalenie zawodowe; Służba Więzienna; dobrostan psychiczny; poczucie sensu życia; poczucie szczęścia

