

“Guide for the Prevention of Emotional Exhaustion Due to Burnout Syndrome in Sign Language Interpreters.”

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ABSTRACT

This critical essay addresses the importance of preventing burnout syndrome among sign language interpreters, with a particular focus on Ecuadorian Sign Language (LSEC). It examines how the high cognitive, emotional, and physical demands of the profession lead to progressive exhaustion, affecting both the well-being of the interpreter and the quality of the service provided. Drawing on contributions from academic literature and professional experience in the field of interpretation, the main risk factors are identified, including work overload, emotional strain derived from exposure to sensitive situations, repetitive movements, and prolonged working hours without adequate rest. The essay also emphasizes the need to incorporate prevention and self-care strategies, such as physical exercise, breathing techniques, grounding, mindfulness, and effective time management. It concludes that burnout prevention does not depend solely on the individual professional, but also on institutions and public policies that must ensure dignified working conditions. This guide is presented as both an academic and practical resource aimed at strengthening the emotional and physical well-being of interpreters, thereby ensuring communicative accessibility for the Deaf community.

Keywords:

Sign Language Interpreters, Burnout Syndrome, Emotional Exhaustion, Occupational Stress, Professional Self-Care, Mental Health, Deaf Community, Psychosocial Risk Prevention.

INTRODUCTION

This guide presents a series of physical and psychological exercises specifically designed to prepare sign language interpreters prior to their professional performance. It includes hand, neck, and shoulder mobility exercises, as well as breathing, concentration, and attention techniques. Each exercise is intended to strengthen the connection between body and mind, reducing tension and stress while enhancing both emotional and physical stability.

Sign language interpreters require agility in their hands and fluidity in body expression, along with mental clarity and emotional stability to convey messages with accuracy and confidence. For this reason, this guide adopts a psychological approach aimed at improving expressiveness and concentration, helping interpreters regulate their emotional responses and strengthen self-confidence.

By fostering a state of calm and enhanced focus, this guide enables interpreters to perform with greater fluency and confidence across a variety of professional contexts.

THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Framework and Background

Sign language interpreting is a highly demanding profession in which the demands are numerous, dynamic, and interactive, arising from complex linguistic, environmental, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors (Dean & Pollard, 2001). For Ecuadorian Sign Language (LSEC) interpreters, burnout syndrome can be particularly complex and difficult to manage. Interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language in highly sensitive contexts becomes cognitively and emotionally demanding.

LSEC interpreters play a vital role in enabling Deaf individuals to communicate with the broader society; however, this responsibility often entails significant psychological stress. According to Hubscher Davidson (2021), interpreters may experience “ethical stress” when faced with dilemmas that require immediate resolution. The emotional impact of interpreting has also been widely

examined within sign language interpreting contexts.

From a conceptual perspective, the sign language interpreter, as defined by Burad (2008), acts as a mediator in communication between individuals who use different linguistic codes (p. 32). Similarly, Asetrad (2020) describes the interpreter as a bridge between two cultures, facilitating communication between individuals who speak different languages. Their professional training enables them to convey ideas accurately and effectively from one language to another (p. 3). This highlights the high level of responsibility involved in transmitting spoken discourse through linguistic mediation into Ecuadorian Sign Language and vice versa.

Work-related stress is a major cause of both emotional and physical health issues. Gómez-Abreu et al. (2023), in their study *Workplace Stress in the Tortipán Bakery*, found that work overload and stress—resulting from performing multiple tasks in short periods without opportunities for active breaks—lead to physical symptoms such as neck and back pain, as well as muscle tension. The author also notes that

women tend to show a higher incidence of these conditions, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1

Duality in the interpreter's role: cognitive load and emotional exhaustion in sign language interpreting performance.

Note. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

Burnout syndrome (Ruiz-Sastre, 2021) is a health condition directly linked in its origin to the work environment and that also has significant repercussions on job performance. It is characterized by emotional exhaustion and multiple physical symptoms (p. 4). According to Peyró-Outeiriño et al. (2019, as cited in Castro-Valles et al., 2024), emotional exhaustion stems from a reduction in emotional expression, even unconsciously, when performing certain work-related tasks (p. 4).

Mejía-Bernal et al. (2023) note that this syndrome more frequently affects professions involving direct contact with people, such as teaching (p. 3). It is evident that burnout involves a state of extreme fatigue and work-related emotional exhaustion, which can limit an individual's ability to meet both emotional and professional demands.

Mental fatigue among LSEC interpreters arises from constant exposure to situations with high emotional load, such as interpreting sensitive or traumatic content, including illness, family tragedies, or situations of violence. This results in a significant emotional burden. In addition, interpreters face the pressure of maintaining high levels of accuracy and fluency, which requires continuous cognitive effort. They must perceive, process, and convey messages in real time, gradually leading to mental and emotional exhaustion.

The problem lies in the lack of comprehensive research on the specific psychosocial risks affecting sign language interpreters, as well as the need to better understand how these risks impact their quality of life, emotional well-being, and

ability to perform their work effectively. It is also important to highlight that sign language interpreters are exposed to rapid and forceful movements and uncomfortable postures for prolonged periods, often standing, and frequently without adequate breaks due to the continuity required in their interpreting tasks (Freeman & Rogers, 2010).

Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness of burnout syndrome among LSEC interpreters in order to promote prevention and support strategies. Improving the working and emotional conditions of these professionals will not only benefit their health and well-being, but also ensure high-quality interpreting, thereby guaranteeing full inclusion and access to communication for Deaf individuals.

According to Freeman and Rogers (2010), in the United States context, sign language interpreters are a recognized professional group that frequently develops musculoskeletal disorders in the upper limbs due to the physical demands of the job. These include rapid and repetitive hand and arm movements performed over extended periods without sufficient rest, as

well as the lack of proper warm-up before and after interpreting assignments.

At the regional level, several studies have examined the role of interpreters and their relationship with the Deaf community. For example, Pérez-Toledo et al. (2021), in their study “*Interpreter or Sign Language Facilitator?*” conducted in Chile, conclude that the interpreter’s role often shifts toward that of a facilitator. This occurs because interpreters not only transfer messages between a visual-gestural language and an oral language, but also explain content when necessary (p. 14). It is therefore reasonable to assert that interpreting involves not only decoding messages, but also making them more accessible and understandable, through examples and real-time explanations.

In the Ecuadorian context, several studies on interpreters can also be highlighted. For instance, Ortega-Rentería and Merchán-Bustamante (2023), in their research “*A New Application of Ecuadorian Sign Language for Students with Cerebral Palsy,*” emphasize the importance of having a sign language guide, as such resources ensure that all members of the

educational community can acquire essential knowledge to establish effective communication environments (p. 11). These essential skills include the ability to function effectively while promoting both physical and emotional self-care.

It is therefore crucial to develop a burnout prevention guide for sign language interpreters, as these professionals face long working hours that require sustained concentration, assertive communication, and empathy over extended periods. Accumulated stress can lead to both physical and emotional overload, increasing the risk of mental exhaustion. This may manifest in symptoms such as chronic fatigue, lack of motivation, anxiety, and health problems that affect not only the interpreter but also the quality of the service provided.

Physical and Attention Exercises

Before performing sign language interpreting, it is important for interpreters to prepare both mentally and physically to ensure optimal performance. Interpreting is an activity that requires high levels of bodily coordination, concentration, and energy, which can generate physical and

emotional tension, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2

Work-related stress in interinstitutional interpreting contexts: cognitive and emotional load of the sign language interpreter. Original visual production for the article “Guide for the Prevention of Burnout in LSEC Interpreters” (Oña Rojas, 2025).

Note. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

For this reason, physical exercises performed prior to interpreting play an important role in injury prevention and stress reduction, thereby improving fluency in communication.

Physical exercise refers to the systematic and organized execution of body movements, postures, and physical activities (...) aimed at correcting or preventing impairments, as well as improving, restoring, or enhancing

physical functioning (Ordóñez-Aroca et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted using a qualitative approach with a descriptive–propositional design, aimed at analyzing the needs of sign language interpreters in relation to stress management and the prevention of burnout syndrome, as well as proposing a practical guide to support their physical and emotional well-being.

The method employed was the analytical–synthetic approach, which made it possible to break down the problem of occupational stress into its main components (physical, psychological, and emotional) and subsequently integrate these elements into a structured proposal of exercises and strategies. Additionally, the inductive method was applied, based on the review of experiences and theoretical contributions related to stress, attention, relaxation, and body expression, in order to develop a guide applicable to the context of sign language interpreting.

Data collection techniques included bibliographic and documentary review, analyzing academic sources related to occupational stress, relaxation techniques, therapeutic physical exercises, and emotional regulation strategies. These sources provided the theoretical foundation for the proposal and supported the selection of appropriate exercises for the target population. Furthermore, content analysis was conducted to organize the information into categories such as physical exercises, breathing, attention, body expression, and stress regulation strategies.

The study population consisted of sign language interpreters, considering their working conditions, such as long working hours, high cognitive demands, and emotional load. No specific sample was used, as the study has a propositional nature and aims to provide a general tool applicable to this professional group.

The research context is situated within the educational and professional field of sign language interpreting, where high levels of physical and mental demands may lead to stress and exhaustion. Within this

framework, the guide is proposed as a support resource to improve professional performance and quality of working life.

The methodological procedure included, first, the identification of the problem through the analysis of interpreters' working conditions. Subsequently, relevant literature was reviewed and selected. In a third phase, exercises and techniques were organized and adapted according to their relevance and applicability. Finally, the guide was structured into practical sections that integrate physical, breathing, cognitive, and emotional exercises, allowing for easy understanding and application.

In this way, the methodology employed ensures a systematic process that facilitates understanding of the research development and enables its potential replication in similar studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that sign language interpreters are exposed to high levels of physical, cognitive, and emotional demands, which increases the risk of developing occupational stress and

burnout syndrome. Based on the documentary review conducted, recurring factors were identified, such as work overload, the need to maintain constant concentration, the pressure to convey messages accurately, and the limited implementation of self-care strategies in the professional environment.

Based on these findings, a practical guide was developed, consisting of physical exercises, breathing techniques, attention and concentration strategies, as well as emotional regulation activities. The results indicate that the integration of body warm-up exercises, especially for the hands, shoulders, and neck, contributes to the prevention of muscle tension and improves fluency in interpreting. Likewise, diaphragmatic breathing techniques help reduce anxiety levels and promote a state of calm prior to the interpreting activity.

On the other hand, attention techniques such as grounding and sustained focus proved to be effective tools for strengthening concentration and maintaining focus on the message, thereby reducing distraction and mental fatigue. Similarly, body expression exercises and

positive visualization contribute to enhancing confidence and stage presence, which are essential aspects of interpreter performance.

Figure 1 summarizes the main components of the proposed guide, organized into physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to stress prevention.

From an analytical perspective, the results obtained are directly related to the objective of the study, which is to provide tools for stress management among interpreters. In line with the theoretical contributions reviewed, occupational stress is understood as the body's response to demanding situations; therefore, the implementation of emotional and physical regulation strategies is essential for its management.

The discussion highlights that the proposal not only responds to a need identified in the professional context, but also aligns with previous studies that emphasize the importance of relaxation, mindful attention, and physical activity as effective mechanisms for reducing stress. In this

regard, the developed guide provides a practical and comprehensive approach by integrating physical, psychological, and cognitive elements into a single accessible tool for interpreters.

Furthermore, it is emphasized that incorporating pre-interpreting exercises not only improves the well-being of professionals, but also positively impacts the quality of the service provided, promoting clearer, more accurate, and more fluent communication. This reinforces the idea that interpreter well-being is a key component of the communication process.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the systematic application of physical and mental preparation strategies can significantly contribute to stress prevention and the strengthening of professional performance. However, it is recommended that future research include field studies or practical applications to quantitatively measure the impact of these strategies on sign language interpreters, thereby expanding the scope of the results presented.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis indicates that, in order to prevent stress associated with burnout syndrome, it is essential to address both the physical and emotional well-being of professionals. This includes strategies such as breathing techniques, relaxation, ergonomics, and time management to balance professional and personal life. This comprehensive approach not only improves interpreters' health but also enhances the quality of their work and services.

It was also concluded that normalizing self-care and mental health within the field of interpreting is crucial for preventing occupational stress. Promoting mental health training and the implementation of preventive strategies fosters psychological well-being, raises awareness, and transforms the way interpreters manage their emotional health.

Ultimately, it is concluded that the prevention of burnout syndrome does not depend solely on the individual interpreter, but also on institutions, which must guarantee fair and dignified working

conditions, including balanced workloads and appropriate policies that promote respect for and care of professionals.

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