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Stress management among healthcare workers during COVID – 19

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Abstract

Any action that puts an individual under additional physical or psychological strain or that upsets their sense of balance is considered stressful. Workplace stress is a possible source of worry for healthcare professionals because it is linked to reduced job satisfaction, time away from the office, anxiety, depressive symptoms, restless nights, and medical mistakes and near-misses. There are also many concerns over the psychological anguish of HCWs who are attending to and caring for these patients. The general health and the ability of HCWs to bounce back is one of the most important factors in maintaining an optimal healthcare response for effective patient management to successfully treat patients during this COVID19 outbreak. As it reveals the level of pandemic preparation in all impacted countries, COVID-19 is causing severe psychosocial disruptions. The disease presents an unfamiliar hazard since it spreads quickly and has a high fatality rate to set itself apart from more benign disorders. The disease brought with itself not just physical but psychological distress as well. While there was enough attention paid to the mental health of desk workers, not enough focus was laid on the well-being of those attending to the ones affected. Major sources of stress include the possibility of working more and longer shifts, the limited availability of personal protective equipment, unpredictable duty schedules, the worry that they will bring an infection home, quarantine/isolation in hotels away from friends, family, and children, and a lack of household help. Additionally, studies have shown that witnessing co-workers develop illnesses, social exclusion, and having to make difficult decisions about how to allocate scarce, allocating life-saving resources affect them in a negative way and cause high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms.

Keywords

HCWs – Health Care Workers,
Occupational Stress,
Burnout,
Coronavirus,
Health Workforce,
Pandemic

Aim

The aim of the study was to assess the levels of stress among healthcare workers, working in hospitals with 50-100 bed in the Covid wards, and its correlation to factors like physical and mental health, work and other allied factors.

Objectives

To find out existence and levels of stress among healthcare workers during the pandemic, and coping strategies for the same.

-) To assess the stress level among various work groups of health care professionals
-) To find out the causes of stress among healthcare workers
-) To explore the relation between work stress and health
-) To identify stress coping methods adopted by the healthcare workers

Methodology

The study was conducted through a questionnaire survey among the nurses working in the covid wards with up to 100 beds. The survey also included healthcare professionals, paramedics, administration and support staff. The survey had multiple sections that focused on the levels of stress, its causes and how they cope with it.

The link to the survey was distributed via emails and WhatsApp. The link that participants received and clicked on, immediately redirected them to the study's intent and purpose. The completion of the survey implied consent to participate in the study, and all responses were kept anonymous and private.

The study was a questionnaire-based analytical investigation. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, which was utilized for both data analysis and tabular presentation, was used to statistically evaluate the replies.

Background

What is stress?

Your body's response to pressure from a particular circumstance or incident is stress. It could be an emotional, mental, or bodily response.

Everybody experiences stress at some point in their lives. It could be your career, a family disease, or financial difficulties. These serve as typical triggers. A recent survey found that over half of all Americans report experiencing moderate stress.

Stressful life situations, like the pandemic, or the recessions, have a negative implication on mental health and the overall functioning of physical as well as psychological health Abraham, W. T. (2007). COVID 19 had a huge impact on people's lives as well as their jobs, especially the healthcare workers. The risks that exist in the workplace because of pandemics not only divert workers' attention from their task but also endanger their existence by causing health issues. To study the understanding of how stress is created we need to focus on two things: First is to understand how psychological aspects of the work environment hampers performance, like increased workloads, role conflict, lack of social support, Etc. Second is to look at how physical environments and worker ability leads to adverse physiological and psychological responses.

Stress and health

The symptoms or stress affects your body, thoughts, feelings and behaviours in various ways. Covid 19 pandemic was indeed a very stressful period for the healthcare workers but it was more crucial for them to learn how to manage it well because the whole country was dependent on them. Anita Odigie (2016) Stress affects your body in a lot of ways. You may think illness or weakness is the reason for irritating headaches, frequent insomnia or your decreased productivity at work, but stress may be the cause. Understanding typical stress symptoms might help you manage them. Unmanaged stress can be

a factor in a number of health issues, including high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, and diabetes.

Some of the common effects of stress on your body are headache, fatigue, muscle tension, upset stomach, insomnia, change in sex drive, chest pain, etc. Some effects on your behaviour are angry outbursts, less exercising, social withdrawal, misuse of drugs and alcohol, overeating or undereating. Effects to notice on your mood due to stress are anxiety, sadness or depression, restlessness, irritability or anger, lack of motivation or focus, feeling overwhelming, etc. Stress is very difficult to manage if it is unrecognizable. Learning how to manage and cope up with stress can have many health benefits as well. Some of the strategies to manage stress are:

-) Exercising regularly, taking care of your body plays a major role in managing stress.
-) Giving time to your body and taking a break in between by practicing deep breathing, meditation, yoga, massage can actually help you to deal with stress sometimes when work gets overburdened.
-) Avoid using drugs and alcohol to cope up with the stress because it impacts your body and may get addicted to it.
-) Spend time with your friends and family and talk to them, open up about your feelings.
-) Recognize when you need more help, consult a doctor who can help identify the sources of stress and learn new coping tools.

Stress and age

While stress is undoubtedly difficult to manage at any age, it can get harder to handle as you age for a variety of reasons. First of all, your body is no longer physiologically capable of handling stress the same way it did when you were younger. Your heart and lungs might not function as well as they once did, and your body might find it more difficult to recover from stressful situations. Additionally, managing stress mentally could be more difficult. In some cases, getting a good night's sleep can help lower stress, but as you get

older, you might stop sleeping well, which can cause your brain's levels of stress hormones to rise. Additionally, there may be other contributing elements to your stress, some of which may be more complicated than the problems you dealt with when you were younger. Stress symptoms might resemble those of dementia or memory loss, and they can also manifest as changes in appetite, headaches, anxiety, impatience, or difficulty concentrating. Utilize relaxation techniques, participate in your community, take care of yourself, eat well, get enough sleep, and maintain other healthy routines to manage stress. Age also plays a major role in your work-related stress. You are a lot more relaxed when you are in your 20s because of the lack of dependency and responsibilities, but it also depends on your financial background as well as marital status and family status. As you grow older between the ages of 30-50, people are the most stressed because of the increase in responsibilities and expenses. It also depends on your lifestyle, marital status, type of job, whether you have kids or not. People after retirement, aged around 60s are less stressed because of the decrease in responsibilities and no job-related stress.

Stress and gender

Stress may vary depending on the gender of an individual. However, it has been noticed that women initially react to stress in the same way as males do, making them somewhat susceptible to cortisol and adrenaline. The pituitary gland of women, however, also starts to release oxytocin, which helps reduce the production of cortisol and adrenaline and lessens its negative consequences. Hope Ricciotti, M.D., and Hye-Chun Hur, M.D., M.P.H. (Editors in Chief, Harvard Women's Health Watch)

It's interesting to note that men secrete oxytocin as well as women do under stress, however they do so in lower quantities and its effects are blocked by male hormones like testosterone. The more relaxed behaviour that oxytocin promotes also seems to offer some protection of its own Shelley E. Taylor, PhD, (a professor of psychology at UCLA).

Men and women not only handle stress in different ways, but they also value managing stress in different ways. Women place more emphasis on the need to manage stress yet believe they are not doing it well enough, whilst males report being less concerned and more likely to claim they are doing enough in this area.

Also, Men may find it more difficult to understand the connection between stress and physical health Redford Williams, (MD, director of the Behavioral Medicine, Duke University). Despite being more likely than women to report having been diagnosed with the kinds of illnesses that are frequently made worse by stress, men are less likely than women to feel that it can have any impact on their health (*Journal of Family Psychology*).

Observation and Result

The form consisted of several questions to find out the relationship between firstly the extent of work -related stress among the health care professionals, and secondly, how many of them

take measures to deal with stress.4 parameters were provided to choose from. Those were – Never, sometimes, frequently and always, all depicted the intensity of occurrence of stress during working hours. There was a total of 24 questions in the questionnaire, and the responses were collected from 100 participants.

Objective 1 – To assess the stress levels among various work groups of health care professionals.

Here we observe that most of the participants have favoured the second and the third parameter which points out most of the staff experienced high levels of stress on a daily basis during the pandemic. The following questions help us explain how they experience stress and how often. 21% people agreed to bottling up their problems or taking out anger on those near them. About 40% people agreed that they try to concentrate on their work to forget about their problems. 24% also experience negative behavioural patterns in their day-to-day life during their shifts and 15% focus on the negative aspects of their life.

1. To assess the stress level among various work groups of health care professionals	Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1. I bottle up my problems, then feel like I want to explode	12	57	21	10
2. I concentrate on work to forget about my personal	2	44	40	14
3. I take out anger and frustration on those nearest to me	31	43	21	5
4. I notice negative changes in my behavioral patterns when I am under pressure	18	50	24	8
5. I focus on the negative rather than the positive aspects of my life	30	50	15	5

Objective 2 – This objective focuses on what causes stress among the health care workers. The participants have again favoured the second and the third parameter which points out that problems like familial issues, health related concerns, finances, work-life balance and working hours are stress causing factors. Around 38% of

them accepted that the major sources of stress for them are their familial issues, finances and health. 36% of the staff agreed to stressing about long working hours and feeling emotional around sick patients in the ward, whereas 28% worry about work-life balance.

To find out the causes of stress among healthcare workers	Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1. I often worry about my familial issues	6	40	37	17
2. Do you worry about getting sick working in a quarantined area	9	41	38	12
3. Do you often worry about your finances?	6	38	39	17
4. Is it easy to maintain work life balance?	16	52	28	4
5. How often do you feel emotional while working around the patients	9	44	36	11
6. Do you often worry about long working hours?	15	37	36	12

Objective 3 – The focus here is on the relation between stress and health. This objective seeks to find how often stress is displayed through physical discomfort in patients. Most participants chose the second and the third option that points out that they often experience physical discomfort during shifts, which may be caused due to stress

at their workplace. 17-18% often experience fatigue and a drop in their work performance, 32% display headaches and body aches. 34% complained about sleeplessness. 30% also display other symptoms like skipping meals and 35% agreed to facing difficulties concentrating on tasks and witnessing drop in performance.

To explore the relation between work stress and health	Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1. I feel fatigue	14	59	18	9
2. I experience headaches	12	47	32	9
3. I usually skip meals during work	11	55	30	4
4. I experience sleeplessness	16	38	34	12
5. I usually experience unrelated body pain	13	48	32	7
6. I often face difficulty concentrating on tasks	18	40	35	7
7. I often witness a drop in my work performance Sometimes	26	55	17	2

Objective 4 - We also measured the coping methods adapted by the health care workers during working hours and after to deal with stress and increase work performance. 20% people agreed that they often engage in practices like deep breathing, 29% regularly exercise and, 34%

practice limiting alcohol and other stimulants. 31% frequently talk about how they feel and 28% take breaks between work to increase productivity. Whereas only 3-18% few people do not engage in these stress relieving practices.

To identify stress coping methods adopted by the healthcare workers	Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1. I practice deep breathing to deal with stress	10	61	20	9
2. I often take breaks between work to calm myself down	12	55	28	5
3. I often talk about how I feel	18	42	31	9
4. I exercise regularly	11	39	29	21
5. I practice eating well and limit alcohol and stimulants	3	37	34	26
6. I get enough good quality sleep	6	53	30	11

Findings

From the following observations, we can say that

1.The highest percentage of people deal with stress by concentrating on their work to forget about their problems and the lowest percentage focuses more on negative patterns of life than positive.

2.From the second objective, the highest cause of stress in the healthcare sector is finances, whereas the lowest stress causing factor is maintaining a work-life balance.

3.The third objective shows that the most frequently occurring symptom of stress is facing difficulties concentrating on tasks, whereas the least recurring symptom is witnessing a drop in work performance.

4.The fourth objective concludes that more number of people engage in eating well and limiting alcohol to reduce stress related symptoms, and least number of people take breaks to avoid stress.

Stress management strategies

Finding the root of the problem is the first step in treating stress. A recent big life event, such as a job shift, marriage, an increase in work, or the birth of a child, might result in greater personal stress. However, sometimes the root causes are less visible, such as poor time management, excessive worrying, and inefficient coping techniques. Stress is frequently referred to as the "silent killer" since it has so many negative, frequently hidden impacts that may make going about your regular business painful and taxing. It may have an impact on your sleep patterns in addition to your job, studies, career, and friendships. Physical pain, such as a headache, an upset stomach, or back pain, may also come from it.

Everyone experiences some level of stress in their life, therefore learning coping mechanisms is crucial. Learn to keep track of your stress levels throughout the day and practice strategies to restore your sense of calm. If required, create

yourself an email reminder to make sure you schedule time each day to manage your stress.

Consider what matters to you in each area of your life, including your health, your partner's relationship, your family, your friends, your finances, your creativity, and how you take care of yourself. What do you consider to be success in terms of your personal values?

Make sure to schedule time for enjoyable pursuits and the matters that really important. Keeping a daily stress journal can help you determine how much stress you are experiencing, potential stress triggers, and stress-reduction strategies. Spend a few minutes each day describing any situation that made you feel stressed out, along with any associated feelings or symptoms. Over time, you'll be able to spot patterns that will aid in the creation of effective management techniques.

Learn how to say "no" when necessary. Whether in your personal or professional life, be clear about your boundaries and practice saying "no" when someone asks you to do something that goes against them. Refuse to take on additional responsibilities when you are already overburdened.

Your mental and physical health are greatly impacted by the way we think. Your body responds each time you have a bad idea about yourself by acting as though it were in the middle of a stressful scenario. You are more likely to feel well about yourself if you think well of yourself, but the opposite is also true. Words like "always," "never," "should," and "must" should be avoided since they are tell-tale signs of self-defeating beliefs.

Some stressors, like the death of a loved one, a serious sickness, or the introduction of a new technology, cannot be changed or avoided.

It is better to accept things as they are in the long run in these circumstances than to complain about a situation you can't change. Many things in life are out of our control, most notably other people's

actions. Focus on the aspects of your life that you can influence, such as how you respond to issues. When faced with difficulties, try to see them as opportunities for personal development. If you made poor decisions that led to a stressful scenario, think back on them and take the opportunity to learn from them.

In addition to taking charge and being optimistic, you may lessen stress in your life by taking care of yourself. Make time for fun and relaxation on a regular basis. Some healthy ways to unwind and recharge are to take a walk, spend time in nature, call a friend, work out, write in a journal, take a bath, get a massage, listen to music, or play with a pet. Don't let life's busyness prevent you from taking care of yourself. Include fun and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don't let other commitments encroach.

By improving your physical health, you can better withstand stress. The consequences of stress can be lessened and even prevented with regular exercise. Schedule three times a week for at least 30 minutes of exercise. Be attentive of what you consume because properly fed bodies are better equipped to handle stress. With a healthy breakfast and balanced, nutrient-rich meals throughout the day, you can maintain your energy level and mental clarity. The brief "highs" that coffee and sugar produce frequently lead to a slump in attitude and energy.

Therefore, you will feel more at ease and get better sleep if you consume less coffee and sugary foods. Self-medicating with drugs or alcohol may make it simple to get away from stress, but the relaxation is only transient. Deal with issues head-on and rationally; don't sidestep or confuse them. Both your body and your mind benefit from getting enough sleep.

Practical implications

The findings indicate that high levels of occupational or work-related stress are frequently experienced by healthcare professionals, with detrimental effects on their physical and psychological well-being, healthcare

organizations, and the community. Stress from the workplace undoubtedly has a negative impact on the physical and mental health of healthcare professionals, as well as on organizational symptoms like poor performance and low productivity.

The importance of program interventions for work-related stress reduction cannot be overstated because healthcare workers experience very high levels of work-related stress, which has a serious impact on their physical and mental health. When tackling the issue of stress among healthcare professionals, the author argued that a multi-level or influence approach is necessary. When addressing the issue of work-related stress reduction, the connection between healthcare workers and their surroundings should be dynamically reflected.

A framework for stress management that identifies multiple levels of influence or factors in reducing work-related stress is important to this study. These intervention measures or approach should promote both individual healthcare professionals' coping strategies and also improve the working environment. Assessing workplace stressors in terms of the type and nature of the work, workload, and organization also entails taking into account individual vulnerability in addition to paying attention to external sources of stress, such as environmental conditions or the physical work environment, such as the design of the workplace, which determines whether it is airy or stuffy with the appropriate temperature, tools, and equipment.

Healthcare professionals who experience supportive environmental work are less likely to use costly mental health services. Social support contributes for physical health and may thereby reduce healthcare costs. Other resources besides social support that can be used to buffer the effects of work-related stress include indirect stress interventions, improving healthcare professionals' pay, promoting individual healthcare professionals' coping skills, or improving organizational culture. A socially supportive work environment can highlight other

aspects of an organizational culture in ways that improve workers' mental and physical health and reduce mental and physical health disorders, especially stress.

When employees are expected to complete a specified task performance, providing appropriate job autonomy and necessary equipment would also fall under the category of stress management, which combats the effects of job expectations with job resources. It is important to give employees job autonomy in the real workplace in order to improve their coping skills. According to research, job autonomy has a negative relationship with depression and anxiety and a good relationship with job performance and job satisfaction.

The results of the study thus far indicate that stress management interventions are necessary to improve the health and job performance of healthcare workers. The goal of stress management is to lessen stress and increase coping skills. It is a broad field that includes a variety of various approaches. Therefore, intervention programs that attempt to lessen workplace stress and assist people in changing how they perceive it or assist them in efficiently coping with occupational stressors should be used in the healthcare context.

Conclusion

Healthcare professionals need assistance in coping with the numerous stressors that are inherent in their line of work, and it is recommended that stress management interventions be focused on preventing or reducing stress among healthcare professionals. These interventions should optimize job demands through a matching type of resource for the job. In order for healthcare professionals to handle the high job expectations, specific job resources such as autonomy, job control, empowerment, power, organizational support, and access to information should be improved. the stress employees

experience while doing their duties, which demonstrates the need to restructure their workplace to address new issues and lessen the negative impacts of a heavy workload. Management intervention programs that would support both the workplace and an individual's coping mechanisms should be used by healthcare managers.

Hospital administrators should also come up with plans to address and enhance other aspects of healthcare workers' working circumstances. Healthcare personnel should receive stress management training in order to help them develop efficient coping mechanisms, adapt to new technology and workplace obstacles, and advance their careers. Interventions should focus on workload, employees' individual expectations, and job happiness in order to improve clinical practice and the psychological health of medical professionals and hospital staff.

The importance of transformational leadership should also be highlighted because it is a rewarding leadership style that is linked to improved task performance, greater social support, job happiness, and overall well-being, all of which lower stress at work. Future research on stress management is advised to empirically access health professionals' perceptions of their working environments.

The findings demonstrated that health care professionals experience significant levels of stress, which are easily characterized as a problem.

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