Stress at Workplace During Covid-19 Pandemic: Causes and Countermeasures

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Abstract:- **Covid-19 resulted in many restrictions in movement and brought the normal lifestyle to a standstill. Workers were like serving prison sentences at home, detention without trial. This had a huge impact on mental health and wellbeing. This paper therefore explores the situation and attempts to highlight the causes of stress especially during the pandemic period. It is a qualitative study that reviewed the regulations, measures to contain the pandemic, observation and complemented this with interviews on participants selected using convenient and purposive sampling. The study concludes that the measures to contain the pandemic caused stress to the workers. The key driver was fear of contracting the disease, driven by the negative news then, both in the mainstream and social media. There was also fear of losing their jobs and livelihoods. Being in one place for a long time also contributed and being together with close family members for long was another factor. It recommends preparedness and counselling capacity so that such a pandemic does not have such a magnitude of stress. The workers need to sieve information and rely on reliable sources to contain fear.**

Keywords:- Covid-19 Pandemic; Workplace; Stress Management; Mental Health.

I. INTRODUCTION

Stress can be defined as any challenge to the balance (also known as homeostasis) of the body, whether physical, psychological, emotional, real or imagined (Selhub, 2019). These challenges can range from complex and traumatizing world news to simple issues like weather changes. Robbins (1989) defines stress in terms of a situation that creates excessive psychological or physiological demands on a person. Therefore, the situation, often referred to as the stressor, and the response, together create the stress that an individual experiences. Selye (1976), who pioneered study on stress and its effects, developed a model dubbed the general adaptation syndrome (GAS), that suggests that stress occur in three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion, also defined stress as "nonspecific response by the body to any demand made upon it".

We respond physiologically to stress, and Cannon (1963) coined what he termed as 'fight or flight' to describe the inborn defense response to threat or danger, meant to ultimately ensure survival. Cannon (1963) described the reaction as body releases stress hormone like adrenalin and cortisol into the bloodstream, causing our senses to become hyperalert and aroused, pupils to dilate, muscles to tense up in preparation of fight or flight. Liver also releases stored sugar to give us energy, lungs work faster to increase breathing rate, heart pumping faster, blood pressure rises, and immune system provoked (Cannon, 1929).

II. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021), Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) was first reported in Wuhan, China, on December 31, 2019. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. According to WHO, a pneumonia of unknown cause was detected in Wuhan, China and reported to WHO Country Office on December 31, 2019. This is a new coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. The outbreak was declared as Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020. On February 11, 2020, WHO announced the name for the new coronavirus as COVID-19, and declared in a pandemic on March 11, 2020 and that the pandemic is becoming endemic during the press briefing on May 15, 2020 (Sambu, 2021). WHO kept daily statistics reported from several countries continuously and the pandemic progressed, it was evident that COVID-19 is no longer a health crisis, but a socio-economic disruption of epic proportions (Sambu, 2021).

According to WHO, the COVID-19 virus primarily spreads through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. WHO (2021) advised the public on various measures to protect themselves against the contagion. Key amongst the advice given is social distancing by maintaining at least three feet from any person, avoiding crowded places, restricting travel and staying home. Various governments have imposed additional measures, including declaring states of emergency, lockdowns, curfews

and cessation of movements in certain locations considered epicentre of the contagion. These measures therefore restrict possibility of holding physical meetings, with many participants attending (Sambu, 2021).

The East African countries had taken varied measures in response to the pandemic (Ministry of Health, 2020). Kenya passed various restrictions, key amongst these is social distancing. Kenya imposed national curfew from 19h00 to 05h00. It also imposed cessation of movement in Nairobi Metropolitan Area, Mombasa, Kilifi, Kwale and Mandera counties (Sambu, 2021). The daily working hours was ending at 16h00 daily. Several other regulatory bodies issued guidelines on how business would be conducted given the restrictions. Aging employees and those with existing conditions were barred from accessing offices to spare them from the risk of contracting Covid-19 (Sambu, 2021). Uganda imposed a total lockdown and closed all its borders, except for trucks ferrying goods across the borders, whose drivers are required to be tested and only allowed into the country when they test negative. Rwanda took a similar approach. This means schools were closed and many workers worked from home. Families stayed together for longer periods indoors too.

The countermeasures therefore caused drastic change in the workplace and lifestyle in an unprecedented level. This paper therefore assesses the impact these restrictions had and especially on stress levels and mental health of employees. It focuses on one educational institution as a case study that is representative of other institutions.

This paper is structured to give the introduction, the delves into the definition and understanding of stress, the Covid-19 pandemic, the methodology used in the study, and structure of the paper on the first part. It then explores the causes of stress according to respondents, complemented by the available literature. It attempts to provide countermeasures as well. It then concludes and provides recommendations.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study that culminated in the paper was qualitative in nature, being based on the case study of the Covid-19 pandemic impact on workers in an educational institution in Nairobi, Kenya. For this end, this paper used review of documents, especially guidelines on the pandemic, interviews on the workers, observation, and expert opinions for getting both primary and secondary data. The selection of the respondents was done through purposive and convenience sampling and a total of 12 respondents out of 118 staff were interviewed, between August and December 2021. This was deemed fit for a qualitative study to avoid saturation. Research ethics were observed, and confidentiality of the respondents and the educational institutions have been maintained, with information being used for research purposes only.

IV. CAUSES OF STRESS

The educational institution was closed to students, but staff were still expected to continue working and engaging students remotely. They were facilitated with internet access and increased airtime to enable them to call from home. Meetings were conducted virtually. Periodically, and on a scheduled rotation, staff were expected to report to work. As the pandemic progressed, the educational institution implemented reduced salary, without notice, advising staff of tough times since students were not paying. Some staff on fixed term contracts did not get renewals of the contracts. The responses from the participants in the interviews acknowledged that stress was at high levels during the Covid-19 pandemic. They stated many causes of stress during this period as stated in the foregoing paragraphs.

Loans from financial institutions are causing financial distress to salaried employees, most of which have loaned themselves to the limit, hence receiving very little net pay. The situation has been exacerbated by little income after the COVID-19 impact, that limited travelling and related out of station allowances was curtailed. Austerity measures to mitigate pandemic's impact resulted in drastic pay cuts, unpaid leave or outright retrenchment, resulting in distress.

Working from home affected many employees hence struggling to cope. Most of them do not have proper environment to work. The presence of other family members at home diverts attention and concentration. Facilities like reliable internet access were limited and exposed digital illiteracy. Personal relationship has taken a beating as well, due to pressures of living together in one place and working from the same place.

Tasks allocation became strenuous, especially due to reduced manpower in many sections, either due to shift patterns implemented to meet the COVID-19 containment measures, or permanent reduction of workforce to stay afloat during the pandemic. The same work will still need to be completed by the fewer employees remaining, and hence distress in workplace. The timelines and deadlines set for submission of completed work is piling pressure and hence stress on the employees. Supervision by seniors can be a source of stress to employees. The pressures to delivery, even with new systems and remote working, have been intense, forcing many to break down. There was little social support, given the impact of COVID-19. New systems and tools were introduced to support remote working, yet no one was adequately prepared, yet expected to cope, hampering productivity, which may have caused many employees to score less in their appraisals and hence less or no bonuses.

Covid-19 containment measures resulted in less physical activities and yet employees still eat the same amount of food or even more due to proximity to food, and hence resulting in sudden weight gain, causing distress as well for employees

and reducing their self-esteem (Gangji, 2021). Beccuti and Pannain (2011) research supported this view that sleep disorders and obesity cause distress. Fear of contracting Covid-19 itself became a key source of stress. The information and misinformation about the contagion was immense, causing many to view anything and everyone as a source of infection of the deadly pandemic. Fear was instilled and even travelling was shunned, and many forced to solitary confinement, to their detriment as to mental health and wellbeing. This caused much stress, as the changes were sudden and little social support available to employees to cope. While Covid-19 is a health crisis, it can be a mental health crisis if action is not taken (Mashologu, 2021). It is noted that when people have been less physically active, they experience more harm to their mental health (Mashologu, 2021). Isolation from the usual office affects mental health. Physical isolation and lockdowns caused a lot of psychological turbulence and excessive use of internet caused dysfunctional behaviour (Wambugu, 2021). This was evident from the responses received from the sampled employees.

Job insecurity increased due to austerity measures and became a key source of stress too. This was compounded by what was perceived as low productivity of individual employees during the pandemic, with no consideration on specific matters facing them during that period. Many employers found ways of coping with less employees, hence declaring redundancy. Technology came in handy to solve the gaps with artificial intelligence, hence automation of many tasks.

Being away from each other was also strenuous to many workers. They had forged a routine that was rudely interrupted by the pandemic. They were used to getting smart and travelling, and these curtailed drastically. They had made social support from each other and taking that away took a toll on many respondents. Many also felt that they lost power and respect they commanded during physical presence. The response indicates that this situation affected their mental health.

V. STRESS PREVENTION, TREATMENT MEASURES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Awareness training makes people conversant with what is ailing them and hence measure to counter stress (Peganix, 2021). However, it appears that even leaders in the institution was ill prepared to handle this and staff had to cope on their own. It is advisable that a self-assessment tool be availed for people to be self-conscious. Consultants, if engaged, may help staff in these awareness trainings. Employers may also continuously review processes and policies to ensure existence of accommodative policies and procedures by employers need to be in place to help employees have a work-life balance that boosts productivity in workplace.

Deliberate job redesign also helps, with a focus on utilising employees' skill well. The redesign was intended to be compatible with demands outside work, for instance, flexible work schedules that encourages telecommuting. Monitoring of employee's workload is advisable to minimise chances of stress (Lee, 1999). Evidence from the respondents shows an attempt by the institution to accommodate the employees struggling to cope. Staff were also encouraged to engage in open communication in workplace given that open dialogue encourages employees to vent out emotions and accords management to clarify issues and therefore avoid ambiguity.

The institution tried to boost the staff morale by being clear on career prospects. Workplace conducive environment can be supported by positive organisational culture. Top leadership at should encourage interaction of stakeholders, avoid bullying in workplaces, sexual harassment, and any form of discrimination. An effective whistleblowing mechanism, monitored externally, supported by a positive culture in the organisation, boosts workplace environment. Employees however should be held accountable, with tasks, targets and objectives made clear in advance. Superiors should involve juniors in matters affecting their work, hence two-way consultation process in a participatory leadership style, which is proven to work.

Mental and emotional wellness programs are encouraged, since the health of workers is not just physical but psychological too. Respondents seem to all agree that little effort was put to this. Fadel *et al* (2010) found that mental health risks to workers, such as occupational stress and depression, are on the increase and recognising and promoting mental health is an essential part of creating a healthy and safe workplace. When employees experience positive physical and mental health, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated and productive in their roles (Fadel *et al*, 2010).

Resilience training is recommended, perhaps semi-annually, as part of team building exercises for all employees. Whenever faced with a challenge, resilience is the ability to deal with it, process it, and get back on track. Developing mental toughness can improve employees' performance in every area of life, and resilience training provides them with the injection of mental stamina they need (Peganix, 2021). Resilient people bounce back from difficulties faster, thrive under pressure, adapt better to changing environments, have higher energy levels and are better able to manage stress (Peganix, 2021). Employees are then able to train their brains to stop feeling dejected, victimised, or angry, so respond quickly and constructively to crises.

Rest and restoration are key elements of helping employees 'refuel' and feel rejuvenated. In addition to the statutory annual leaves, some employers grant employees rest and restoration leaves depending on the nature of work. Those in hardship areas getting more days off duty to enable them

travel out of their sites. Rest is encouraged and all staff should be subjected to stress self-assessment periodically to note how they rest. They provide statistics on sleeping patterns, physical exercise pattern, screentime and nutrition. An app may be created specifically to monitor this, and staff receive feedback to enable them change for the better.

Physical exercises have been proven to burn excess energy in addition to contributing to physical and mental health of employees (Warburton *et al*, 2006). Some employers have joint aerobic exercises done after office hours, with results tracked quarterly and employees meeting targets awarded accordingly. Others may team up to do jogging, cycling, swimming, tennis, basketball, football etc. Employers may provide them with sport kit and facilitate travelling out as part of team building exercises, and avail awards for winners in each category. These options were limited during the pandemic but the institutions should have encouraged staff to do it remotely.

Counselling is one of the most effective ways in treatment of stress. Employees are taken through sessions and socially supported to cope with stress in workplace by a dedicated team of counsellors internally and supported by external counsellors. Consultants and experts in workplace stress and productivity may also be called in to observe how tasks are assigned to employees and have a discussion with them. The 360-degree feedback usually informs the policy and procedure changes, and appraisal input. This can help a lot in having a conducive environment for employees.

Empathy by top management should be experienced at all levels, especially during peak periods where timelines need to be met by the entire organisation. The top leadership should prepare for behavioural variations in response to crisis and implement support strategies across the branch network to ensure everyone copes well. Coaching should be part of the performance management process at workplace, where employees are helped to cope and adapt to workplace environment by supporting them work better in groups and teams. Spiritual nourishment also helps and employers should encourage aspects like meditation, nature walks, yoga and prayer sessions.

VI. CONCLUSION

Stress is not necessarily negative, as it spurs us to function. But it remains a matter of concern as it affects productivity of workers. Some workers indicated that they were able to cope and even engaged in online learning, which equipped them with additional skills and positioned them from career growth. The lack of travel accorded them huge time together. The Covid-19 prevention measures resulted in remote working, working with less teams, and often with outdated or ill-introduced systems. Financial strain set in, with insecurity rising too. Organisations ought to have put in mechanism to assess the new situation and put in programs

that all employees are facilitated, with aspects like guidance and counselling, facilities, training, revision of scope of work and flexible delivery patterns. However much the company tries to minimise or eliminate stress, it is incumbent upon individual to be self-conscious and handle their situations well to be able to cope.

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