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Under Stress: Social Coping Mechanisms for Survival among the Working Professionals

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ABSTRACT: *The nature of work of professionals and their family life may very often expose them to high level of stress which has the potential of affecting their productive and earning capacity. Coping strategies have been the subject of many studies and various suggestions have been made regarding the most appropriate way to categorise them in terms of function and efficacy (Amble, 2006; Buys et al., 2010). The goal of the current study was to examine how social coping mechanisms are helpful to employees in reducing stress and the stressful situations for their behavioural and emotional well-being. In achieving this goal, the researcher collected the data from the field through a structured questionnaire consisting of three phases- the demographic details, the stressors at workplace, social coping mechanisms adopted by them. Findings from the study show the existence of high level of stress among the working professionals. The sources of stress among the working professionals range from their nature of their work to work-family imbalance. In terms of coping strategies of stress, it was revealed that the respondents indulge in setting their goals, relaxing, exercising, diet, using sedatives and various others strategies suiting their needs. The need for appropriate mechanisms to be put in place by the managements of these organisations to address the stress needs of employees is essential to help reduce their stress levels.*

Keywords: Stressors, Coping mechanisms, Working professionals, Organisations.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The term 'stress' has increasingly become an integral part of everyday use. Everyone experiences stress, whether it is within the family, business, organization, study, work, or any other social or economical activity. Thus in modern time, stress in general and job stress in particular has become a part of the life and has received considerable attention in recent years. Stress has become the core concern in the life of everyone, but everybody wants stress-free life. Stress is a subject which is hard to avoid. Stress is a part of day-to-day living. Every individual is subjected to stress either knowingly or unknowingly. Stress, long considered alien to Indian lifestyle, is now a major health problem/hazard. Stress refers to any environmental, organizational and individual or internal demands, which require the individual to readjust the usual behaviour pattern. Degree of stress results from events or situations that have potential to cause change. Stimuli or situations that can result in the experience of stress are called stressors. Stress affects not only our physical health but our mental well being, too. To successfully manage stress in everyday lives, individual can learn to relax and enjoy life. The best way to manage stress is to prevent it. This may not be always possible. So, the next best things are to reduce stress and make life easier. Recent research on workplace stress has revealed that the coping strategies adopted by general employees are moderated by a series of factors, including: personality traits, attitude to work (Hsieh, 2004; Siu et al., 1999); and previous coping experiences (Chang and Lu, 2007; Mao, 2003; Siu et al., 2002).

Stress has been considered as one of the major factors in work organization (Agrawal *et al.*, 1979). When people experience work-related stress, they often feel tensed and distressed. Due to globalization and changes in the nature of work, people in developing countries have to deal with increasing work-related stress (WHO, 2005).Sources of stressors in the employment organization identified by Pestonjee (1992) are work, role, personal development, interpersonal relations and organization climate. Stress is inevitable/ unavoidable, when large amount of work is expected beyond the capacities of the worker and work has to be performed keeping in view the set deadlines. A high level of occupational stress, not only detrimentally influence the quality, productivity and creativity of the employees but also employee's health, well being and morale (Cohen and Williamson, 1991) Job related stress tends to decrease general job satisfaction. Stress disturbs the equilibrium of the body. It affects physically, emotionally, and mentally. When individuals experience stress or face demanding situation, they adopt ways of dealing with it, as they cannot remain in a continued state of

tension. How the individual deals with stressful situations is known as 'coping'. There are two major targets of coping: changing ourselves or changing our environment. Coping refers to a person's active efforts to resolve stress and create new ways of handling new situations at each life stage (Erikson, 1959). The goals of coping include the desire to maintain a sense of personal integrity and to achieve greater personal control over the environment. Then he modifies some aspects of the situation or the self in order to achieve a more adequate person-environment fit. Coping thus, is the behaviour that occurs after the person has had a chance to analyze the situation, take a reading of his or her emotions and to move to a closer or more distant position from the challenge. The word coping has been used mainly with two meaning- ways of dealing stress and the effort to master harmful conditions, heat or challenge (Pareek, 2008).

According to Selye (1975, 1976) stress is "any external event or internal drive which threatens to upset the organismic equilibrium". McGrath (1970) defined stress as a perceived imbalance between demand and response capacity under conditions where failure to meet demand has important consequences. Beena and Poduval (1992) conducted a study on sample of 80 (40 male and 40 female) executives in different organizations. They found that when age increases, experienced stress also increased due to the increase in the responsibility of the executives. Female executives showed higher rate of stress because women experience greater amount of work change than men do. Orpen (1996) examined the moderating effects of cognitive failure on the relationship between work stress and personal strain. Tang *et al.* (2001) reported that teachers experience a great deal of stress in the course of their career. Burn out represents teachers' negative response to the mismatch between job requirements and their perceived abilities, self-efficacy and proactive attitude. Triveni et al. (2006) concluded that the major sources of job stress perceived by 90 veterinary assistant surgeons were numerous meeting, work load, lack of personal growth, lack facilities and monotonous nature of work. Latha and Panchanatham (2007) found out the job stressors and their implications on the job performance of 40 software professionals. More than 50% of the respondents do not feel stressed by the working conditions and promotional opportunities.

Social Coping in Modern Organisations

Social relationships serve important functions in an individual's everyday lives. Coping means to invest own conscious effort, to solve personal and interpersonal problems, in order to try to master, minimize or tolerate stress and conflict Weiten, W. & Lloyd, M.A. (2008). Coping mechanisms can save lives but they have human and social costs. Psychologists Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1966) scientifically defined coping as the sum of cognitive and behavioural efforts, which are constantly changing, that aim to handle particular demands. Social support is considered a coping resource—a social "fund" containing emotional and material resources from which people may draw when handling demanding and stressful circumstances (S. Cohen 2004; Thoits 1995). (Bacharach, Bamberger, and McKinney 2000). Social support has been described as support accessible to an individual through social ties to other individuals, groups, and the larger community. Cooper (1996) claimed that coping strategies involve a number of factors: social support, task strategies (e.g., time management and delegation), logic (e.g., prioritizing), time and involvement. He also persisted that coping strategies assuage levels of perceived stress by diminishing the negative impact of sources of pressure at work. Coping strategies help to maintain job satisfaction and contribute to a sense of physical well-being, a claim supported by reports of tangible physical benefits such as reduced hypertension and migraine headaches (Morris and Long, 2002).

Many psychologists also contributed in the study of coping mechanisms by grouping mechanisms or strategies according to their manifestations and purposes. In general, here are the general classifications of coping mechanisms:

- **Defense** - the unconscious ways of coping stress. Examples: reaction formation, regression
- **Adaptive** -tolerates the stress. Examples: altruism, symbolization
- **Avoidance** -keeps self away from the stress. Examples: denial, dissociation, fantasy, passive aggression, reaction formation.
- **Attack** - diverts one's consciousness to a person or group of individuals other than the stressor or the stressful situation. Examples: displacement, emotionality, projection.
- **Behavioural** - modifies the way we act in order to minimize or eradicate the stress. Examples: compensation, sublimation, undoing.
- **Cognitive** - alters the way we think so that stress is reduced or removed. Examples: compartmentalization, intellectualization, rationalization, repression, suppression.
- **Self-harm** - intends to harm self as a response to stress. Examples: introjection, self-harming
- **Conversion** - changes one thought, behaviour or emotion into another. Example: somatisation.

Social Relationships Influencing Physical Health Outcomes

Relationships with other people form a ubiquitous part of an individual's everyday lives. Social support is considered to be beneficial because it protects an employee from the harmful behavioural, emotional, psychological and physiological consequences of stress. In theoretical terms, social support helps decrease how stressful an employee finds an event to be. An employee who has supportive ties may experience less job stress because close others provide helpful information or reaffirm other aspects of that person's life (e.g., familial role). The decreased stress appraisal may in turn influence psychological processes such as negative mood states, feelings of personal control, and self-esteem. These psychological processes are thought to influence the cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems, with implications for relevant disease outcomes (Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1995). Over the long course of time, alterations in cardiovascular function (e.g., heart rate) may influence cardiovascular disorders such as high blood pressure, where as a decrease in immune function may have implications for cancer and infectious diseases. However, even when employees are not encountering stressful life events, it is possible that social support may affect physiological processes by directly influencing the psychological processes of self-esteem, feelings of personal control, and negative mood states. The relationship between good social support and superior mental and physical health has been observed in diverse populations, including college students, employed and unemployed workers, new mothers, widows, and parents of children with serious medical illnesses Resick PA (2001).

An additional pathway by which social support may be linked to physical health outcomes is through the modification of health behaviours, such as smoking, exercise, and diet (Umberson, 1987), that in turn influence relevant physiological processes (e.g., exercise decreases blood pressure). There are several ways in which social support may influence health behaviours. First, higher levels of stress have been linked to poorer health behaviours (Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1995). Social support may facilitate better health behaviours because it de creases the amount of stress that an individual experiences. Second, social support may directly motivate individuals to engage in more healthy practices. For instance, close family members may place pressures on an individual to exercise or stop smoking. It is also possible that having adequate social support communicates the fact that one is loved, and this may lead to better health behaviours by increasing.

Objectives of the study:
1. To study the occupational stressors affecting the performance of working professionals.
2. To understand the coping mechanisms employed by the working professional to combat stress.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is aimed at identifying the workplace stressors, the level of stress and coping strategies adopted by the working professionals, which may affect their behaviour and productivity at work. The methodology used for the research has been presented under following sub headings:

Locale of the Study

The locale for the study was restricted to Mangalore city in Karnataka state. The employment opportunities has grown tremendously in Mangalore city in the past few years. Many MNC's, Banking, Manufacturing, IT, Hospitals, Educational institutes, retail outlets, likewise have mushroomed and helped Mangalore to have a diverse growth opportunities for the professionals. 150 respondents who are professionals in their fields were selected for the study. The professionals/respondents selected for the study were in the field of banking, Educational Institutes – Assistant Professors, Associate professors, Professors, Doctors and Charted Accountants.

Selection of Sample

The criteria for selection of the respondents for the study were professionals who were employed as full time employees, working for more than one year in their respective organisation in Mangalore city. The total sample size was comprised of 150 respondents, who were selected by Simple random sampling method from their respective profession.

Procedure for Data Collection

Data collection was carried out with consent of the respondents to get the responses. Good rapport with the respondents was established by explaining them the purpose of the study, making them aware of the objectives of the study, importance of their co-operation and their sincere responses before the distribution of the questionnaire. They were also informed that confidentiality of the information would be maintained strictly. The respondents were instructed about the pattern of answering the questionnaire. They were given a week's time to answer all the statements.

Based on the objectives of the study, the questionnaire was considered to be the most suitable instrument for the data collection. To collect information about demographic characteristics and coping strategies for stress, questionnaires were developed. The tools used to carry out the present research was analysed as follows:

• Demographic information of the respondents
• Stressors at the workplace
• Social coping mechanisms

The data collected from the respondents was analysed through appropriate statistical techniques. Simple statistical tools were used to analyse and present the data.

III. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the selected respondents in the Insurance sector

Category	Demographic variable	Respondents N=150
Gender	Male	80
	Female	70
Age	Young (<35 years)	63
	Middle (35-50 yrs)	65
	Old(> 50years)	22
Marital status	Unmarried	42
	Married	102
	Widow	06
Educational Qualification	< PUC	00
	UG	28
	PG	113
	Others	09
Place	Urban	133
	Rural	17
Designation	Senior level	42
	Middle level	69
	Junior level	39
Income (per annum in Rs.)	<3,00,000	32
	3,00,000-4,00,000	29
	4,00,000-5,00,000	53
	>5,00,000	36
Current Job period	< 2 years	43
	2-5 years	73
	>5 years	34
Employment of spouse	Un employed	12
	Semi professional	23
	Professional	115

The demographic characteristics of respondents presented in table 1 indicated that, majority of the respondents were male (53%). Further it was evident that majority of the respondents (43%) are middle aged i.e, between the ages of 35-50 years. Marital status depicted that maximum percentage of the respondents (68%) were married. In terms of place, it is observed that there is a significant difference between the responses of the respondents of rural (11%) and urban area (89%) with regard to stress. Table 1 also deals with the information regarding education, designation, income of the respondents, current job period and employment of the spouse. The employee's tenure in an organization also has influence on employee job performance. In the current study majority of the respondents (48%) are working in the same organisation from the past 2-5 years.

Stressors among the Working Professionals

When the expectations of work exceed the capacity of the employee to work, a stressful situation exists. This stressful situation can be either positive or negative. It can be called positive when the employee has the ability and the required resources to complete the task. It can be termed negative when the pressure to complete job increases and the resources available are inadequate. In such a situation, stress turns into strain, thereby exhausting the human body which ultimately results in burnout.

Table 2: Workplace stressors among the working professionals

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Sl. No.	Workplace stressors	1	2	3	4	5
1	I have to keep myself busy all the time to meet my deadlines	12	35	22	43	38
2	Most of the time I'm pushed to go for work.	33	12	17	24	64
3	My work allows me to take regular breaks	23	42	47	28	10
4	The time passes without my notice each day when I'm at work.	15	07	15	34	79
5	My work is monotonous in nature	13	24	54	23	36
6	My interests and experience in work are different from what I actually do	29	12	23	39	47
7	My work environment is conducive for work	28	32	29	45	16
8	My superiors and colleagues are very supportive of me.	27	38	47	12	26
9	My employment organizational responsibilities interfere with my family organizational role.	09	05	13	27	96
10	I need to give up on my values and ethics in meeting my role obligations.	10	22	16	29	73
11	It is not clear as ,to what type of work and behaviour my higher authority and colleagues expect from me	24	12	21	18	75
12	I have opportunities, to grow and develop and enhance my efficiency.	27	42	52	22	07
13	I have the authority to work as per my strategy in the organization.	32	24	57	18	19
14	My inability to take up challenging tasks due to the nature of my work loses my interest at work.	11	28	47	29	35
15	The relations with my colleagues causes a great deal of stress	18	14	22	38	58
16	I feel at home in my workplace	34	27	62	15	12
17	I'm a part of the decision making process in my organisation	67	12	47	06	18
18	I get the right kind of motivation to work from my superiors/colleagues	58	14	36	23	19
19	I can always look up to my superiors for any kind of advice	51	43	22	19	15
20	I feel that I put in more time and effort to complete tasks assigned to me	11	07	38	49	45

It is observed that from the above table that majority of the respondents experience stress in their workplace doing their day-to-day tasks. It is seen that 27% of the respondents feel that they are busy all the time to meet their deadlines, 43% of them feel that they pushed to go for work, 7% respondents work allows them to take regular breaks, 53% feel that time passes without their notice each day when at work, 24% feel that work is monotonous in nature, 31% of the respondents interests and experience in work are different from what they actually do, only 11% of respondents feel that their work environment is conducive for work, 17% of respondents superiors and colleagues are very supportive, 64% of the respondents agree that their employment organizational responsibilities interfere with their family organizational role, 49% feel that they need to give up on their values and ethics in meeting their role obligations, 50% feel that they are not clear as to what type of work and behaviour their higher authority and colleagues expect from them, 5% say that they have opportunities to grow and develop, 13% feel that they have the authority to work as per their strategy, 39% feel that their challenging tasks loses their interest at work, % feel that their relations with my colleagues causes a great deal of stress, 8% feel at home in their workplace, 12% are included in decision making process, 13% of the respondents get the right kind of motivation to work from superiors/colleagues, 10% can always look up to their superiors for any kind of advice, 30% feel that they need to put in more time and effort to complete tasks assigned to them.

Social Coping Mechanisms questionnaire consists of statements to collect information from the working professionals regarding the physical and mental stress management strategies adopted by them to combat stressful situations. The respondents were asked to tick any one under every side heading, the most appropriate strategy followed by them. Following were the observations made:

Table 3: Social Coping Mechanisms

Sl. No.	Stress Coping Strategies	Total	Percentage (%)
1	**Setting Priorities**		
	Set the right goals	09	06
	Having alternative work schedule	12	08
	Set enough time for family	39	26
	Take hired help	61	41
	Outsource some jobs	29	19
	None of the above	00	00
2	**Relaxation**		
	Taking regular rests	11	07
	Going out for annual vacation	72	48
	Practise deep breathing	16	11
	Going out for entertainment shows	39	26
	Pray/Meditation	12	08
	None of the above	00	00
3	**Diet**		
	Taking wholesome food	39	26
	Eating more food	17	11
	Eat less	15	10
	Consuming more of junk food	42	28
	Skip one meal per day	37	25
	None of the above	00	00
4	**Physical Activities**		
	Going on long walks	18	12
	Yoga	32	21
	Exercise regularly	47	32
	Playing games	42	28
	Swimming/Gym	08	05
	None of the above	03	02
5	**Sedatives**		
	Smoking	52	35
	Alcohol consumption	29	19
	Drugs	00	00
	Tranquilizers	03	02
	Intake of regular tea/coffee	49	33
	None of the above	17	11
6	**Natural/Medicinal Remedies**		
	Herbal therapy	13	09
	Colour therapy	29	19
	Aroma therapy	00	00
	Spa/Massage	16	11
	None of the above	92	61
7	**Other activities**		
	Work in groups	09	06
	Counselling	21	14
	Attend social gatherings	29	19
	I keep to myself	52	35
	Engage in religious activities	23	15
	Share with friends, family	16	11

From the above table it is observed that the respondents prefer different ways to combat stress. In this study it is seen that in terms of setting priorities, 41% of the respondents take hired help followed by setting enough time for family 26%. In relaxation, 48% of the respondents prefer going out for annual vacation, 26% follow taking wholesome food while looking into their diet. In terms of physical activities 32% of the respondents exercise regularly followed by 28% of them play games to relieve stress. Due to increased stress at workplace 35% of the respondents have taken to smoking followed by 33% of the respondents have tea/coffee regularly. In terms of natural remedies 19% respondents prefer colour therapy, followed by 11% prefer massages/spa, 9% prefer herbal therapy. Apart from these, 35% prefer keeping matters to themselves, 19% like to attend social gatherings and so on. It is noted that employees do follow certain stress coping mechanisms to either reduce or prevent stress.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to Xiao and Cooke (2012) it is now recognised that for an organisation to be competitive and efficient its workforce needs to be healthy and committed. These employees/professionals may be financially sound but are confronted with stressful and social issues which demand the intervention of human service practitioners. A healthy and committed workforce is one that can manage the demands of the ever

changing organisational workplace. To do this, organisations need to have clear stress management initiatives in place (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Therefore, managers play a significant role in stress reduction, a factor that might be even more relevant in times of austerity, where workforces are reduced and uncertainty is high. The cost of failing to intervene may well be higher than that of investment. In other words, reducing stress in the workplace does have tangible benefits for organisational performance and success.

The findings of this study reveal that most of the professionals have family, work and personal concerns which need to be address to ensure their social, psychological, physical and emotional needs. Most professionals find it difficult spending quality time with their families due to their busy schedules. Moreover, these professionals practise certain stress coping strategies. But there is also the need to put in place adequate and proper strategies regarding working hours, interpersonal relationships and communication patterns to reduce stress and to better manage the performance of these professionals.

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