Employee mental well-being amidst Covid-19: Major stressors and distress

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The world is countering unprecedented health catastrophe but this is not the first instance. Before COVID-19, another cholera pandemic and the “Spanish Flu” desolated the world in the early piece of the twentieth century. Therefore, while there have been episodes of Asian influenza, SARS, MERS, Ebola, and so on, the pandemic of COVID-19 is on an extraordinary scale. It has shaken the whole world and made worldwide frenzy. The remedial measures like social distancing and lockdown have totally disturbed our routine life activities. Household work and rigorous and timeless work from home have made life more complicated physically as well as mentally stressful.

Today, work from home with digital means is the need of an hour. The sudden shift in the work pattern made things challenging for employees physically and mentally. Nowadays, employees have different struggles in their routine work life. Due to the remote working conditions, employees feel lonely and isolated. Since there are no face to face interactions with their boss and colleagues, employees feel frustrated and disappointed. In present times, employees need to complete their tasks along with the additional responsibilities they have in their house and uncertainties, which have blurred the fine line between work life and personal life (Deloitte, 2020).

Before COVID-19 and the lockdown, employees were juggling between balancing their work and personal life. Although the lockdown has given a chance to spend time with their family members—at the same time in the absence of any domestic help—people are bound to perform household work on their own, which is quite challenging.

The present situation is not only affecting the physical health of employees, it has an adverse impact on their mental health too. People are caged inside their homes because it is the only way to remain protected from this infectious disease. People are surrounded by various uncertainties and risks that are ultimately affecting their mental fitness (WHO, 2019). The current pandemic situation has severely hit various aspects of businesses and economy (MacIntyrea, 2020; Shigemura et al., 2020). Surely, it appears that during a pandemic flare-up, particularly on account of an obscure new infection, people’s emotional well-being issues can, in some cases, be generally neglected. We are constantly counting the losses suffered by the country’s economy. However, the most ignored part is the mental health of employees, who are actually running the business operations and economy of a country, and they are treated as “human capital.” Under this situation, the involvement of employees should be a prominent concern for every organization. Keeping the employees’ morale high, and to maintain the level of productivity, is a quite challenging task for every employer. As employees are struggling with their mental status, employees’ mental health should be a matter of concern for every organization.

Unfortunately, very limited studies have been conducted over the condition of employee’s mental health, as everybody is concerned about the statistics related to economy. The present conceptual study tries to fill the gap and attempts to explore the main stressors for the working community and business. Furthermore, the study also explains the outcomes of stressors, which are in the form of distress, and evaluates the organizational efforts from the perspective of human resource management, which can minimize the glitches faced by employees.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the present situation, the entire world is under threat. Such catastrophic situation is giving rise to many uncertainties. The whole world is struggling, many countries, in order to protect their citizens, have restricted travel, closed schools, universities, cinema halls, restaurants, and other public gathering events are on a halt. In order to
reduce the level of infection and prevent themselves and their family members from the infection, people have quarantined themselves in their home. People are afraid of such bizarre activities around them. The pandemic has severely affected the world’s economy as well as the mental wellness of employees. People are so much afraid of COVID-19, they are committing suicide. Through this paper, we analyzed the impact of the current pandemic situation on employees' mental health by exploring the various stressors, which may result in distress and further how the problem can be handled from the perspective of HRM to mitigate the effect of COVID-19 on employees' mental wellness. Following Figure 1 is the related diagrammatic presentation of the conceptual framework.

3 | LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 | Major stressors and distress

A thorough review is conducted with the help of the recent and current literature from various sources like Google Scholar, Web of Science, and the guidelines issued by WHO, using key words like COVID-19 impact, employee mental health, burnout, anxiety, and depression. We have focused on the articles published during February 2020–July 2020. The current literature tried to bridge the gap between the pandemic, employee psychology, and HRM perspective by identifying the various stressors among the working community and the impact of stressors in the form of psychological distress with the support of the existing literature. The paper examined the following major stressors during COVID-19.

3.2 | Isolation resulting into restlessness

During the lockdown, many big organizations are bound to work from home over digital means. Some organizations created the setup of work from home model overnight, and few are still in the adoption phase. However, we must accept that none of the organization is ready to go with 100% work from home model. By various digital means, like video calling, virtual meeting platforms, etc., companies are trying hard to make sure that their work is not affected by ensuring the involvement of their employees. But we cannot forget that human beings are social creatures. People are used to personalized human touch, unofficial coworkers’ gatherings as it gives a feeling of sense of belongingness at workplace and creates an impression of a part of the team. We are not ready to adopt such acute remote and isolated working conditions as it may lead to restlessness (Birla, 2020).

Globally, an estimated 264 million people suffer from depression, one of the leading causes of disability, with many of these people also suffering from symptoms of anxiety. A recent WHO-led study estimates that depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy US$ 1 trillion each year in lost productivity. Unemployment is a well-recognized risk factor for mental health problems, while returning to, or getting, work is protective.

In the absence of domestic help, people are bound to do household chores along with their official work. As there is no demarcation between the office timings and personal timings, in fact many employees are not used to the new digital work from home culture, which, in turn, consumes more time for employees to adjust. It is a big challenge, especially for those who are with kids as their children are home from schools and they need to care for them along with their

![FIGURE 1](image-url) Conceptual framework
work. The outbreak of COVID-19 has made life very tough, to keep things clean. There are a lot of safety protocols at home too, which makes things complicated at home.

3.3 | Work pressure resulting into burnout

Due to the remote working situation, employees are feeling neglected as their commitment toward work is being questioned because they are not physically present at workplace. In such case, employees are working even harder to justify and showcase their efforts and commitment to the management. Not only the zoom fatigue but the current pandemic outbreak also gave rise to panic buying due to uncertain lockdown situation. Because of which a fine line between work and home has become fuzzy, which, in turn, leads to high level of work pressure, which is a major reason for employee burnout (SHRM, 2020). Following is the figure (Figure 2) related to data calculated by SHRM on employees’ mental well-being.

3.4 | Job and Financial insecurities resulting into depression

COVID-19 pandemic has hit hard the global economy as well as India. Organizations are struggling and facing economic crises as it is directly impacting their revenues, which are constantly declining. Every organization has to face downsizing in the coming 12 months. In such situation, organizations are left with no option but to reduce the staff and implementing other ways of cost-cutting like lay-offs, salary cuts, and delay in appraisals. This is creating a state of depression as the workforce has a lot of financial liabilities in terms of loans, EMIs, and debt, as well as fear of losing the job, which create a situation of severe financial crunches. Furthermore, people can witness the absorption of employment opportunities around them due to current the pandemic situation resulting into depression.

The effect of this crisis has been devastating on the economy as well. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMEI):

- The average employment rate has reduced from 404 million in March 2019 to 282 million in April 2020, which means that about 122 million people have lost their jobs, including 27 million youth.
- From an estimated 78 million entrepreneurs and businesses in 2019–20, we were down to approximately 60 million by April 2020.

Nearly 50 lakh salaried jobs were lost in India in July, according to the latest data released by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE).

3.5 | Risk of infection and worry for family and friends resulting into fear

On the one hand, the employees working from home are suffering from social detachment, and, on the other few, employees are still bound to work onsite at workplaces with a constant threat of getting infected from outsiders. Due to which the employees are under great stress that they may become a carrier of the infection for their family members and loved ones. Employees are in extreme worry that whether the organizations are able to provide protection in workplace. People are so much afraid of getting infected from COVID-19, they are even committing suicide. As per the data from a group of researchers including public interest technologist Thejesh GN, activist Kanika Sharma, and assistant professor of legal practice at Jindal Global School of Law Aman said 338 deaths have occurred from March 19 till May 2 and they do not have diagnosable psychological instability, the suicides are related to socioeconomic reasons and panic stigma due to worldwide lockdown.

3.6 | Uncertainty resulting into anxiety

The current COVID-19 pandemic has elevated uncertainty over the economy, work, accounts, and apparently physical and psychological well-being. Nobody knows for how long the pandemic outbreak will
affect the economy, whether we will be able to survive from such hard times both physically and financially. The fear of such unanswerable questions leads to uncertainty. Furthermore, news coverage of a pandemic outbreak may contain an amount of conflicting information, which can shake an individual’s trust (Mccauley, Minsky, & Viswanath, 2013), creates confusion, uncertainty, and increases the level of depression in the individual and their incapacity to cope with the intensity of the current situation. Moreover, the lack of clear information about the different levels of risks may lead individuals to imagine the worst, which exacerbates their anxiety (Desclaux, Badji, Ndione, & Sow, 2017).

4 | WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO

In such a tough phase where employees are struggling professionally and personally, employers can play an important role in providing emotional and psychological support. The employer and employees both are accountable to minimize and handle the negative effect of the COVID-19 outbreak.

4.1 | Use Technology for Support

Since almost everything is digitalized in the current pandemic situation, organizations must utilize the technology in supporting the mental well-being of human resources. Here, the biggest challenge for manufacturing companies like CEAT, SAR, and Aditya Birla lies in optimizing the downtime of the employees. For example, these companies’ efforts are highly appreciable as they transformed such testing phase into opportunities by involving them in building up their aptitude as their kind of work did not permit them to update themselves. The HR managers are also trying to connect emotionally with their employees by using the digital platform and conducting online classes on physical fitness and webinars to remain psychologically strong during the pandemic times, in addition to this, the HR leaders are also arranging counseling sessions so that they can support their employees in times of stress over losing their jobs and dread of getting contaminated (Goswami, 2020).

4.2 | Ensure employees’ safety

As employees are worried about themselves as well as their family members’ health, organizations need to understand their responsibility toward employees. There are various sectors/companies where work from home is not possible, employees are coming to the workplace by staking their health and life. Therefore, it is the prime responsibility of companies to take care of the employees’ psychological and physical health. For instance, organizations like Dr. Reddy’s Laboratories, NSE, and Fortis healthcare are ensuring proper safety measures at workplace and conducting counseling sessions for their employees in order to support them (Anand, 2020).

4.3 | Post Covid-19 times

People know that the negative effects of the current pandemic outbreak can be long lasting. HR can play a crucial role in handling the aftereffects of COVID-19 also. Many multinational companies like Unilever and Deloitte believe in conducting mentorship programs during the pandemic situation to provide career guidance and attaining individual goals of employees, thereby having more loyal employees (Sharma, 2020). HR leaders are also focusing on finding how the employees can bounce back at their workplace with full zeal and enthusiasm after COVID-19.

4.4 | Creating awareness

Nowadays, whenever people turn on their TV sets, the news channels are flooded with related information. Even social media platforms are also not behind in scaring the people with the current situation, which creates fear and aggravates their perception of menace, which is ultimately degrading their mental health by creating anxiety (Bai et al., 2004; Garfin et al., 2020; Shigemura et al., 2020). As people are aware of the fact that misleading information spreads at a much faster pace, organizations must do something to cope with such situation like CHRO, Signify Innovations India states that their HR department has formed an internal crises committee, which keeps the employees updated regarding the COVID-19 news, what can be the preventive measures, and how employees can protect themselves from the virus.

4.5 | Building emotional connect

Since people are facing a rough duration professionally, personally, socially, and drained mentally, the HR department of the organizations must take steps to connect with their employees emotionally. Here, the HR managers need to ensure to remain connected to the employees in order to create a positive and stress-free work environment. For this, leaders need to show empathy, provide structure, and explore the current work–life challenges of the teams and colleagues. As the world changes with the new reality, it is significant for HR to keep their representatives drew in and inspired. Relating representatives show that they care, as they shuffle between their work–life exercises. In fact, the HR personnel of various companies are taking initiatives to get through with this situation by engaging the employees in some constructive tasks like conducting yoga sessions, e-classes, and guest lectures for improving soft skills, regular interaction with employees and their family members, organizing quiz, guidance for parenting as organizations understand the additional family responsibilities of employees, especially during this time. Another example of CHRO, Signify Innovations India, which organized coffee sessions and counseling sessions so that HR leaders can help in maintaining work–life balance by conducting informal meeting on team-building exercises (Suryanarayan, 2020).
5 | WHAT EMPLOYEES CAN DO

5.1 | Emotional and Psychological fitness

It is a common saying that if you cannot go outside, go inside. We all know very well that there is a lot of negativity around us during this time, which is affecting not only physically but mentally and emotionally too (Delloitte, 2020). In such situations, meditation and spirituality can help the employees to cope up with the current challenging time. Relax your body and soul by achieving inner peace by exploring inner strength that helps in achieving emotional stability. In fact, this is the ideal time to press a pause button and relax by enlightening the mind and soul. Take short breaks and breathe deep while working. Take care of your mental health as well as your surroundings. A concern text can also do wonders for your colleagues.

5.2 | Keep distance from negative news

Try to limit the dose of related negative news over all platforms like television as news coverage is giving insufficient and conflicting information. And social media also are the major carrier of misleading information, it is not always a trusted source of information for a pandemic, therefore creating rumors (Bontcheva et al., 2013; Roth & Brönnimann, 2013). Focus more on the information related to preventive measures and inevitabilities of quarantine instead of keeping track of dreadful data of increasing patients and mortality rate.

5.3 | Spare quality time with family

Before the lockdown, people were striving hard to remain with their family members, but they hardly got the time, now this is the time when people can have quality time with their loved ones. People are having a good time with their kids by playing indoor games and involving in the routine day activities of kids resulting into better understanding with them. People also got the time to take care of their parents (The New Indian Express, 2020).

5.4 | Focus on physical fitness

People usually elude to follow the schedule for physical fitness, sometimes because of busy work schedule or household responsibilities. This is the best time that can be utilized to take care of themselves. Indulge in some physical activity, go for a walk, take nutritious diet, and take a sound sleep by striking a balance between personal and professional life. Establish a routine for your work–life balance.

6 | CONCLUSION

The study is a pioneer in the impact of corona virus, which reveals the overall impact of the corona virus on human, particularly to the workplace, which has rapidly gripped the entire globe. This paper explores the various peripherals of anxiety, stress, and disappointment among the working community in India, the psychological and biomedical research pertaining to the mental health, since the recent studies and trends seem to be overlooking, and the psychological loss and problems due to the pandemic. This conceptual paper is an effective tool for organizations, human resource managers, and concerned policy makers to address the issues related with the mental health of the workers. Since COVID-19 has paralyzed the life of workers in all the spheres, this study could prove to be a game-changer in motivating and enhancing the spirits of workers.

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