

A Study of Stress Management in the Current Changing Economic Situation

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Abstract

Stress is a mixture of psychological and physiological reactions of human body. It is a universal element and almost every man irrespective of their demographic differences have the experiences of stressful situation. It may occur due to a simple problem or a complex one in life. Not all individuals interpret the same event as stressful; what may seem stressful to one may not be the same for the other. Macro and Micro HR issues confront organizations engaged in globally distributed work. These impact not only the work and organizational productivity but also the people delivering that work and therefore, need to be addressed adequately for the benefit of all stakeholders. In the present globally competitive environment outsourcing has emerged as a feasible option through which in-house operations/ business processes are contracted to an outside agency- a method to reduce operational costs and get access to superior technologies or more efficient personnel at reduced cost. This BPO industry has been rapidly expanding in over the last 10 years growing at the rate of 40 – 50 %. There are however concerns regarding issues of health and safety that are unique to this new and developing industry. The management across the sector is increasingly aware of occupational hazards associated with the job, but dearth of innovative techniques can be felt as small companies are still gearing up to provide employees with proper working conditions. In this context there is a paucity of empirical work on this emerging field. However this paper aims to include through a survey of specialist medical practitioners preventive techniques to combat occupational stress- as this sector has elevated our society from poverty, it also faces threats of outsourcing of health problems to our people. The results of the survey will enable our BPO vendors to enhance their health care strategies to combat the inbuilt stress factor in this occupation – else the phenomena of stress will dig a grave for this industry amidst the other threats that this flourishing industry is facing in the competitive scenario.

Keywords: Occupational stress, BPO, Work-life Stress, Preventive healthcare, Stress Management, Strategy, Lifestyle diseases.

INTRODUCTION

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Your true sources of stress aren't always obvious, and it's all too easy to overlook your own stress- inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sure, you may know that you're constantly worried about work deadlines. But maybe it's your procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that leads to deadline stress.

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1. To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:
2. Do you explain away stress as temporary (“I just have a million things going on right now”) even though you can’t remember the last time you took a breather?
3. Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life (“Things are always crazy around here”) or as a part of your personality (“I have a lot of nervous energy, that’s all”).
4. Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it, your stress level will remain outside your control. Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life. Your stress journal can help you identify them. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem. Work-life balance is a broad concept including properly prioritizing “work” (career and ambition) on one hand; and “life” (pleasure, leisure, family and spiritual development) on the other. Achieving work-life balance is not as simple as it sounds because it is found that corporate professionals often have to make a tough choice between their professional and personal life as it is nowhere close to equilibrium.

Now let's take a look at some of the unhealthy ways of coping with stress:

These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but they cause more damage in the long run:

- Smoking
- Drinking too much
- Overeating or under reacting
- Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Using pills or drugs to relax
- Sleeping too much
- Procrastinating
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)

Occupational stress is the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. Downsizing, increased workloads, high competition, growing population etc. are taking their toll. “Stress, in essence, is a feeling of doubt about being able to cope, a perception that the resources available do not match the demands made. When it persists, stress can cause physical and psychological ill-health and adversely affect social functioning”. Occupational stress has become a common and costly problem leaving a few workers untouched. Over 20% of corporate employees in India crave to strike a right balance in life. If one looks beyond this craving there’s an unsettling world of long work hours, strict deadlines, sleep debt, precipitous drop in physical activity, eating fatty foods of convenience and stress loop at home and at work spiraling into a an abyss of chronic lifestyle disorders. In the present day scenario, IT and BPO companies jobs are being termed as more competitive and stressful. Even though by virtue, some jobs are highly stressful like army, police, and fire service etc. Some are relatively moderate viz. Service sectors and health care industry etc. The BPO industry has been rapidly expanding in India over the last 10 years. It has been growing at the rate of 30-40% a year. It is

observed that the top 13 companies have grown by 67.4% while the next seven have grown by 27.5%. This brings us a full circle that the industry is still evolving. Another dimension observed was that Indian BPO's have got listed on the stock markets making it one of the most important years in the evolution of this industry. Preventive healthcare holds enormous promise for the competitiveness of Indian BPO Companies; and for the Country's economy in the global arena. In an era when the service sector is gaining pre-eminence, the value of the individual employee has increased more than ever before. Employees with specialized skills are the focal point on whose well-being and performance the productivity of a company rests. In a highly competitive corporate environment, companies cannot afford the absence of their employees due to sickness, caused by a sedentary lifestyle, etc as a poor performance at the workplace due to poor health. Both as part of their corporate social responsibility and to boost their profits, a number of firms are offering preventive health care facilities to their employees. This awakening however is only in the inception phase as one sees only top corporate like WIPRO, TCS, HP, PepsiCo Maruti Suzuki venturing into wellness measures but a vast majority companies across sectors lack practice. This paper tries to examine the empirical evidence of the relationship between preventive healthcare and labour productivity and corporate profitability with specific reference to ITes/BPO sector. While doing so it generates awareness on the positive role of preventive health care in boosting the corporate sectors performance and improving the country's economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been identified that globalization has been the primary cause of concern for the work related stress. Globalization is broadly defined as the idea by which we understand the transition of human society into the third millennium (Waters, 2022). It is also defined as a strategic effort to treat the world or a significant part of it as a single market in which to do business in (Tallman and Fladmore-Lindquist, 2002). A research conducted by (Madeline, W) suggested that there are concerns over the impact of stress on the IS manager's health and productivity. The rapid growth in information technology and communication has caused and awareness of the global economy amongst the minds of the people.

El Sayed and Westup (2022) have said that the recent developments of technology and information have led to the formation of new and complex networks between national and global organizations. Stress in organizations has been deeply studied by many researchers (Robbins and Sanghi, 2021). There are various causes of stress that have been reasoned out by these researchers. Amongst them is the belief that problems in roles depend on job characteristics and their individual perception. It becomes vital therefore that job characteristics and personal factors would influence role stress. Various researchers have found out the different factors which affect work stress. Age, hierarchical level, and functional assignments are some of the factors researched by Srivastav (2021, 2020). Other researchers have stated the relationships of length of service and role stress. Many, on the other hand have denied any significant relationship of role stress and length of service.

Gupta (2022) and Kumar (2022) have found out a positive relationship between the length of service and organizational role stress. This shows that there is no continuity in the outcomes of the research. Researchers are themselves confused about the exact causes of work related stress. Given the fact that work stress depends on individual perception, we can say that the researchers did a fairly good job of determining some factors. Non-agreement on certain points can be considered since the whole concept of stress is perceived differently by different individuals. In this paper, the author tries to assess the difference in the levels of stress experienced by the public and private sectors of India. The effects of stress are varying. Some researchers suggest that stress plays an important

role in motivating the employees and for the overall business while a majority of researchers say that stress in organizations lead to various problems. Other than the healthy concerns, stress causes false decision making, haste and frustration

THE CONCEPT OF BPO AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

BPO Defined

Business Process Outsourcing is a general term used to describe the outsourcing of Critical, but non-core, business process or functions of an organization to external vendor for long periods of time on a set of predefined performance metrics. BPO services have gained prominence during the past couple of years as more and more organisations have recognized the practical and enhanced value of externally delegating processes as opposed to doing them in house. BPO is not a new concept many larger organisations have been outsourcing non-core activities such as IT maintenance, housekeeping and security services for decades. These activities are simply and require placement of low-skilled labour-on-site at the location itself. Critical activities were never on the agenda as companies were scared of losing control over such activities; moreover it was assumed that it would be costlier to outsource them than to do them in-house. All this has changed in the last 15-20 years. Improvements in technology in recent years have enabled companies to 'Virtually' Control processes outsourced to distant locations of third party vendors of outsourcing services. The rapid advances in internet technology and its omnipresence made this even simpler. This led to a trend of companies outsourcing more complex processes to outside vendor by keeping in touch with their vendors 24 x 7 x 365.

STRESS AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

Learn how to Say "No"

Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities when you're close to reaching them. Taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.

Avoid People who Stress you Out

If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.

Take Control of Your Environment

If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic's got you tense, take a longer but less- traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online.

Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can't prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change.

Don't Try to Control the Uncontrollable

Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.

Look for the Upside

As the saying goes, “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.

Share your Feelings

Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist. Expressing what you’re going through can be very cathartic, even if there’s nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation.

Learn to Forgive

Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the sources, factors of stress
2. To find out affiliation of the respondents with the negative stress busters
3. To identify the time spent by the respondents in coping with stress.
4. To critically estimate various preventive measures of stress control.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

An empirical analysis was conducted to evaluate the stress. Both secondary and primary data was used. A well structural Questionnaire with open and close ended questions was used and data was collected through personal Interview method from BPO employees of Kolkata region. Statistical tools like chi square (one sample test), ranking methods were also used so as to judge the credibility of the survey results.

FINDINGS

Most Common Unhealthy Ways of Coping with Stress

- Smoking and Drinking 71%
- Use of Pills and Drugs 14%
- Sleeping Too Much 7%
- Overreacting/ Under reacting 8%

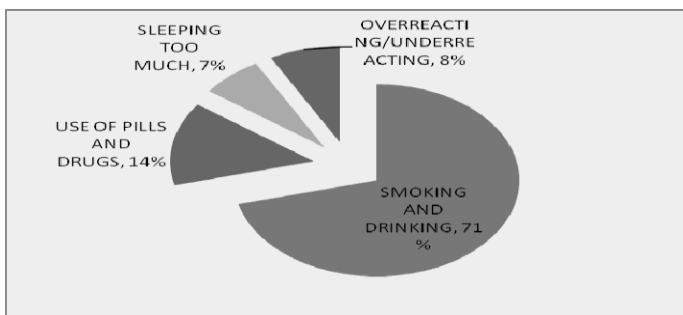


Fig 1. Time Spent in Coping with Stress

TIME (hours)	FREQ
0-5	3

5-10	3
10-15	27
15-20	5
20 above	12

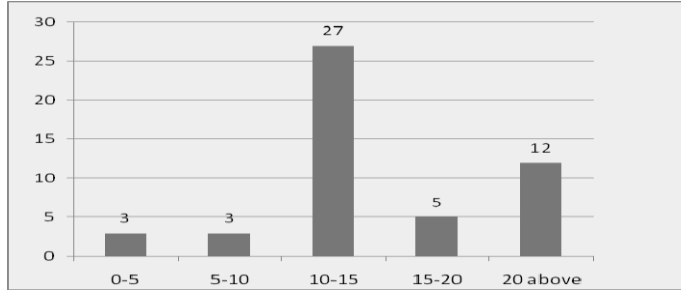


FIG. 2

TABLE 1

Major Factors for Stress	% (as responded)
Work related issues	70
Personal life/social issues	22
Health Reasons	8

TABLE 2

Frequency	% (as responded)
Always	40
Sometimes	48
Often	22
Never/Rarely	-

The above tables shows that typical stress causing factors observed and it is work related issues (Work load) indicates that more and more BPO employees are prone to mental illness due to depression.

CHI Square Hypothesis (One Sample test) was applied onto above table and the following are the Observations

HYPOTHESIS 1

Ho: Factors causing occupational stress are uniformly distributed among patients.

O	E	(O-E)	(O-E) ² /E
35	16.6	18.4	20.39
11	16.6	5.6	1.96
4	16.6	12.6	9.56

The calculated value of chi square was 31.91 and the table value was 5.99 at 5% level of significance and degree of freedom equal to 2. Hence the null hypothesis is rejected and it is concluded that factors causing occupational stress are not uniformly distributed among the sample.

HYPOTHESIS 2

Ho: Frequency of patients with stress related diseases is uniformly distributed.

The calculated value of chi square was 5.89 and the table value was 5.99 at 5% level of significance and degree of freedom equal to 2. Hence the null hypothesis is accepted and it is concluded that frequency of visit of patients with stress related diseases are uniformly distributed among them which is mostly always, sometimes, often. These hypothesis testing clearly indicate that the variations observed in the sample survey are not due to chance and therefore there is a need to pay attention to the results of the survey.

OTHER MAJOR FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

It has been clearly established that major of stress related diseases lead to critical illness like heart attacks, high diabetes, high cholesterol and the like which could have been much under control/ avoided in some cases through preventive medicine. About 82 % of the doctors are of opinion that preventive healthcare increases productivity as well as profitability of a company. Some of the diseases that can be detected through preventive health care are Hypertension, Anemia, Diabetes, Gastro Intestinal, Heart disease, and musculoskeletal diseases

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It is increasingly being recognized that occupational stress is a major hazard at the work place of BPO employees. This is taking a toll on the lifestyle of our youngsters. The deaths in the recent years in this sector have to some extent brought the attention of policy makers to regulate the health and safety related issues. One can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors when they inevitably come.

- Go for a walk.
- Spend time in nature.
- Call a good friend.
- Sweat out tension with a good workout.
- Write in your journal.
- Take a long bath.
- Light scented candles
- Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea.
- Play with a pet.
- Work in your garden.
- Get a massage.
- Curl up with a good book.
- Listen to music.
- Watch a comedy

Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs.

Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

In addition, there are a number of points, they are as follows:

- Government intervention through its comprehensive care and commitment to regularly introduce innovative schemes, infrastructure development, environment protection at the Macro level and also provide incentive and subsidies to these companies or indirect subsidies cover the whole range of preventive health care. Measures like counseling, gym, health check-ups, follow-up to this check-ups etc. should also be covered by government schemes.
- Though some companies provide wellness measures they are used by employees only in certain situations. Hence government must ask these companies to make preventive checkups mandatory.
- Corporate can offer preventive health care vouchers for fixed time periods at regular intervals of time.
- “When you are in Rome be like a Roman” This philosophy has to be realized by the employees to accept the demands of the BPO job profile apart from the income from it.
- The role of HR personnel has to be unbiased towards the Employees and the employers to provide a more stress free work environment.
- Providing music in the background of the shop floor, would give them relaxation to monotony and boredom in the work.
- Yoga is a traditional and cultural science of India. Some of the stress relieving asana like Makarasana to eliminate physical and mental tension can be followed. The regular habit of de-stressing exercises and meditation must be instilled in the minds of the employees through regular counseling and stress-relieving lectures.
- Ergonomics at work place has to be regularly audited and this is the most useful approach for preventing stress at work and plan suitable remedial actions for organizational and individual growth. Finally as no job is stress free and also even the best effort to improve working conditions cannot completely eliminate stress, there is a need for a mental change in the employers and employee to combat stress through realizing “Prevention is better than cure”.

Further while liberalization of the economy has expanded opportunity for employment and additional incomes, it has also brought with it urbanization and changes in lifestyles. These changes have had a profound impact on the epidemiology of diseases and health care demands of the people. To some extent large companies like Infosys has introduced programme like (Hale) Health Assessment Lifestyle Enrichment for reducing absenteeism and psychological stress. Similarly WIPRO runs a programme called Mitr (Friend) to take care of the emotional and physical wellbeing of its employees. But however such initiatives are beyond the reach of the smaller organisations which are in our Country more so than the larger ones extending to the Tier II and Tier III towns and cities extracting the work at cheap labor costs. This can be checked only through government initiatives through strict policy formulations and through public-private participation. The role of the hospitals comes only after the initiatives have been taken by the other participants namely government, NGO, employee and employer. No wonder India is ranked somewhere like 134 in the Human Development Index. Finally Business enterprises have to realize their stake in optimally using their health budget to reduce attrition, absenteeism, building team spirit and enhancing productivity for the mutual benefit of the various interest groups in our economy to combat occupational stress through the strategic measures of preventive medicine.

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