

# Occupational Stress among Healthcare Workers Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Insights from a Malaysian Hospital

Syazwan Syah Zulkifly<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohamad Imran Daud<sup>2</sup>, Muhashamsani Abdul Ghani<sup>3</sup>, Mohd Salahudin Shamsudin<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Business Competitiveness, Standards, and Sustainability Initiatives (IBCSI), School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Emergency and Trauma, Hospital Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah, Temerloh, Pahang, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Perak Centre of Excellence, Perak Techno Trade Centre (PTTC), Off Jalan Jelapang, Bandar Meru Raya, Ipoh, Perak

<sup>4</sup>School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8110050>

Received: 28 October 2024; Accepted: 03 November 2024; Published: 02 December 2024

## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented levels of occupational stress among healthcare workers, particularly those on the front lines. Increased workloads, frequently changing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and the continuous use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) have highlighted the critical need for effective management practices to safeguard the well-being and resilience of healthcare staff. This study examines the influence of managerial interventions on alleviating occupational stress among healthcare workers at a Malaysian public hospital during the pandemic. Using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model as a conceptual framework, a qualitative approach with snowball sampling was applied to gather semi-structured interview data from healthcare personnel, including doctors, nurses, and support staff. Content analysis revealed core stressors such as intensified workloads, PPE-related discomfort, and SOP-related confusion. Effective strategies, such as counseling services, NGO support, and recognition programs, significantly mitigated stress, although gaps in communication and resource allocation were identified as factors exacerbating stress. This research highlights the critical need for adaptive and proactive management to reduce occupational stress during crises, emphasizing the roles of strategic communication, mental health support, and efficient resource management. The findings provide insights into resilient management frameworks that can enhance preparedness for future healthcare challenges.

**Keywords:** Crisis Management, Occupational Stress, JD-R Model, Healthcare Workers, COVID-19, Resilience

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented stress on healthcare systems globally, with healthcare workers facing the brunt of these challenges. Frontline workers experience high workloads, stringent SOPs, and the constant risk of infection, compounded by emotional strain. The unprecedented demands placed on healthcare workers have highlighted the critical role of effective management practices in maintaining staff well-being and resilience (Pfeffer, 2018). In Malaysia, as in other countries, healthcare.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Occupational Stress in Healthcare

Occupational stress is prevalent among healthcare workers, especially during a pandemic. High patient loads, strict SOPs, and the risk of infection contribute to mental health challenges such as burnout, anxiety, and depression (Boran et al., 2012; Magnavita et al., 2020). Stress levels are particularly high in emergency and intensive care units, where patient needs are most demanding (Walton et al., 2020). Prolonged stress without adequate support can lead to both physical and emotional exhaustion.

### Pandemic-Specific Stressors

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced distinct stressors, including limited resources, extended PPE use, and heightened public scrutiny. Healthcare workers faced constant exposure to COVID-19, fear of infection, and often stigmatization, further complicating their roles (Kang et al., 2020). Frequent SOP updates, designed to adapt to new knowledge about COVID-19, created additional stress as healthcare workers had to adjust practices continually.

### Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) is a valuable framework for examining occupational stress, particularly in balancing job demands (e.g., high workloads, PPE discomfort) with resources (e.g., counseling services, peer support). Research indicates that resources such as psychological support and peer support can mitigate the adverse effects of high job demands, especially during crises. JD-R suggests that adequate resources buffer against burnout and promote resilience among healthcare workers (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design using snowball sampling to select healthcare professionals engaged in COVID-19 care at a public hospital. The initial participants were selected through professional networks and referred additional participants who met the study criteria. A total of eight healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, and medical support staff, participated.

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives on occupational stress during the pandemic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, allowing for detailed content analysis.

Content analysis was conducted to systematically identify themes related to occupational stress and management interventions, categorized under job demands (e.g., workload, PPE discomfort) and job resources (e.g., counseling support). Ethical measures, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly upheld.

## FINDINGS

The analysis revealed that healthcare workers experienced significant occupational stress due to several factors. First, the increased workload overwhelmed healthcare staff, who described feeling physically and mentally exhausted by managing multiple cases with limited support. This strain was particularly evident in high-intensity departments like emergency care, where unpredictable cases added to the pressure.

Another key stressor was the prolonged use of PPE, which participants described as uncomfortable and isolating. PPE was essential for safety but impaired communication with both colleagues and patients, heightening mental fatigue. Moreover, healthcare workers had to adjust rapidly to frequent SOP changes, which increased anxiety and created confusion, especially when updates were poorly communicated.

Support mechanisms such as NGO and community support played a crucial role in mitigating stress. PPE donations, food provisions, and gestures of appreciation were highly valued, especially during peak periods. Peer support also emerged as a critical factor, with healthcare workers describing the solidarity among colleagues as a buffer against isolation and stress.

However, participants felt that additional improvements were necessary. Many expressed a need for increased staffing and better PPE provisions. The stigmatization faced by healthcare workers from the public also added psychological strain, impacting their morale and sense of job satisfaction.

## DISCUSSION

The findings emphasize the essential role of proactive management in reducing occupational stress among healthcare workers. The JD-R model framework highlighted how the provision of adequate resources can buffer against the demands of increased workload and frequent SOP changes. Aligning with Alizadeh et al. (2020), this study found that psychological and peer support are significant in promoting resilience. Additionally, NGO and community support alleviated stress, as highlighted by Buselli et al. (2020).

Proactive management practices, including effective communication, regular mental health support, and resource allocation, are necessary for bolstering morale and resilience. The study also revealed the impact of public perception, confirming Kang et al. (2020) findings that public stigma can exacerbate stress. Future management strategies should address public education to reduce societal stigma, while continuing to support staff through structured interventions and counseling.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for supportive, adaptive management practices that prioritize healthcare workers' well-being. Addressing stressors such as workload, PPE discomfort, and SOP changes, coupled with providing robust support systems, are critical to developing a resilient workforce. Moving forward, healthcare organizations should invest in crisis-specific leadership training, emphasizing empathy, effective communication, and resource management.

## REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, W., Taggart, F., Mujtaba, M., et al. (2019). Psychological impact of COVID-19 on healthcare workers in Malaysia. *BMC Public Health*, 19, 1120-1129.
2. Alizadeh, K., Khabbaz, H., & Aghdasi, M. (2020). Occupational stress among healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Healthcare Leadership*, 12, 333-341.
3. Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Verbeke, W. (2004). Using the Job Demands-Resources model to predict burnout and performance. *Human Resource Management*, 43(1), 83-104.
4. Boran, A., Shawaheen, M., Khader, Y., et al. (2012). Work-related stress among health professionals in northern Jordan. *Occupational Medicine*, 62(2), 145-147.
5. Buselli, R., Corsi, M., Baldanzi, S., et al. (2020). Professional quality of life and mental health outcomes among healthcare workers exposed to COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 594-608.
6. Chandola, T. (2010). Stress at work. *The British Academy Review*, 15(1), 8-12.
7. Crimi, C., & Carlucci, A. (2020). Mental health and psychological impact of COVID-19 on frontline healthcare workers. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 277, 249-258.
8. Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The JD-R model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 499-512.
9. Kang, L., Li, Y., Hu, S., et al. (2020). The mental health of medical workers in Wuhan, China dealing with the 2019 novel coronavirus. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(3), e14.
10. Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck: How Modern Management Harms Employee Health and Company Performance—and What We Can Do About It*. HarperCollins.