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**COVID-19 AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN THE
ORGANIZATIONS: INTERVENTIONS TO ENHANCE THE
MENTAL WELL-BEING OF THE EMPLOYEES**

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Abstract

COVID-19 outbreak has affected the work-life of individuals where employees are facing increased pay cuts, job insecurity, layoffs, and furloughs. Employees are facing stress and experiencing depression and anxiety due to such looming uncertainty. In such desperate times, organizations need to take initiatives to protect the psychological well-being of employees. This study aims to analyze the organizational and individual-level interventions which enhance the mental health of the employees in the organizations and can be opted in the COVID-19 pandemic. A literature review of thirty – six articles has been done to analyze the interventions which were existed in the pre-COVID era and can be implemented by the organizations during the pandemic outbreak. Various interventions were identified in the review. Individual-driven interventions include employee counselling, motivational interviewing, and e-mental health interventions such as website access or smartphone mental health apps. Organization-driven interventions include employee assistance programs, and mental health first aid training. The study will provide insights to the managers and the practitioners regarding employee interventions, and facilitate choosing the right one which can enhance the mental well-being of the employees and hence their performance.

Keywords: COVID-19, Employee well-being, Mental well-being, Organizational interventions, Psychological Interventions



INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has brought mental health to the forefront as a major public health concern. Distancing from others, isolation, sadness, anxiety, concern, and stress are all components of the pandemic that have serious mental health consequences. In addition to personal tensions, people's anxiety is exacerbated by economic and financial problems, as well as a lack of proper healthcare facilities (Arevian *et al.*, 2020). While quarantine and lockdown are crucial preventive measures to halt the spread of COVID-19 infection, many studies have found that they have a detrimental psychological impact on individuals, suggesting that they should only be used as a last resort (Strelkovskii *et al.*, 2022; Das, 2020).

According to doctors and mental health professionals, the virus is wreaking havoc on the world's mental health, as seen by an increase in cases of depression, suicide, and other psychiatric illnesses (Kumar and Nayar, 2020). According to a recent assessment by the Indian Psychiatric Society, mental diseases have increased by 20% since the COVID outbreak (Loiwal, 2020). While psychological therapies have been incorporated into disease outbreak protocols in Western countries, this has yet to be done in developing countries (Rajkumar, 2020). Organizations and corporates are also affected by the psychosocial and psychological consequences of the current Coronavirus outbreak (Burdorf *et al.*, 2020). The working population faced drastic changes in everyday lives, especially their social lives getting affected as they were stuck in work from home setting. Many employees were furloughed and laid off and industries were shut down (Tušl *et al.*, 2021; Giorgi *et al.*, 2019). The worst affected population, not in terms of employment problems but the exposure to COVID-19 were healthcare workers who had faced stressful times (Blake *et al.*, 2020 ; Kock *et al.*, 2021).

As per the KPMG survey, 94 percent of employees are facing stress due to their jobs (Laker, 2021). As per the

survey conducted during the second wave of the pandemic outbreak in 2021 in India, nearly 54 percent of employees are in a stress zone, while 39 percent need immediate attention to manage their anxiety and stress (Sheth, 2021). In these distressing times, organizations need to ensure the psychological well-being of the employees working with them either on the office premises or in remote settings (Hamouche, 2020). Though organizations are ensuring the financial and medical assistance needed by the employees if they contract COVID-19 (Phadnis, 2021), the psychological trauma created by the disease needs to be redressed as well. Such distress can jeopardize the mental well-being of the employees thus affecting/her performance. Absenteeism, labor turnover, loss of productivity, and disability pension expenditures are all substantial socio-economic implications of occupational stress and work-related mental health problems (Czabala *et al.*, 2011).

Addressing work-related stress and poor working conditions is necessary for preventing persistent stress situations that contribute to the onset of serious mental health difficulties. As a result, building mentally healthy workplaces is a major undertaking. Practitioners and academics in the field of work and organizational research have consistently gained a comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors that can act as protective factors in the workplace, enriching it and assisting in the formation of a healthy working environment. On a qualitative level, higher levels of psychological well-being are associated with improved work performance, reduced turnover rates, and better interpersonal interactions (Angelis *et al.*, 2020). Integrated mental health issues prevention strategies and the development of tools for gauging mental health can help to understand the ill effects of work-related stress, and accordingly develop the organizational and individual interventions to redress it. There are a variety of measures that organizations can do to promote workers' mental health and well-being and to establish psychologically healthy workplaces. Workplace well-being interventions scientific behavioral

or psychological initiatives that improve employee well-being by either boosting people's resilience and coping resources or removing or changing job stressors (Silvaggi and Miraglia, 2017). The literature has drawn a comparison between the individual and organizational interventions. For instance, organizational interventions target the whole workforce while individual interventions focus on an identified employee. Individual interventions focus on immediate effects while organizational intervention effects might take a longer period to show visible results ranging from two to three years.

Individual interventions target symptoms at the micro level while organizational interventions target the poor well-being and health at the micro-level (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008; Blume *et al.*, 2019; Ogbonnaya *et al.*, 2017). This paper is an attempt to analyze the organizational and individual interventions by the organizations for enhancing the psychological well-being of the employees, which are being depicted by the research literature. The paper intends to throw light on what all organizational interventions can be opted by the organization in these pandemic times.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The literature of the study was searched in the databases such as Emerald Insight, JStor, ProQuest, Scopus, and EBSCO. To ensure no relevant paper is missed, research papers were searched in Google Scholar as well. Peer-reviewed papers were considered for the study. The search process started with using primary topic keywords such as "COVID-19 Employee Well-Being Interventions", "Employee Interventions in Organizations", "Psychological well-being interventions for employees" and "Mental Health Interventions for employees". Using database filters, the articles were restricted to English language articles in scholarly journals. After completing the steps of duplicate removal, title screening, and abstract screening, thirty-six papers were selected for literature review analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 will have a long-run and short-run impact on societies, healthcare systems, workplaces, and individuals alike (Burdorf *et al.*, 2020). Frontline workers such as healthcare workers, and police during this pandemic are reporting significant levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Stogner *et al.*, 2020 ; Ceri and Cicek, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2020). There have been attempts to develop interventions specifically targeting the healthcare workers to develop their psychological resilience (Buselli *et al.*, 2021).

More time is spent with technology in the form of social media, connecting with others or in the form of work from a home setting or for children's educational purposes (Garfin, 2020). Despite its advantages for both employers and employees, remote working has drawbacks, such as technostress (Molino *et al.*, 2020). Resistance to working from home might be a result of a traditional work setting or lack of infrastructure required for work from home or blurred boundaries of personal and professional life (Kramer and Kramer, 2020). Many employees who did not have experience with telework before the quarantine experienced a major blow in their work from home experience (Raišiene *et al.*, 2020). Social isolation has been one of the prominent negative consequences of the pandemic leading to poor mental health. However, the presence of high emotional intelligence in the individual can reduce the negative effect of isolation on wellbeing (Issa and Jaleel, 2021).

In a study, growth curve modelling depicted negative trends in the work-related well-being of employees as shown by plummeting work engagement and job satisfaction (Syrek *et al.*, 2021). As depicted by a survey According to a survey, over 30 percent of employees think that working from home has harmed their professional and personal lives, while 10 percent consider that their work has improved and 13 percent believe that their personal lives have improved (Tušl *et al.*, 2021). The quality of social connections predicted an individual's well-being positively in a sample of software engineers

working from home, while stress predicted an individual's well-being negatively. The most adverse repercussion faced by the employees especially the marginalized workers (e.g., women, migrants, and people facing financial hardships) during the pandemic outbreak was job insecurity, where the employee feared that they might lose their job (Pacheco *et al.*, 2020).

Therefore, some employees might experience gratefulness for having a job thus experiencing high job satisfaction (Syrek *et al.*, 2021). There are numerous initiatives targeted at improving the mental health of employees. They can be at the organizational level, such as improved working conditions and shifts in work schedules. On a personal level, individual stress management and skills training programs are available (Czabala *et al.*, 2011).

Other studies identify individual-level interventions such as early identification, diagnosis, and treatment, self-awareness counselling, coping skills training, and work hardening. Stress management and relaxation training, communication skills training, anger and frustration management, and social skills training are all structured and systematic interventions for developing abilities (Krupa, 2007). Human Resource Management practices that can help to mitigate the outcomes of COVID-19 on the employees' mental health are optimizing communication and transparency, mental health training, management of teleworking social support, and development of a return-to-work plan (Hamouche, 2020).

As identified by the demand-control support model, some participation actions at the organizational level may promote employee health, but they may not protect employees from poor working circumstances in general (Egan *et al.*, 2007). More of the workplace interventions include skills training, improvement of occupational qualifications, and working conditions improvement (Czabala *et al.*, 2011). Organizational interventions also help in enhancing the employees' participation in workplace decision-making (Egan *et al.*, 2007). Employees with mental health issues find it challenging

to discuss their return to work in the workplace. A workplace intervention for a successful return to work for such employees can facilitate both employee and the supervisor (Oostrom *et al.*, 2008).

Mindfulness-based and positive psychological interventions offer a promising avenue to revamp employee well-being, especially during the work-from-home context (Bartmann *et al.*, 2021). Employee assistance programs are a famous form of intervention. The organizations need to make sure that the EAPs not just focus on the individual level but at the organizational level as well (Kirk and Brown, 2003). Other forms of interventions are MHFA and motivational interviewing. Mental Health First Aid Training can be provided to the employees. This can be the adequate help provided to a person who is susceptible to having mental health problems until proper treatment is provided (Kitchener and Jorm, 2008). Motivational Interviewing is a behavioral intervention that helps in addressing multiple behaviors, health risks, and illness self-management. MI is client-centred counselling for inducing required behavior in clients (Butterworth *et al.*, 2006). Angelis *et al.* (2020) suggest that the interventions are best effective when they are carried out at multiple levels such as IGLO (Individual, Group, Leader, and Organizational level). Active participation at all levels from executives, and employees, to managers can result in well-being synergy at all levels (Angelis *et al.*, 2020). Employees' physical and mental health is suffering as a result of the lack of physical activity and changing lifestyles brought on by COVID-19 and teleworking., therefore companies should invest in the development of corporate wellness programs or modify the programs to work from home setting, for instance, Mahou San Miguel Corporate well-being program Cuidarme in Spain which started back in 2000 adapted to the COVID-19 ensuring high participation and satisfaction from program (Núñez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021).

Workplace counselling is considered to be effective for various types of the severity of the problems faced by the employees in the organizations (McLeod and McLeod, 2001). Workplace counselling has shown effective results

in alleviating psychological problems and reducing the significance of absence and attitude towards work (McLeod, 2010). The growth and popularity of the internet have opened the opportunities for online mental health interventions. Online interventions are less expensive, more convenient, and reach a wider audience than traditional face-to-face interventions. These interventions range from psychoeducational websites, and mental health apps to interactive cognitive-behavioral-based self-help programs, videoconferencing, and professional-led online therapy (Barak and Grohol, 2011).

The E- Mental Health approach is self-help interventions on the internet in the form of different websites. These interventions help in improving mental health and enhance well-being (Ketelaar *et al.*, 2014). Mental health mobile apps present online content in innovative and creative ways to promote personal growth, and behavioral and cognitive learning (East, 2015). With the widespread availability of smartphones, mental health apps can prove handy, however, concerns have been raised about the lack of scientific evidence about their efficacy (Donker *et al.*, 2013).

Many interventions are developed and designed to cater to the psychological needs of a specific population, for instance, Gurman *et al* (2021) discussed Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR), mindfulness, and cognitive reframing intervention for the well-being of the teachers (Zadok-Gurman *et al.*, 2021). To prevent exposure to COVID-19, university lecturers as well had to work from home. Kotera *et al* (2020) discussed a university-initiated virtual hurdle to briefly socialize and check on their colleagues' well-being every morning (Kotera *et al.*, 2020). Ravalier *et al* (2020) talked about the significant role played by the social workers in UK society and developed interventions psycho-educational improved top-down and bottom-up communication, and provided access to a Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant for those struggling and at risk of sickness absence. The interventions produced positive results and the intervention recipients reported improvement in working conditions and other conditions (Ravalier *et al.*, 2020).

The worst psychological impact was experienced by frontline healthcare workers who had to work extra shifts that too in the grotesque conditions. Blake *et al* (2020) developed a digital learning package using Agile methodology. This e-package includes guidance and support for psychological wellbeing for all UK healthcare employees. This package is free to use and is found effective for healthcare workers (Blake *et al.*, 2020). United Kingdom hospital started with "Supported Well-being centres "to redress the psychological impact of COVID-19 on healthcare workers. The healthcare workers who used facilities reported high well-being, engagement, job satisfaction, and lower job stress (Blake *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, healthcare organizations and other organizations as well should provide localized and diversified psychological first aid to the employees to redress the negative impact of COVID-19.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the literature review, the study will attempt to answer the following research questions through this study.

RQ1: What does the literature indicate about interventions aiming at improving the mental health of the employees at the individual and organizational levels?

RQ2: Which intervention can be opted by the organizations during the COVID-19, for enhancing the mental health of the employees, and how effective implementation and research could be ensured?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In India, 2 in 5 professionals are experiencing increased stress due to COVID -19, while employees are facing increased burnout (PTI, 2020). Mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, and depression are significant cost burdens in the workplace (Butterworth *et al.*, 2006). Personal costs of such stress for the employees include poor mental well-being lower self-esteem, chronic physical ailments, and a negative impact on family life (Czabala *et al.*, 2011). In addition, the pandemic time is

marked by the sheer sense of job insecurity faced by the employees due to the curbs and lockdown (Pacheco *et al.*, 2020).

There are a lot of studies on the costs of anxiety and depression, such as lost productivity, high attrition, absenteeism higher medical care expenditures, exacerbating physical sickness, and studies on mental health care restrictions and cost-offsets (Langleib and Kahn, 2005). Interventions can prove to be helpful during these distressful times for both employees and the organization. For instance, workplace counseling can reduce sickness absence by 20-60 percent (McLeod and McLeod, 2001; McLeod, 2010). Initiatives to improve mental health and well-being have been demonstrated to be effective for the frontline workers (Ravalier *et al.*, 2020).

The interventions can be rolled out at either the individual level or at the organization level in the COVID-19. Individual-driven interventions are the ones that aim to focus on how individuals cope with the environment. While organization-driven interventions are the ones that focus on changing the psycho-social environment of the organization (Egan *et al.*, 2007). Individual-level interventions as identified from literature are motivational interviewing, employee counseling, mental health apps, e-mental health interventions (Donker *et al.*, 2013 ; Butterworth *et al.*, 2006; East, 2015; McLeod and McLeod 2001).

Organizational interventions include employee assistance programs, mental health first aid training, skills training, and anger management (Kirk and Brown, 2003; Kitchener and Jorm, 2008; Krupa, 2007). Organizations need to take initiative for supporting the mental health of the employees in form of insurance coverage, or reimbursement of medical bills to encourage the employees to address their mental health issues at the earliest. McDonnell -Douglas organization experienced reduced absenteeism and substantial saving on medical claims among workers who were treated for mental health issues (Pattanayak and Sagar, 2016) proven in the past to

be entirely offset by higher use of other services and lost workdays (Rosenheck *et al.*, 1999).

The majority of the studies in the literature are cross-sectional where mental health and psychological well-being are analyzed as moderators, mediators, or antecedents of factors such as COVID-19 impact and experience, optimism, humor, sleep, and many more (Reizer *et al.*, 2022; Saalwirth and Leipold, 2021). Intervention studies, which are mostly longitudinal are scarce in the literature. The impact of an intervention can be best gauged with a time-lagged analysis gauging pre and post-well -of the intervention recipients.

Though literature does highlight the intervention studies, in COVID-19 the emphasis on the well-being assessment and interventions reclined more towards hospital and healthcare workers as the core frontline workers (Blake *et al.*, 2020; Lamiani *et al.*, 2021; Wilbiks *et al.*, 2021). A few studies have discussed interventions for work from home employees for instance teachers teaching during lockdown (Blake *et al.*, 2020; Kotera *et al.*, 2020; Zadok-Gurman *et al.*, 2021). Rarely does any study talks about multi-level interventions, where multi-level interventions can prove to be most effective in bringing the change both at the micro and macro level (Angelis *et al.*, 2020).

The organizations should now make a gradual shift to a hybrid mode as work from home isolation as well damages the mental health of employees. Interventions should be rolled out for the hybrid model of work, where digital interventions such as app-based interventions can prove to be helpful in work from home set- up.

MANAGERIAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper will provide an insight to the managers and practitioners regarding the interventions they can use for the enhancement of employee mental well-being, during these distressing times of the pandemic. The efficacy of the smartphones and e-mental health interventions is already proven in the research literature (Donker *et al.*, 2013; Ketelaar *et al.*, 2014), and this could be harnessed

when people are extensively relying on technology to find the escape (Garfin, 2020). This would help the enhancement of productivity and performance and reduction in burnout and attrition. Stress management workshops and counselling sessions can be organized at regular intervals to keep a check on the employees and support them in these times of crisis. Such commitment on the part of the organization toward employees would lead to increased employee commitment and loyalty to the organization (Laker, 2021). Organizations should adopt interventions at both the individual and organizational levels for the best results. This will ensure that employees receive holistic growth as a result of initiatives.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

The study tends to be a literature review reviewing the studies related to employee interventions at the individual and the organizational level. A more systematic effort such as a systematic literature review using the PRISMA framework, Meta-analysis could be done to represent a more detailed analysis of interventions depicted in the literature. Since this study is general in nature-focused studies elaborating on specific interventions such as positive psychology interventions, digital interventions such as mobile app-based and web-based could be done to see the development of literature. Qualitative studies in form of interviews of the recipients of the interventions could be done to analyze the themes emerging from such interventions. Intervention study and pre and post-assessment of well-being could be carried out to observe the effect of interventions discussed.

CONCLUSION

This paper was an attempt to sift through the intervention research literature to identify which interventions can be implemented in the COVID-19 pandemic times, in the organization to improve the psychological well-being of the employees. The paper identified many interventions and the organization needs to decide which intervention

will be most appropriate as per the needs of the employees. Given the COVID-19 situation and work from home settings, organizations can rely more on individual-driven interventions which are easy to implement in the online mode. This includes mental health app or website access, or individual employee counselling where the therapy sessions are provided to the distressed employee.

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ANNEXURE

S.No.	Author	About the paper	Type of paper
1.	Mcleod, 2010	Workplace Counselling	Systematic Literature Review
2.	Rosenheck <i>et al.</i> , 1999	Cost Cutting on mental health backfires the organization	Empirical
3.	Kirk and Brown 2003	Employee Assistance Programmes in Australia	Theoretical Conceptual
4.	Egan <i>et al.</i> , 2003	Organizational Interventions for increasing employee control	Systematic Literature review
5.	Krupa, 2007	Individual -level, employer oriented and workplace oriented	Theoretical Conceptual
6.	Ravalier <i>et al.</i> , 2020	App based well-being intervention	Participatory Action Research
7.	Hamouche, 2020	Organizational actions to combat stressors prevalent in the employees during the COVID-19	Literature Review
8.	Oostrom <i>et al.</i> , 2008	Cost effectiveness of workplace intervention	Randomized Controlled Trial
9.	Mcleod and Mcleod 2001	Workplace Counselling	Literature review
10.	Garfin, 2020	Technology used for coping in the pandemic	Opinion Article
11.	Czabala <i>et al.</i> , 2011	Psychosocial interventions in workplace mental health	Literature Review
12.	Burdorf <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Consequences of COVID-19 on the occupational health	Opinion Article
13.	Butterworth <i>et al.</i> , 2006	Motivational Interviewing as the Intervention	Empirical
14.	Kitchener and Jorm 2008	Mental Health First Aid as an early intervention	Theoretical - Conceptual
15.	Tusl <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Effect on well -being of German and Swiss employees	Empirical
16.	Kramer and Kramer 2020	Effect of COVID-19 on work from home employees	Opinion Article
17.	Raisiene <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Evaluation of telework to gauge satisfaction in the employees	Empirical
18.	Ceri and Cicek 2020	Psychological well-being comparison of healthcare and non-healthcare professionals	Empirical
19.	Langelib and Kahn 2005	How mental health issues of the employees can prove costly for the employees	Literature Review
20.	Syrek <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Effect on the employees' well-being during COVID-19	Empirical

21.	Pachecho <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Job insecurity and employees' well-being during COVID-19	Empirical
22.	Li <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Psychological well-being in frontline nurses in China during COVID -19	Empirical
23.	Molino <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Effect on well-being due to reliance on technology due to remote working	Empirical
24.	Issa and Jaleel 2021	Social isolation and well-being during COVID-19	Empirical
25.	Stogner <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Mental health of police officers during COVID-19	Theoretical - Conceptual
26.	Smith <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Anxiety / Depression in UK based sample due to COVID-19	Empirical
27.	Russo <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Well-being of software engineers working from home	Empirical
28.	Buselli <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Organizational Interventions for healthcare workers	Literature Review
29	Donker <i>et al.</i> , 2013	Smartphones usage for mental health services	Systematic Literature Review
30	Barak and Grohol 2011	Trends in Online mental health interventions	Literature Review
31	Ketelaar <i>et al.</i> , 2014	E -Mental Health Intervention for nurses	Randomized Controlled Trial
32	East 2015	Mental Health Mobile apps for Mental Health Services	Theoretical - Conceptual