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Post-webinar
paper
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How to Cope with Stress During Pandemic

PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANTS IN BUSINESS (PAIB) COMMITTEE



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This paper is an extract from the ICAP Webinar ‘How to cope with stress during pandemic’ held on July 3, 2020, from 7:45 PM to 9:15 PM PST. Around 4900 participants viewed the webinar locally as well as internationally.

The panel discussion included industry leaders;



Sohail Zindani, Founder, Learning Minds



*Dr. Iffat Zafar Aga, Co-Founder and Chief Operations Officer,
Sehat Kahani*



*Dr. Aisha Sanober Chachar, MBBS, FCPS (Psychiatry) Child and Adolescent
Psychiatry Fellow Department of Psychiatry, Aga Khan University*



*The webinar was moderated by,
Fraz Aslam, HR Head, Siemens Pakistan*

Introduction

Covid 19 has brought an unprecedented disruption all over the globe with many adversities yet also some opportunities. The adversities are primarily related to lives and livelihood. The global economy has suffered trillion dollars of losses while millions of workers are unemployed and thousands of businesses are shut down. Similarly, the virus has so far claimed more than half a millions lives and the number of infected people has crossed 10 million. This loss of lives and livelihood has created an environment of fear and uncertainty which are the primary reasons for stress in this new era.

Stress and its causes

Mental health has never been more important than it is now. In the current situation stress has a lot to do about the immense change in our lives as repercussions of the pandemic. There is excessive anxiety due to change in working environment, paradigm shift of working from home with lack of right infrastructure/ tools e.g. VPN, low bandwidth connectivity, printers, etc., negative news all around us especially on social media e.g. certain number of people are getting sick / died every day, people lost their jobs as the Company has filed for bankruptcy, etc., constant fear of contracting the virus while interacting with people for necessities e.g. essential service providers (medical related staff, bankers, law enforcement personnel) performing their duties, people buying groceries, etc. sudden change in routine e.g. kids are not going to school in March to May, lack of domestic help, the need to wash hands regularly, apply sanitizer, wear mask and other such precautionary measures.

Another aspect that can lead to stress is missing out on the social element and not having the liberty to do even the most regular social activities such as going to office, talking to friends, enjoying cultural and religious festivities such as hugging during Eid or offering prayers at Mosque. Another important contributor to stress might be the work-life balance as a lot of professionals are working from home there is no detachment from work. The uncertainty about the future has also created fear and anxiety because no one knows what's going to happen, will we go back to how we were, when will the virus medication be available and when will this all end?

Identifying stress and its impact on physical and emotional well-being

It is a well-known fact that identifying the physical health issues are easier than spotting the mental health issue. However, mental health has a lot of physical manifestations; which we call somatic symptoms in medical terms. These symptoms include cluster headaches, back aches and neck aches. Due to lack of knowledge and appreciation, in Pakistan, a big percentage of population that might be suffering from mental health issues may not realize what they are going through. Individuals with mental health issues mostly complain about intense body pains and aches. Other indicators of stress or anxiety include constant change in behavior such as becoming anxious agitated, change in sleeping pattern such as insomnia (trouble falling or staying asleep) or hypersomnia (excessive sleep).

A major indication of stress is when people are unable to maintain a proper and normal life routine. For instance, losing interest in their lives, dressing shabby, uninterested in eating properly, parents not being able to take care of their children, not being able to function properly, etc. This changed behavior is a red alert and something to look out for in people around you.

In a way, stress is subjective because everyone has their own threshold of taking stress and coping with it. Stress in a situation such as this where the entire world is immensely affected, is a very normal reaction. There is uncertainty, fear, concern about health, fear to spread the virus, layoffs, economic conditions etc. This ambiguity about every aspect of life makes stress and anxiety completely understandable.

Recognizing the existence of stress in the society and corporate sector

The level of empathy that organizations and the corporate sector as a whole has shown in this situation, has been reasonably well. But let's look at it from the different perspective as to what is actually happening around us?

Although the general conversations among people revolve around how pandemic has taken a toll on mental health, but to see it from a different angle, mental health was already in a bad place, the pandemic has only exposed it. Somehow, people never learned to live with themselves because they are always socializing but now they have to live in their own company.

Let's enhance this perspective in light of stress, the entire education system i.e. schools, colleges, universities etc. trains individuals to manage the outer world and ignores the importance of dealing the inner self. The pandemic is only exposing the absolute level of flaw in the education system as well as the way we are nurtured and developed.

Finding its relevance in the corporate world, since corporate world is also just a platform of the outer world is difficult. During pandemic, there has been more and more realization and discussions about stress and depression but the fact is that this is not something which is in the air and anyone can catch it like a virus. Instead, it is simply the inability to manage self that causes stress. For example, two students when taking exams deal with it differently; one of them is excited while the other one is stressed because both of them are reacting as per their preparation level for the exam.

The preparation to deal with ourselves and to understand our happiness, sadness and success is excessively reliant on external factors. Regretfully, people are not taught to be better at things, instead they are only pressurized to do best only which leads them to constantly look for competition because without competition they feel that there is no sense of achievement or success.

Unfortunately, everyone is trying to control the weather while not looking at the climate and this is where everything goes wrong. Right now, people are focused on quick fixes, an example of which is the corporate sector arranging sessions on stress management on a daily basis.

Stress is an outcome of many inabilities and misunderstandings. Doctors and psychologists are the right people to add an educated perspective to this conversation and not just a burst of motivation. People don't need motivation; they need a perspective to look at things the right way. That's where the conversation should tilt and that's where corporates are struggling. Organizations use TNA (Training Needs Analysis) tools and if they identify stress in their employees, their solution is to offer them a session on stress management which is not a practical approach. So let's be open about these conversations we need more holistic and more profound conversations around this subject.

Occupational stress

The era of profession and employment is not an ancient thing. Around 130 years ago, the employment rate was zero per cent, because there were no jobs, everyone was self-employed. Then came Henry Ford who needed workforce to run the Ford Motor Company so he offered lucrative wages i.e. \$ per hour which was significantly higher than what the self-employed people used to earn i.e. 50 cents an hour. This created a lifestyle revolution in America which the world quickly adopted till this time.

Today organizations are differentiating between essential positions and non-essential positions? The question is that if any position was non-essential, why did it exist in the first place? This is the time to perform an audit to see whether we are moving in the right direction or not.

The finance fraternity, particularly the Chief Financial Officers should now look at the cost from an entirely different angle and question whether the corporate plans and actions are worth it or not. Occupational stress should not be treated as an outcome, instead the source must be figured out. It comes from a poor design; a design where individual thought process is categorically killed. Since organizations are greatly focused on selling their products, new ideas are not appreciated and are not taken forward. Although we claim to believe that human intelligent is the greatest asset, it is not appreciated.

Corporate structure is a type of a contract with good salary, benefits, pension after retirement and other benefits in return of doing work as directed. The corporate culture today expects employees to park their minds at home and act as an order receiving robot in exchange for a handsome salary, lavish lifestyle and pension. But with the advent of information technology, people have access to much more information and possibilities to explore. Today, there is an opportunity to reinvent ourselves; we must build humanocracy in our organizations rather than having bureaucracy to make our organizations truly human-centered. Employees in a human-centered organization can have work pressures but they will not feel stressed because stress happens when employees do not emotionally get involved in their work. It takes emotional commitment and passion to carry out responsibilities while not getting stressed. Organizations need to work hard to emotionally involve their employees to their work if they really want to achieve something big in future.

Stress and entrepreneurs

The success and failure for entrepreneurs during pandemic completely depends on whether their business was based on technology or dependent on physical interaction. Companies that are entirely based on physical interaction, such as restaurants, passenger transportation companies, are going through a challenging time and suffering financial crises which is why most of the companies have shifted or trying to shift their models. For example, Airlift has changed their model from a transit service provider to a delivery services now. On the contrary, some businesses are booming during the crisis such as online delivery service (amazon, Ali baba, etc.) and communication companies (Zoom, WebEx, etc.).

Apart from this, entrepreneurs as well as other businesses have realized the need and possibility of work from home. For years. Organizations, particularly in Pakistan, were skeptical about the possibility of working from home but this has drastically changed. The silver lining in these challenging times is the realization of the importance of things that were not considered important before covid.

For instance, Sehat Kahani is a startup with a small office but now they are speculating whether they really need to spend so much money every month as rent of the office when work from home is possible. Similarly, businesses with big infrastructures and giant spaces must be questioning whether they need the space for work or not. So, Covid-19 has not only brought disaster but also essential learnings for those who want to learn from it.

The segment of society most impacted by COVID-19

Anyone and everyone without the capability of dealing with herself/himself is in crises. Stress should be directly proportional to the capability that a person has to deal with it. For example, a person who is not trained to fly an airplane when given the opportunity to fly it will flip out. Similarly, a person who is not a doctor when asked to treat a patient will also not be able to do it. However, for trained professionals, both these jobs are not a matter of stress but a matter of their practicing capability or expertise. This is the time to be committed for developing our own capabilities; not just to deal with outer world but also to deal with our inner world.

On the other front, children are also having a hard time aligning with the concept of online classes. Although it sounds nice to be continuing with education online but it comes with its own challenges, not to mention, parents are also finding it difficult to deal with this situation.

On the corporate side, the people who were not agreeing to the possibility of working from home since the last 30 years are the ones working from home since the last 3 to 4 months. This drastic change happened not because we embraced work from home, but because it is imposed on us due to the crisis. Human nature is such that it does not celebrate or enjoy anything that is imposed irrespective of the fact that it is beneficial but when something is intentional and conscious it becomes acceptable and easy to reap benefits from. This is the time that we, as a society embrace this change as the new normal in all sectors.

Professionals in all sectors have their own share of stress but individuals with the ability to embrace stress and beat it with improved capability are successful. We should not waste our energies in creating more fuss about the current circumstances or the future, but invest our time and efforts to learn and grow. In these times, whoever is in control of his brain is rich.

Stress in children

Although the pandemic is not a heightened threat to children, but during the crisis children has also been affected in numerous ways which has impacted not only their studies but everything else as well. There has been research related to child's mental health which proves that a child's stress level is synced with that of parents. Therefore, if parental stress is managed it can significantly manage the stress level in children.

Although many children enjoy studying at home as it is more comfortable in contrast to the discipline they have to follow in schools. However, they are frustrated due to their disturbed social lives. Children spend quite a good amount of their day in social activities such as during school, sports activities, spending time with friends and kids of relatives, etc. all of which has taken a significant hit because of the pandemic. Due to lockdowns and closure of schools, parks and restaurants, kids have to stay at home with restrictions on screen time. Online teaching in some cases is not as effective as some schools are conducting online classes, with multiples of their physical class sizes, by merging all the sections of the same class in one online sitting. This makes it difficult to understand the concept, ask question and communicate with fellow students, which ultimately adds frustration and stress to children.

Stress in children is a much more complex issue and we completely overlook the complexities and nuances associated with stress and try to find linear reasons for actions. To raise a child was already a difficult task for most of us but it has become more challenging now. However, parents will be the one who will have to make changes in their and their kids life to overcome the stress level.

Strategies for managing mental health of children

In child mental health, training is such that children are not given medication quickly. Instead a deeper understanding and diagnosis is done to treat the child. There is a lot of significant data around how to manage parent's stress which will automatically help the child.

There is a misconception that children will not understand if we talk to them about the crisis but being at home they listen to the news anyway which creates a confusion in their heads with no one to clarify them. They are noticing the change going on around them with social distancing and lockdown but no one talks to them about the whole situation. So, addressing their concerns and questions in a very healthy way is important.

Parents need to realize the fact that children are also experiencing the same situation they are, which is why they need to cater to them accordingly. It is okay to be more lenient and replace their screen-time with interesting talks and activities because these are not normal times. However, routine should be maintained with adequate sleep time. These are very basic things that are important for child's mental health.

Coping mechanism for stress during pandemic

This is the time to be more mindful and conscious of ourselves, the surroundings, our actions and consequences. It is time to be more subjective towards life and a time to build perspectives. We should be positive about the fact that we are the generation who was alive before pandemic, witnessed the pandemic and hopefully will survive this through. This is the time to upgrade ourselves and come to terms with your own self. It is not easy to not socialize and live with limitations but to make your company an interesting one is what it's all about now. This is the time to be entrusting and take charge of our own inner management. World will never happen your way but at least you should happen your way.

Role of organizations in helping employees deal with stress

It is true that organizations are now taking psychologists and psychiatrists on board to help their employees deal with stress during pandemic. However, if this is just a corporate shenanigan or corporate selling pitch then it is impractical, but if it is done consciously with genuine care for employees, then it is a revolutionary step.

Although some professionals / organizations believe that as soon as this pandemic will end they will get back to the previous routine and will perform their activities in the same manner as they have been doing it for some time but the truth is that this is the New Normal and it is better for professional/ organization to adapt it or be history, the world will never get back to how it was before. The world never sprung back after World War II and things never got back to as they were before when 9/11 happened which is hardly 10% of what is happening right now.

Persistence, capability and space to enhance perspective, space to listen more, see more, embrace technology rather than having deep rooted hatred towards technology, how to embrace it mindfully and channelize it is important. Technology should facilitate you, you should not be facilitating technology.

Relevance of Coaching for Professionals during pandemic and in the future

Coaching is as much important today as it was in the past; the challenge is how to identify the coach because unfortunately, in our society there are as many coaches as there are people who need coaching for themselves.

Coaching is a crucial personal development tool nevertheless, we should not approach coaching as yet another corporate fashion. Coaching should be an individual exercise when an individual accepts that he he/she needs help and takes the decision to improve, to change perspective, to move ahead in a new direction of performance. This is the time to embrace coaching but not just as another corporate fad.

Discussions about stress is not something which is dedicated only to HR function or any particular job function or profession. This is the people's function and we all need to embrace it. We need to take right steps for our organization with institutions like Sehat Kahani and many others now.

I think this is the great era to be in, if you can swing through this little bit of turbulence. We will certainly come out of the crisis as better people with better perspective and better resilience to life.

Hope in Crisis

When there is a will there is a way. During a pandemic you have a chance to get a perspective about your ambition as to what you actually want to do in your life. Today we have an opportunity to talk with ourselves and with our family members but the tragedy is we don't talk. We should listen and participate in the discussions that are happening around us. Family discussions revolve around on any topic such as budget, savings, purchases etc. but there are no discussions on things that are really important for us such as our passions, ambition and feelings etc. In the same way, unfortunately we don't even talk with ourselves.

Having said that, it is important to understand and realize what we truly want from our lives? This is the best time for everyone to understand their entrepreneurial origins. Many people who are working in the corporate world want to do their own business but they have not been able to take that step yet.

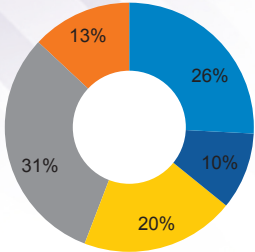
Unfortunately, we have never given enough time and space to ourselves to think and plan for the future and contemplate on questions like where do we see ourselves in the next 5 years or 10 years. We are overwhelmingly occupied in our daily tedious routine and one-day life will end. So, before that happens, we should step back and understand if we have a different opinion on what we should be doing right now personally and professionally, then give it our best shot.

Regarding many corporates taking mental health practitioners on board for their employees, Sehat Kahani is the platform for accessing mental health experts. Our organizations/ society have had cases of suicides, domestic abuse and other challenging stressful situations, however, this is the best time to overcome stress by availing online access to mental health experts and their services.

As an entrepreneur, understand what are your hopes and what you want to do in future. This is not the end of the world but a beginning of the new era.

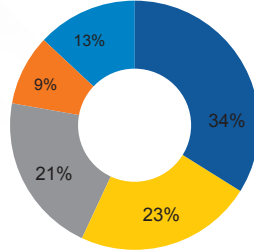
Audience poll

What is the main cause of stress for you?



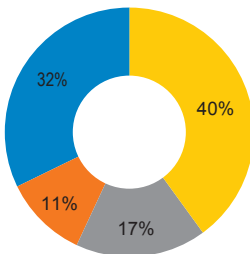
- Lockdown or isolation
- Job insecurity & financial obligations
- Personal or family problems
- Risk of getting infected
- General uncertainty about future

Which strategy do you adopt for managing stress?



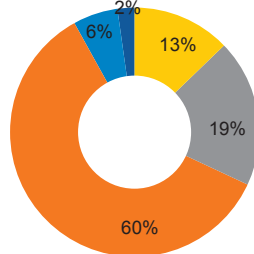
- Do regular exercise and meditate
- Maintain a well-balanced diet and get sufficient sleep
- Turn towards religion and prayers
- Consciously enforce a positive outlook on life
- Make time for leisure/stress-relieving activities

Which place generates the most stress for you?



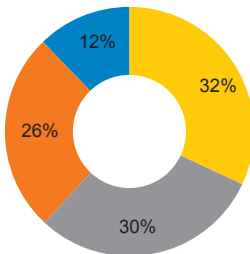
- Home
- Workplace
- External environment
- Grocery stores or marketplace

What is the impact of COVID on productivity?



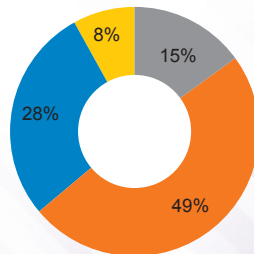
- Somewhat adverse
- No impact
- Completely favorable
- Somewhat favorable
- Completely adverse

Does our corporate culture recognize stress as an issue?



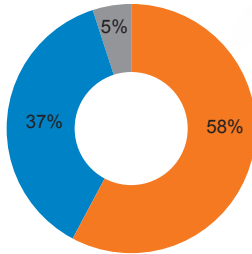
- Sometimes
- Yes
- Not at all
- Rarely

In the corporate environment, who do you think is most stressed?



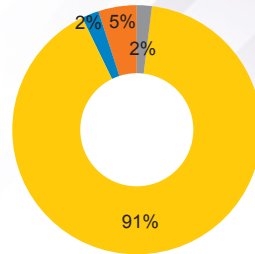
- Mid-level management
- Top-level management
- Non-managerial staff
- Low-level management

Do you think stress can be effectively managed?



■ Maybe
■ Only to certain limits
■ Yes

Does work from home create more stress than working from office?



■ Yes: to a certain degree
■ No: I don't think so
■ Yes: totally agree
■ Not at all; it has enhanced my productivity

The paper is reviewed by Mr. Muhammad Shoaib and Mr. Rauf Ali Jan of ICAP Professional Accountants in Business Committee