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# Stress Level and Coping Strategies Among Medical Frontliners in Tagbilaran City, During the COVID 19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

Stress is the body's nonspecific response to demand. Coping refers to things people do to protect themselves from life's challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected our lives as it caused additional stress to people worldwide, especially the medical frontliners. Stress dramatically influences our mood, sense of well-being, behavior, and health. This study aimed to determine the stress level and coping strategies among the medical frontliners in Tagbilaran City. It utilized the descriptive quantitative research design aided with a self-made questionnaire based on the "Person-Environment Fit Theory" by Kurt Lewin to measure the respondent's level of stress and a standardized Questionnaire entitled "The Coping Resources Inventory for Stress (CRIS)." The questionnaire was subjected to pilot testing. The result for Cronbach's test was 0.862, which was acceptable. Forty-seven (47) respondents were randomly selected to participate in the study, 18 of the forty-seven nurses were working at Bohol Cooperative Hospital, and twenty-nine (29) were from Borja Family Hospital. Primary ethical concerns were observed throughout the study as it underwent an ethics review from the University of Bohol Research Ethics Committee. Respondents' participation was based on the signed informed consent ensuring their privacy and anonymity. Data were subjected to the Chi-Square test and Spearman Rank Correlation using SPSS. The results

showed that the respondents were moderately stressed regarding work-related factors and mildly stressed with personal-related factors, which challenged their ability to manage Stress. Results further revealed that respondents were above-average stress-copers.

**Keywords**: Stress, Coping Strategies, Medical Frontliners, Nurses, Health, Descriptive-Quantitative Design, Percentage, Weighted Mean, Chi-square test, Spearman Rank Correlation, Self-made modified, Covid-19 Pandemic, University of Bohol.

## INTRODUCTION

Stress is perceived with different meanings by different people under different conditions. According to Hans Selye (1936), "Stress is the body's nonspecific response to any demand." For various situations, other definitions have evolved to cater. An example of these would be the effects of psychological Stress experienced by different healthcare workers depending on each individual's occupation, assigned area, particular situation, experiences, and the challenges that they face daily (Selye, 1973).

The occurrence of a worldwide virus known as the Coronavirus infection (COVID-19) was detailed to have begun in Wuhan, China, in the last quarter of 2019. Serious Intense Respiratory Disorder Coronavirus-2 causes this infectious illness. The World Health Organization (WHO) announced it to be widespread due to its far-reaching transmission. Its high mortality rate and speedy transmission has alarmed individuals from all over the world. It has increased the number of admissions in the hospital, which causes additional burdens to the health care provider.

There has been reported increased attention on job-related Stress and burnout experienced by medical health workers in vulnerable and at-risk populations, including effects on personal mental health, therapeutic decision-making, and job effectiveness. Stressors majorly influence mood, sense of well-being, behavior, and health. However, little is known about the combined influence of stress perception, coping adequacy, and its impact on the performance of medical frontliners (Fried & Fisher, 2016).

These variables have enormously influenced healthcare specialists' mental, social, and psychological states. Exposure of healthcare workers to Covid-19 patients causes some distress. In China, a considerable proportion of the 1,257 healthcare workers involving seven hundred

sixty-four (764) nurses and four hundred ninety-three (493) physicians were psychologically affected as they experienced depression, anxiety, insomnia, and distress.

In the Philippines, medical frontliners rated the psychological impact of the COVID-19 outbreak as moderate-to-severe, causing moderate-to-severe anxiety levels with some depressive symptoms (Tee, Tee, Anlacan, Aligam, Reyes, Kuruchittham, & Ho, 2020). The cases of COVID-19 worldwide continue to rise. WHO has recorded 117 million infected patients, with 2.59 million deaths worldwide as of March 1, 2021. A report from the Department of Health shows that as of February 28, 2021, there were 591,000 infected cases with 12 465 deaths.

Nurses are responsible for delivering holistic care to all frontline patients, whether part of their everyday routine or during crises. Nurses are essential in healthcare systems since they account for most healthcare providers. In the province of Bohol, community transmissions continue to rise even with the provincial government's strict implementation of health care protocols. Together with the newly recorded variant of the SARS-COVID 2 virus that has reportedly gained entry in other parts of the country, these facts could cause some levels of Stress to the medical frontliners of Bohol. This research study is being conducted on these premises to investigate the stress levels further and identify the coping strategies utilized by the frontliners, especially the nurses.

This study is anchored on Sister Callista Roy's Adaptation Theory, the Transactional Stress and coping model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) model by Dr. Hans Selye, and Person-Environment Fit Theory by Stanley Murrel and Fran Norris.

Callista Roy's Adaptation Model describes that adaptation occurs when people react positively to environmental changes. It is the action and result of individuals and groups who utilize mindful awareness, self-contemplation, and the possibility to generate human and environmental combinations. It states that a person is bio-psycho-social in continuous interaction with a changing environment. In the Transactional Stress and Coping Model, coping is a phenomenon that encompasses both cognitive and behavioral reactions that people utilize to cope with internal and external stressors that are believed to be greater than their resources (Christensen & Moran, 1998). General Adaptation Syndrome is how the body copes with stressful situations and adapts to survive them. According

to Selye, general adaptation syndrome (GAS) is a three-stage sequence of physiological processes that prepares the body for danger so that humans have a higher chance of surviving it than if they stayed passively calm when presented with a threat). This theory also demonstrates that work stressors can affect an individual in the home and social environment. Person-Environment Fit Theory focuses on the characteristics of individuals in their environment wherein the individual influences the environment that they are in, and their environment can affect them as an individual.

The third United Nations Sustainable Development Goal: Good Health and well-being, is anchored on this study. Promoting healthy lives and sound well-being at all ages is essential to sustainable development. At present, humanity faces a global health crisis as COVID-19 causes human beings to suffer, disrupting the economy worldwide and upending the lives of billions of people around the globe. This study is anchored on Republic Act 11036, the Mental Health Law. The law states that the state commits itself to the promotion, protection, prevention, treatment, affordability, and high quality and is always available. The study also supports one of the WHO's Mental Health Care Law: Ten Basic Principles, specifically law 1, the Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental Disorders. It defines how everyone should benefit from the best measures to promote their mental well-being and prevent mental disorders.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has spread suddenly and rapidly from China to the world, affecting Italy in particular. In the early stages of the virus, health workers were at the forefront of infection control. The current study of Babore, Lombardi, Viceconti, Pignataro, Marino, Crudele & Trumello, 2020). Entitled "Psychological effects of the COVID-2019 pandemic: Perceived stress and coping strategies among healthcare professionals. Psychiatry research" aimed to examine the effects on healthcare professionals of the COVID-19 outbreak and to recognize some risk and protective factors of their level of distress in terms of sociodemographic profile, exposure to COVID-19 and the coping mechanisms used to cope with Stress. During the peak of the outbreak, data was obtained. Five hundred ninety-five healthcare professionals participated in the study and finalized the sociodemographic and technical data indicators, perceived stress (PSS), and coping strategies (COPE-NVI-25). Overall, it was found that the main protective factor was a positive attitude toward the stressful situation.

In contrast, females seeking social help, avoidance techniques, and working with COVID-19 patients were risk factors. The economic status, problem-solving ability, and turning to religion were not correlated with stress levels. The key coping mechanisms used by healthcare professionals to cope with the highly stressful situation caused by the pandemic were highlighted (Babore et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the study "Prediction of Job Satisfaction among Health Care Professionals" investigates the role of workplace stress and coping mechanisms: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Data were obtained from 168 full-time social workers and 155 nurses using a survey questionnaire. Both groups differed significantly on measures of perceived work tension, job satisfaction, and the use of three coping strategies. Separate multiple regressions were performed for social workers and nurses to analyze the relative effect of workplace stress and dealing with job satisfaction. The most significant contributor to work satisfaction was perceived job stress for both classes. Although they varied between the two types, some coping strategies were strongly linked to work satisfaction (Gellis, 2002).

Meanwhile, the serious mental health issues facing doctors and allied health practitioners are highlighted in contemporary research. Occupational groups in isolation were the focus of another study. The researchers addressed the gap by comparing the mental health and occupational perspectives of four classes of healthcare workers, such as doctors, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, and respiratory therapists, drawing on data obtained from medical staff in a neonatal intensive care unit (N = 222). The researchers find evidence that doctors and nurse practitioners are more likely to experience work-life conflicts, irregular work hours, and high work pressure. It was significantly explained that these stressors cause higher levels of burnout among doctors and nurse practitioners. The findings endorse the theory of "higher status stress" and offer insights into today's medical workers' job pressures and mental health challenges Grace & Van Heuvelen, 2019).

Workplace stress can affect healthcare professionals' physical and emotional well-being by harming their productivity and overall quality of life. The study entitled "The Impact of Healthcare Workers' Job Environment on Their Mental-emotional Health and Coping Strategies." lasted from July 2010 to October 2010. Two hundred respondents from 21-58 years old working in a 240-bed general hospital participated in the

study. A standardized questionnaire that explores strategies for dealing with stressful conditions was used in the present research on Coping Strategies for Stressful Events to evaluate the process people employ to overcome stressful situations or events. The questionnaire's Cronbach" s alpha result was reliable and valid (Cronbach's α= 0.862). Data were subjected to regression analysis using the SPSS 16.0 software. And found that health professionals' mental health can be affected by strategies for coping with traumatic incidents because constructive reassessment, leaving, and finding social support are associated with the Quality of Life-BREF. Results revealed a noticeable lack of stress management techniques in the workplace, which the participants typically interpret as a lack of involvement in their emotional state on behalf of the management. It is essential that the administration continues to inspire and morally reward workers. Providing them with more or continuous education opportunities has reduced workplace stress (Koinis, Giannou, Drantaki, Angelaina, Stratou, & Saridi, 2015).

The unprecedented nature of the pandemic caused several mental health issues, particularly among frontline healthcare personnel (HCWs). Anxiety, sadness, burnout, sleeplessness, and stress-related problems are common among frontline HCWs. Despite the increased mental health issues among frontline HCWs, their mental health is frequently disregarded. Effective communication, practical support from the administration/seniors, and mental health problem screening are potential ways to lessen the mental health problems of frontline HCWs (Gupta & Sahoo, 2020).

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these facts could cause some levels of Stress to the medical frontliners of Bohol. On these premises, this research study is being conducted to investigate stress levels further and identify the coping strategies utilized by the frontliners, especially the nurses.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, descriptive-correlational design was used to determine the stress level and the coping strategies used by the healthcare providers in Tagbilaran City that used self-constructed and standardized questionnaires. The respondents of this study were the healthcare providers, specifically male and female nurses of Tagbilaran City, ages 20-45 years old, working in Borja Family Hospital and Bohol Cooperative Hospital, assigned to the ward. The study excluded nurses who were not assigned to bedside care. They were chosen through random sampling. A random sample of 47 respondents was selected with a margin of error of 5% at a 95% confidence interval. Eighteen nurses work at Bohol Cooperative Hospital, and 29 respondents are from Borja Family Hospital.

The pilot-tested questionnaire was subjected to a Cronbach's Alpha reliability test with a 0.709 result for the personal-related factors and 0.704 for the work-related factor questions. The first section entails the respondents' demographic information in the context of age, Sex, civil Status, and monthly income. The second section of the questionnaire utilized the researcher-made scale to assess the level of Stress of the respondents in terms of personal-related factors and work-related factors. The researchers based the questions on the "Person-Environment Fit Theory" by Kurt Lewin, which explains a reciprocal relationship between the person and the work environment (Lewin, 2013). *A dynamic theory of personality-selected papers*. Read Books Ltd. The questions focused on how people influence their work environments and how those surroundings affect the individuals who work in them. The third section deals with the level of coping strategies utilized by the respondents.

The Coping Resources Inventory for Stress (CRIS) by Marting and Hammer is also used with a 32-item self-report inventory to measure how the respondents handle stress, conceived in five basic ways corresponding to the measure's scales (Hammer & Marting 1987). *Coping resources inventory*. Consulting Psychologists Press. The researchers chose this questionnaire because it supported the transactional model of Stress and

coping model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), which expounds coping as something that involves both cognitive and behavioral responses that individuals use to manage internal and external stressors. The five CRI scales are Cognitive (COG), Social (SOC), Emotional (EMO), Spiritual/ Philosophical (S/P), and Physical (PHY). The tool will be interpreted with four as the highest score on each scale and 0 as the lowest. The garnered scores will be interpreted as follows: A score of 3.5 and above is with "superior stress-coper"; 2.5-3.5 as "above average stress-coper"; 1.5-2.4 as "average stress-coper," and a score of less than 1.5 to be categorized as below "average stress-coper."

The study underwent Research Ethics Committee review before the actual conduct. A questionnaire was distributed through an online platform by the researchers. Privacy and confidentiality were strictly observed throughout the study, as the respondents were assured that the gathered data would be used only for research purposes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Profile of Respondents.** The first category of the profile pertains to the age range of the respondents; results showed that most respondents were 25-29 years old (38.3%), followed by the age range of 30-34 (34.0%). In contrast, only one (2.1%) belonged to the age bracket of 45 and above. Most of the respondents are females. Most are single (66.0%), while sixteen (34%) were married. The majority (83%) of the respondents were earning between ten thousand pesos to less than fifteen thousand pesos per month (₱10,000 - < ₱15,000), and only two respondents (4.3%) had a monthly income of ₱20,000 and above. These data coincide with a study conducted by *Abalos, Cruz, Ogena, Kabamalan, Laguna, and Marquez, in 2020, which revealed that females and the young dominate the health professionals in the Philippines*. A survey revealed that 65% of health professionals, including nurses, were Millennials aged below Thirty-five years old and single*. It is* common knowledge that there is a shortage of nurses at present. The high-stress level that coins with nurses' work and the low salary, especially among nurses working in private institutions, resulted in high turnouts and even affected the delivery of quality nursing care and the nursing profession in general (Goodare, 2017).

**Stress Level in Terms of Work-Related Factors.** Results showed that the respondents were Moderately Stressed by work-related factors

and were mildly stressed by Personal-related factors. With the nursing shortage worldwide, work overload has also been observed, which even increases the stress level of nurses concerning their work resulting in burnout (Yu, Raphael, Mackay, Smith, & King, 2019). Work-related Stress affects the quality of nursing care and higher the risk of committing errors in the workplace (Baye, Demeke, Birhan, Semahegn, & Birhanu, 2020).

The pandemic causes high Stress among the nurses working in the hospital as their health status, well-being, and ability to work are being challenged (Arnetz, Goetz, Arnetz & Arble 2020). Results revealed that the respondents have felt stressed during the pandemic, especially on the knowledge that there are not enough PPEs in the hospital to be used by all the employees and that there were not enough resources for the delivery of available care for everyone. Primary Health Care Nurses in Australia also experience this problem with PPE as they experience fear for themselves and their families, especially since the institution they work also has an insufficient supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (Halcomb, McInnes, Williams, Ashley, James, Fernandez & Calma 2020). However, the acknowledgment given to the respondents for every task completed and the teamwork in their institution as they continued to cater to patients' needs at the height of the pandemic make the work less stressful.

**Stress Level in Terms of Personal-Related Factors.** The pandemic also caused moderate Stress to the personal-related factors of the respondents. The results showed that despite the pandemic, "they still have a work-life balance" and can "decide easily." Respondents did not feel insecure about their co-workers. Although not feeling the insecurities of co-workers got the lowest rank, it dramatically impacted the person's well-being. A work set aside at the end of the day, spending time with friends, families, and loved ones, and even attending to personal interests is what we call achieving a work-life balance. Work-life balance is crucial to remain psychologically healthy (Yayla & Eskici İlgin, 2021).

Nurses are known to be resilient. The findings revealed the coping strategies employed by the respondents to cope with the Stress experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data showed that respondents relied more on their spiritual practice scale, followed by the tension reduction scale score. One's attitude to one's beliefs and religion is essential in overcoming life's difficulties (Krok, 2008). Spirituality is associated with

one's ability to cope with the challenges in life (Graham, Furr, Flowers, & Burke, 2001).

When subjected to Spearman's rho test, result revealed a P-value of .674, which is higher than the 0.05 level of significance, showing no association between variables. This finding further means that the stress level encountered by nurses who provided bedside care to patients in the hospital during the pandemic was separate from the level of coping strategies nurses employ. The kind of work that nurses do provides a lot of stress, but nurses are trained to overcome challenges in life.

Table 1. Relationship between Level of Stress and Coping Strategy (N=47)

| Variable | Spearman's Rho Test | P-value | Decision | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Level of Stress and Coping Strategy | **-.063** | **.674** | Failed to reject the null hypothesis | There is no significant relationship between the respondent's level of Stress and the Coping Strategy |

Different people would respond to varied stressors differently, and they also cope individually. The coping strategies employed are not based on the extent of the stressors but would depend on several available factors. Nurses' stress would be more related to their work, especially with understaffing, which could result in conflicts in their roles and even patient aggression. These could be coped with by different strategies, including getting support from loved ones and friends or even getting hold of one's emotions (Lim, Bogossian & Ahern, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

Stress is perceived with different meanings by different people under different conditions. People have psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions in response to events affecting and challenging them. The study revealed moderate Stress among the respondents concerning work-related factors and mild Stress in personal-related aspects. In relevance to this finding, the "Person-Environment Fit theory" implies that work-related Stress arises due to a lack of fit between the individual's skills, resources, and abilities and the demands of the work environment (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1998). The levels of Stress and coping

strategies have no significant relationship with the demographic profile of the respondents; Nurses must have a constant balance between their home life and work commitments. Nevertheless, on-the-job stresses, everyday worries, and quality of life make this challenging. Based on the findings, the study can conclude that the nurses in Tagbilaran City's private hospitals have perceived personal and work-related Stress that mildly affects them and are coping successfully.

Nurses play an essential role in society today by being advocates for health promotion, educating the public and patients on preventing injury and illnesses, participating in rehabilitation, and providing care and support to the community. Burnout due to overwhelming Stress and other factors brought about by the demands of the pandemic lower nurses' quality of life, performance level, and organizational commitment and increases their intention to leave the job. Burnout also increases turnover rates and negatively affects the quality of nursing care.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the researchers came up with the following recommendations.

1. Individual approaches of some simple actions nurses can employ to help them relax and experience lower stress levels. Rather than think about all that needs to be accomplished in a day, it is more effective to break each task down into manageable bits.
2. The nursing service administration will plan activities to allow Nurses to spend time in nature. Many studies show that exposure to natural environments reduces blood pressure, enhances feelings of connection, and relieves Stress. Going outside provides opportunities to engage in stress-relieving activities like walking or bicycling.
3. Taking mental breaks and identifying stressors, learning how to meditate, or starting a journal to reflect on the day and joining a spiritual community can help nurses view challenges and goals from a fresh perspective.
4. Institutional approaches to conducting stress management programs available for staff members through regular staff meetings, flexible staffing arrangements, and regular in-service/education programs enable staff to stay abreast of changes in healthcare.

5. For future studies, further research on the stress levels and coping strategies of other medical frontliners, including physicians, medical technologists, midwives, and pharmacists in all private hospitals of Tagbilaran City to compare the different stress levels for each sector of the healthcare system.
6. Further research on developing and enforcing enough personal protective equipment to help protect medical frontliners and help them lower their levels of Stress. The researchers will also recommend that another study be conducted on the stress level of medical frontliners during post-vaccination to measure whether the presence of vaccines will affect their stress levels.

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