

## Workplace stress and its associated outcomes: ethical responsibilities of healthcare organisations

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### Abstract

Workplace stress has a substantial impact on healthcare professionals' job performance, wellbeing and patient care. Long working hours, heavy patient loads, emergency obligations, and professional dangers contribute to chronic stress, which causes burnout, anxiety and depression. Poor leadership and toxic work environments exacerbate these issues. Implementing stress management techniques, such as workload optimisation, mental health assistance, and flexible scheduling, is necessary for ethical healthcare organisations to address these problems. In Pakistan, systemic inefficiencies, labour shortages, and poor infrastructure exacerbate workplace stress, necessitating immediate policy adjustments. A literature review was conducted across Google Scholar, PubMed, Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online and Scopus databases without language or temporal restrictions. Studies examining occupational stress, burnout or psychological wellbeing among healthcare workers were included if published in peer-reviewed journals. Authoritative health organisation reports were also included. Data was thematically analysed to identify stress-related factors, organisational responses, and ethical considerations in healthcare settings. Studies focusing on non-healthcare sectors, or lacking direct relevance to occupational stress were excluded. Adopting the World Health Organisation's workplace wellbeing paradigm could enhance healthcare infrastructure, and encouraging ethical leadership can help reduce stress and increase job satisfaction. In order to improve patient outcomes and overall healthcare efficiency, addressing workplace stress through organisational and policy initiatives will help create a healthier and more resilient healthcare mechanism.

**Key Words:** Occupational stress, Health services

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### Introduction

Effective patient care in healthcare settings demands sustained engagement of healthcare staff. To ensure continuous service provision, workforce scheduling often involves intermittent shifts over a 24-hour period, coupled with the management of emergency situations. These working conditions result in significant job-related stress compared to other sectors, such as information technology (IT), banking or the corporate sector at large. Health professionals are the backbone of social and healthcare management systems, responsible for improving health, halting disease spread, and providing healthcare services to individuals and families across communities in accordance with the primary healthcare (PHC) approach.<sup>1</sup> However, given the demanding care they administer both within and outside medical facilities, healthcare staff frequently encounter physical and emotional stress that, if not properly managed, can hinder their productivity and performance.<sup>2</sup>

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".<sup>3</sup> Occupational stress arises when the demands of a job surpass the worker's capabilities, resources or needs, causing a negative physical and emotional response.

The stress response is adaptive to prepare the body to handle the challenges presented by an internal or external environmental challenge.<sup>4</sup> The WHO has referred to stress as the "health epidemic of the 21st century". Historically, stress was characterised as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), a response by the body or mind to injury or sustained stress.<sup>5</sup> Burnout represents an extreme form of workplace stress. It is a condition characterised by physical, emotional and mental fatigue that typically affects individuals in service-oriented professions, frequently resulting from overwhelming work demands and various psychological, social and physical challenges.<sup>6</sup>

In Pakistan's healthcare system, occupational stress is compounded by inadequate staffing ratios, limited resources and increasing patient loads. Public-sector hospitals face overcrowding with insufficient support systems, leading to burnout and compromised care quality.<sup>7</sup> Institutional mechanisms addressing workplace stress remain underdeveloped, with hierarchical structures inhibiting open discussion of stress-related concerns.

Workplace stress raises ethical issues about professional responsibility and fair treatment. The ethical duty to do good and avoid harm applies not only to patients, but also to the context of healthcare workers' wellbeing. Healthcare organisations must create workplace ethics models that protect staff welfare, distribute workloads fairly, and provide clear systems for addressing complaints.<sup>8</sup>

The current narrative review was planned to identify and analyse the key factors contributing to workplace stress in healthcare settings, including occupational hazards, work demands, and psychological stressors.

## Materials and Methods

The narrative review, with the aim of synthesising existing evidence on occupational stress among healthcare workers and examining the ethical responsibilities of healthcare institutions in addressing these challenges, comprised a comprehensive literature search across Google Scholar, PubMed, Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE) and Scopus databases. No restrictions were applied regarding publication date or language to ensure broad coverage of the available literature. The search employed a combination of key words and Boolean operators, including ("workplace stress" OR "occupational stress") AND ("healthcare workers" OR "healthcare professionals" OR "medical staff") AND ("burnout" OR "mental health" OR "psychological wellbeing") AND ("healthcare organisations" OR "hospitals" OR "clinical settings") AND ("stress management" OR "organisational interventions"

OR "institutional responsibility" OR "ethical obligations").

Studies were included if they investigated occupational stress, burnout or psychological wellbeing among healthcare workers, discussed organisational factors or interventions related to workplace stress, and were published in peer-reviewed journals or authoritative reports from recognised health organisations, such as the WHO and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Studies were excluded if they focused on non-healthcare sectors, or lacked direct relevance to occupational stress in healthcare settings.

Initial screening was performed by reviewing titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles. Full-text assessment was subsequently conducted for potentially relevant studies. Data was extracted on stress-related factors, their consequences, organisational responses, and ethical considerations. The extracted information was thematically organised into categories, including types and sources of workplace stress in healthcare, organisational and environmental determinants, stress management strategies, context-specific findings from Pakistan's healthcare system, and institutional ethical responsibilities. The thematic synthesis enabled comprehensive understanding of workplace stress dimensions and identification of knowledge gaps, particularly regarding Pakistan's healthcare context.

## Discussion

**Conceptual Framework; Stress Models and Ethics Principles:** Stress is a condition of emotional or physical tension, often triggered by situations or thoughts that lead to feelings of frustration, exhaustion or anxiety. However, the positive effects of stress should not be underestimated, as it can be helpful in situations like avoiding danger or meeting deadlines. However, prolonged stress can adversely affect one's health.<sup>9</sup> Stress can be viewed from two different perspectives, and has varying applications: positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress). Those who experience eustress are better equipped to handle workplace demands,

**Table-1:** Categories of stress and their characteristics.

Type of Stress	Description
Acute Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Acute stress arises from the body's response to a new or challenging situation, occurring rapidly and disrupting an individual's equilibrium.</li> <li>■ Spells of anxiousness, mood swings, head pain, digestive disturbances, increased heart rate, and perspiration.</li> </ul>
Episodic Acute Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Occurs when individuals frequently experience acute stress, often due to taking on too many responsibilities or having a chaotic lifestyle.</li> <li>■ This type of stress is characterised by persistent worry and tension, leading to recurring crises.</li> <li>■ This condition can lead to severe comorbidities including hypertension, DM etc.</li> </ul>
Chronic Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Chronic stress, which lasts for an extended period, is considered the most damaging type of stress for overall health.</li> <li>■ It can lead to physical and physiological health problems, including burnout, joint pain, fluctuating blood pressure, and cardiovascular diseases.</li> <li>■ Work-related pressures and strained interpersonal relationships are key contributors to chronic stress.</li> </ul>

promoting a fulfilling work environment marked by satisfaction and positive ethics. In contrast, individuals under distress often fail to meet job requirements, which can negatively affect their work-life balance, resulting in unhappiness and declining ethical standards.<sup>10</sup>

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) and other psychological sources, stress can be categorised into the various types (Table 1).<sup>11</sup>

**Global Burden and Consequences:** Globally, one out of every three workforces suffer from work-related stress. Additionally, occupational stress is associated with health issues, such as insomnia, depression and anxiety.<sup>3</sup> The CDC defines workplace stress as a harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when job demands do not match the worker's capabilities, resources or needs. This form of stress has been linked to various health issues, including insomnia, depression and anxiety.<sup>12</sup> The coronavirus diseases-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated these concerns, with a Gallup report indicating that 60% of employees felt emotionally detached from their jobs and nearly one-fifth describing their time at work as miserable. Factors such as long working hours and blurred work-life boundaries have contributed to this increase in workplace.

stress.<sup>13</sup>

Healthcare personnel face significant levels of occupational stress due to the demanding and unpredictable nature of their work. Long working hours, night shifts, high patient loads, and the emotional burden of patient care contribute to significant stress. Approximately 32% of healthcare professionals report sleep deprivation caused by long shifts, which can contribute to burnout, especially in this group.<sup>14</sup> Despite their life-saving efforts, daily stress contributes to a growing number of medical errors, causing significant harm and mortality.<sup>15</sup>

**Determinants of Stress in Healthcare Settings:** The workplace is a significant source of stress for many employees, often due to high demands, long hours and a lack of control over tasks. According to the APA, excessive workloads, tight deadlines and job insecurity are among the top stressors affecting employees. Additionally, poor organisational culture, lack of support from supervisors, and workplace conflicts further contribute to stress. The WHO recognises occupational stress as a growing global concern, linking it to conditions such as anxiety, depression and burnout.<sup>16</sup>

Healthcare system errors influenced by workplace stress

include medication errors, hospital-acquired infections, missed or delayed diagnoses, treatment delays, insufficient post-treatment follow-up, inadequate monitoring post-procedure, neglecting test results, failing to take proper precautions, and technical medical errors.<sup>15</sup>

A toxic work environment in healthcare organisations is often characterised by extended working hours, excessive workloads, strict time constraints, demanding responsibilities, inadequate rest periods, and monotonous tasks. These challenges typically stem from poor leadership and ineffective management strategies. Leaders who lack strong managerial skills contribute to emotional distress among healthcare workers, particularly nurses, by failing to provide adequate support and guidance. When leadership is ego-driven rather than employee-oriented, workplace pressure intensifies, leading to burnout and decreased job satisfaction.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, organisational culture plays a crucial role in shaping the work environment. Factors such as an unhealthy physical workspace, overwhelming workloads, unclear job roles, role conflicts and strained relationships with colleagues or superiors contribute significantly to workplace stress. Additionally, limited financial and social support further exacerbate employee dissatisfaction. A workplace culture that lacks transparency, communication and support fosters anxiety and frustration among employees. When the organisational environment is not conducive to productivity, the risk of errors, miscommunication and workplace accidents increases, ultimately affecting both employee wellbeing and patient safety.<sup>18</sup>

**Ethical Obligations of Healthcare Institutions:** Effective stress management fundamentally involves identifying and addressing the root causes of stress to mitigate associated risks. A crucial initial step is enhancing self-awareness by recognising personal responses to various situations, pinpointing specific stressors, and observing behaviours during stressful periods. Techniques include modifying the lifestyle if stress is chronic, practicing self-care to prevent stress, and controlling reactions to stress when it occurs.<sup>19</sup>

Stress management is categorised into two strategies. Sustainability management focuses on reducing workplace stressors and implementing tools to support employees in managing stress.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the personnel management approach is employee-centric, encouraging workers to create task lists, prioritise activities, schedule tasks appropriately, and take breaks.

This approach helps employees remain calm, manage time effectively, meet deadlines, and minimize stress levels.<sup>21</sup>

The workplace plays a pivotal role in managing employee stress by fostering a supportive and healthy environment. Organisational interventions such as job redesign, promoting a participative management culture, introducing work-life balance policies, offering flexible working arrangements, and enhancing organisational communication have been identified as effective strategies to mitigate workplace stress.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, providing mental health resources and wellness programmes can enhance employees' ability to cope with workplace pressures. These measures not only improve job satisfaction, but also boost productivity, reduce burnout and enhance overall employee wellbeing.

**Systemic Barriers and Reforms in the Context of Pakistan:** With a population of over 250 million, Pakistan has faced multiple challenges in the health sector. Global warming and rapidly growing national population have impeded its ability to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and slowed progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>23</sup>

Health indicator statistics have, indeed, recorded a dismal downward trend over the last 30 years, indicating serious inefficiencies in the whole healthcare system. Poor health outcomes are exacerbated by limited access to adequate healthcare facilities, a lack of knowledge, and failure of critical public services. However, such deficiencies should not be considered only in terms of individual health risks, as they also pose a threat to society at large, such as social unrest, unplanned migration, and destabilisation in the region.<sup>24</sup>

The major problem of the healthcare system in Pakistan is disproportionate operation of health service delivery at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Many patients avoid PHC due to quality, affordability and reliability concerns, and thus cause shortage of human resources at higher levels of care.<sup>25</sup>

**Discussion and Policy Recommendations:** Evidence synthesised by the current narrative review demonstrate that occupational stress in healthcare demands urgent attention from institutional leaders and policymakers. Organisational dysfunction, manifested through inadequate leadership, deficient communication and unsupportive cultures, serves as the primary catalyst for employee distress.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action, beginning with national health policy reforms that treat

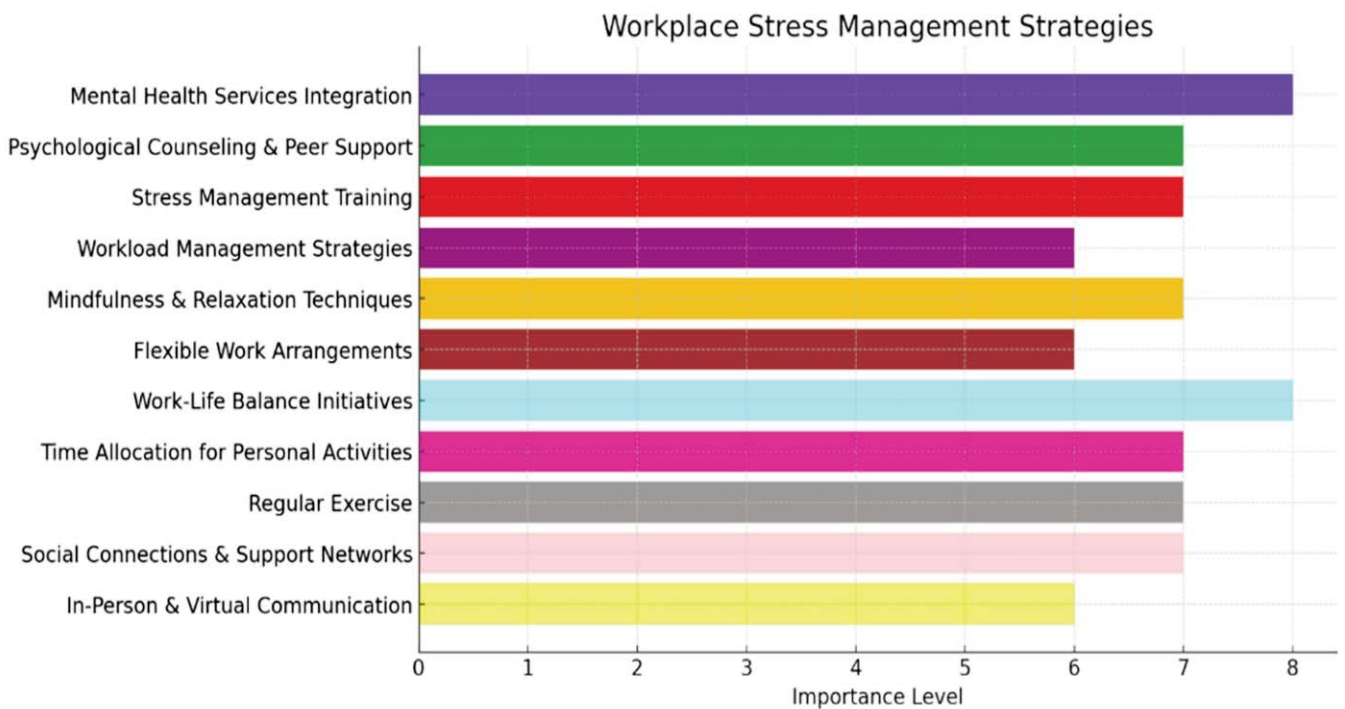
workforce sustainability as integral to system performance. Financial investment in infrastructure and digital technologies must accompany workforce planning that expands training pipelines and develops comprehensive retention strategies. Institutions must implement proactive systems, distributing clinical loads equitably, mandating adequate recuperation periods, and establishing transparent workload monitoring.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond structural reforms, institutions must cultivate environments promoting psychological wellbeing through cultural transformation. Leadership development should emphasise emotional intelligence and empathetic management. Professional development must extend beyond technical competencies to encompass resilience training and adaptive coping strategies.<sup>27</sup> Mental health support services, such as counselling and psychological wellbeing programmes, will provide avenues to mitigate against stress and promote emotional stability.<sup>28</sup>

Improving financial security through a fair and timely compensation structure is key to enhancing job satisfaction and motivation. Furthermore, involving healthcare professionals in decision-making processes empowers them and nurtures a culture of trust and collaboration in the system. Public awareness campaigns about the respective issues can help reduce the misconceptions and stigma around working in healthcare, thus fostering a more appreciative and supportive society.<sup>29</sup> Through such reforms, the health sector in Pakistan stands to gain in terms of creating a more sustainable and stress-resilient environment for staff, resulting in increased staff and patient wellbeing.<sup>30</sup>

The WHO has developed comprehensive guidelines to address workplace stress, focussing on mental health support, occupational safety and resilience building. These guidelines demonstrate fundamental workplace stress management practices in healthcare, emphasising the significance of diverse treatments, such as mental health support, task management and work-life balance.<sup>31</sup> They are aimed at enhancing employee wellbeing, reduce burnout, and create healthier work environments, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1).

While the current narrative review provides a comprehensive analysis of workplace stress in healthcare settings, it has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, as a narrative review, it does not include a systematic or meta-analytical approach, which may introduce selection bias in the literature examined. The reliance on secondary data sources, including



**Figure-1:** A comparative visualisation of different workplace stress management strategies, highlighting their perceived significance in mitigating stress among healthcare professionals.

previously published studies, means that findings are dependent on the scope, quality and limitations of those original studies. The review primarily synthesises existing research rather than presenting new qualitative or quantitative findings based on fieldwork or surveys. Lastly, it primarily draws from global literature and lacks Pakistan-specific empirical studies on workplace stress. Given the unique challenges faced by Pakistan's healthcare workforce, such as underfunded public health facilities, workforce shortages and security concerns, the findings may not fully capture the realities of stressors specific to the country.

## Conclusion

Stress in the workplace among healthcare professionals is a universal issue impairing wellbeing, job performance and, ultimately, patient care. Some effective strategies include workload management, mental health support, flexible scheduling and ethical leadership. The latter are compounded by systemic inefficiencies and workforce shortages in Pakistan, which stress the need for policy reforms and investments in healthcare infrastructure. Considering employee wellbeing and incorporating the WHO's workplace wellbeing framework can help healthcare organisations develop resilience among workers, enhance job satisfaction, and improve patient

outcomes.

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#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS:

**MFK:** Concept, design and critical review.

**FY:** Literature search, data collection and writing.

**FS:** Design, literature search and writing.