Spirituality and Workplace Stress Management

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Introduction:

Workplace stress is a complicated psychological phenomenon that can be addressed by understanding the meaning of word "stress". Zimbardo et al., (2003) & Krantz et al., (1985) have defined stress as change in someone's mental or physical condition because of situations that pose threat or challenge (1,2). Stress can encourage to achieve goals and sometimes proves to be a source of enhanced productivity. But, if stress exceeds from a certain limit of intensity, it can cause physical or mental turmoil, illness and burnout. Hence, stress can result in both ways. Workplace stress is a result of high intensity threat or challenge caused by any stressor including poor communication between employee and manager, continual and sudden change, unsympathetic organizational culture, bullying and harassment, unjustified promotions, no job security, family-work conflict, relentless demands and toxic work environment.

Stress is a key issue to be resolved within an organization. Usman & Ismail (2010) have found stress as one of most problematic and increasing issue in the organizations (3). European Foundation for the Improvement of Life and Working Condition (2007) reported that work related stress is a hot topic in research and this stress has increased in Europe (4). It is also mentioned that workplace environment has caused stress as employees feel overloaded. The latest report of European Foundation published in 2013 also signifies a continuous increase in workplace stress due to different factors (5). Ziauddin et al., (2010) reported stress as a main cause of low job commitment and job satisfaction that ultimately reduces the performance of employees as well as organization (6). Similarly, Kerr et al., (2009) mentioned in their results that high labour turnover and sick leaves are worst results of job stress (7). Saif et al., (2010) also found stress as the core reason behind reduced employee performance and poor health (8).

Pakistan is going through severe economic and political disasters. On one side, Pakistan is combating with internal militants and on other side; there is a severe political instability within the country. These factors are contributing towards consistent decrease in economic development.

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Economic crisis is further fueled by energy shortage. Weak economic condition leads towards less job openings, job insecurity, less choices for workers, increase in workload and increase in unemployment as well as in inflation within the country. Ultimate result of these factors is high level of job stress.

There are number of techniques mentioned in various books and articles for reducing stress including art of breathing, meditation, massage therapy, yoga, self-hypnosis, physical exercise and Tai Chi. All these are effective and are used successfully for reducing stress. But there are few other techniques as practiced and suggested by Muslim psychologist. These techniques are extracted from Islamic teachings and can be used for reducing stress. The purpose of this study is to highlight some Islamic practices which can be used for reducing workplace stress.

Stress:

Stress is divided into two categories: eustress and distress (9). According to Seyle (1980), EU comes from a Greek roots that means "good" (10). So "Eustress" is known as a good or positive stress. Stress is a reaction of challenge given by associated stressor. One can take this challenge positively. Some examples of Eustress are winning a competition, job promotion and purchasing a new home. These Eustress can stimulate and cause an increase in work productivity.

Distress is, however, a stress which is harmful and associated with negative effects caused by stressors. When people think or talk about stress, they mostly discuss the incidents which are highly unpleasant, catastrophic or events that create frustration. Stress can play a positive or productive role in instigating someone to achieve a challenging goal. Stress can also result in the shape of physical illness, burnout and emotional turmoil because of two reasons. Distress is a result of one out of the two reasons; first and most important is person's attitude towards stress. If someone takes stressor as a challenge for achieving the goal, it will prove to be a Eustress and vice versa. Second reason is the intensity and duration of arousal of stress. If there is a high intensity of stress and stress occurs for prolonged time, then stress will result in the shape of distress. This paper focuses on "Distress"; negative side of stress.

According to Lazarus (2000), "Stress comes from any situation or circumstance that requires behavioral adjustment (11). Any change, either good or bad, is stressful, and whether it's a positive or negative change, the physiological response is the same." Stress requires our body`s energy and defensive resources for coping with it and these resources keep on depleting as the period of stress increases.

Workplace stress:

Workplace Stress is not simply a source of physiological response to a stressful situation but an interaction between source of demand and individual within their environment (12). It's a condition that arises in result of demand "exceed his or her real or perceived abilities to successfully cope with the demand, resulting in disturbance to his or her psychological equilibrium" (13). According to National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, job stress is a mental, physical and emotional condition that emerges as a result of mismatch between employee capabilities, high work demands and insufficient available resources.

According to Murphy (1995), there are five categories of workplace stress: 1) factors unique to the job, 2) role in the organization, 3) career development, 4) interpersonal work relationships and 5) organizational structure and climate (14).

In first category, employee has to deal with hours worked, expected pace of work, level of isolation from others, physical environment and workload (9). Overnight hours usually have negative effect on the psycho-physiological condition of an employee starting from the disturbance in circadian rhythm (15). Research reported that 20% night shift employees leave their positions because of gastrointestinal dysfunction, heart disease, hypertension and chronic fatigue (15). Health complication and decreased work performance can also be a result of work load and fatigue (16). According to Anderson & Marcia (2001), "work overload is one of the most stressful tasks demands employees facing today" (16).

The second category emphasizes on employee's level of responsibility within organization) (14). There are times in organizations when employees have to perform multiple tasks and oversight by multiple supervisors. Stress can activate in such situations due to performing several tasks simultaneously which may create ambiguity (9). Role ambiguity is an outcome of inefficiently defined roles of employee. Role ambiguity can be reduced by communicating priorities and conveying the job description to the employee.

Career development is another workplace stressor. This category comprises issues like career development opportunities, job security and under/over promotion (9). In a society facing economic and financial crisis, there are less opportunities of promotion, people stuck into their position with no opportunity for growth and high insecurity because of downsizing by the organization. Managers and employees must sit together to identify remedy for such kind of stress. Managers must guide their subordinates about future career planning and opportunities (17).

Interpersonal relationships are also one of very common and important category which can cause workplace stress. The stress basically emerged as response of problematic relationships between subordinates, coworkers and administrators. Other stressors include threat of violence, discrimination, harassment and managerial bullying. According to Rayner and Helge (1997), there are five categories of bullying behavior: 1) Threat of professional status like public humiliation, belittling opinion and blame on lack of effort, 2) threat to personal standing, like teasing, insult and name-calling, 3) isolation, like biased on providing access to training and information, 4) overwork, like impossible deadlines and unjustifiable pressure of work and 5) destabilization, like meaningless tasks and no appreciation when required/due (18).

Last category belongs to organizational structure and climate. This category focuses on management style, decision making patterns and communication structure within the organization. Participation in decision making and goal setting could have facilitated in improving work performance, decreasing psychosomatic disorder and stress reduction.

There is 10% increase in workplace stress since 2001 (19). Latest report of European Foundation for the Improvement of Life and Working Condition has reported a general increase in workplace stress in European countries due to different factors. According to American Psychological Association (2013) report, work is the second most highly ranked stressor in America (20). Arnetz et al., (2011) have revealed that modern workplace is facing most difficult challenge of dealing with occupational health due to workplace stress (21).

Religion and Stress management:

Religiosity is associated with better psychological fitness (22). Better mental or psychological fitness indicates less depression, greater reported wellbeing, less anti-social activities and suicidality (23). Similarly, Arnetz et al., (2013) suggested that spiritual practices are efficient coping mechanism for employees who are over loaded and these practices ultimately protect employees from exhausting (24). According to this research, if employees incorporate their spiritual/religious values in workplace then these can definitely help them in promoting mental well-being and attenuating workplace stress.

Although many scholars have confirmed relationship between religion/spirituality and workplace stress management but some scholars have deeply analyzed the phenomenon and revealed that this relationship depends upon certain factors. Belding et al., (2010) reported that they are surprised to find the insignificant relation between the religious practices and stress reduction (25). The reason which they found is the lack of concentration while performing prayer. In simple words, participant did not take prayer as *Praying*. It can be inferred from above discussion that

Centering Prayer is critical for effectively reducing stress. Same factor has been reported by Ferguson et al., (2010) in their study which create hurdle in reducing stress through religious prayers (26). These results are consistent with the results of Pargament (1997), in which he reported that being religious may not be effective for reducing or protecting against distress rather it is the personal mobilization of individual for religiousness and integration of their believes for coping stress (27).

Bhagavad Gita & Stress management:

According to Flood (1996), *Bhagavad Gita* considers 'Yoga' as a complementary practice for self-control and mental discipline (28). Control of consciousness can be gained through 'Yoga' which helps in overcoming dualism, inherent in the mind, body and intellect (29). According to Vivekananda (2007), 'Yoga' means union of our individual consciousness with the divine consciousness in a super-conscious state called '*Samadhi'* (30). It is an old discipline designed gaining mental, physical and spiritual health of individual and 'Yoga'related terms like *samadhi* and *pranayama* can be seen repeatedly in *Bhagavad Gita* (31). Sengupta, (2012) further elaborated about the history of 'Yoga' as, "it emerged in the later hymns of the ancient Hindu texts (*Upanishads* or *Vedanta*) (600–500 B.C.) (31). It is mentioned in the classic Indian poem *Mahabharata* (400 B.C. - 400 A.D.) and discussed in the most famous part of that poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Yoga was systemized by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* (300–200 BC). Patanjali defined the purpose of yoga as knowledge of the true "Self" (God) and outlined eight steps for direct experience of "*Self*."

It is a well establish fact that Yoga provides significant cure against stress (32). Yoga based practices normalizes automatic nerve system (33) and considerably decreases heart rate and blood pressure (34). Furthermore, Yoga immediately decreases the anxiety level of the practitioner (35) and increase feeling of spiritual, social and emotional well-being (36).

Now days, Yoga may not be considered as a religious practice of Hindus only. Due to its spiritual nature, in one way or the other, Yoga/meditation becomes an integral part of many religions. Other than this, many people in the west used Yoga as a stress therapy.

Islamic methods for reducing Stress:

There are some Islamic methods which can be used for reducing workplace stress. According to Husain (2006), Islamic practices can help spiritually in a situation when people feel psychological, physiological and social or any other major physical stress (37). Spirituality is a source of tranquility and inner peace. It's a state of ultimate well-being which is quite different from ordinary experience. According to Husain (2011), human spirituality has two important ingredients: one is knowledge and other is practice, whereas, knowledge deals with both material and spiritual sciences (38). Spirituality helps in the practical implementation of new concepts and methods for the benefit of humanity (39). Some of the methods extracted

from Islamic spiritual practices, which are helpful for reducing stress, are given below.

Mid-Day Nap:

Mid-day nap is a *Sunnah* of the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) (37). It helps in reviving and refreshing tired mind. Mid-day nap is only a *Sunnah* but research proves it a very healthy tool for refreshing the mind. It is mentioned by Beekun (2011) with reference to Dr. Thomas Balkin, "in most workplaces, especially workplaces involving safety, you want your workers to be maximally alert, and napping is actually a good strategy to maintain alertness (40). So, during slow periods, scheduled naps, if you're napping in a safe place, being offline, that's the best strategy to maintain alertness". Casey (2010) has mentioned in the article with reference to Anthony, "the benefits are empirically proven; It helps your attention, persistence, and mood" (41). Therefore, mid-day nap can be used as a strong stress reliever and refresher of mind.

Tawakkul :

In simple words, *tawakkul* means trust on God. The trust that Almighty Allah is with me and nothing could happen without His order. The base of this concept is on a strong belief that no one can harm us and cannot provide benefit to us, unless desired by the Almighty Allah. It is mentioned in the holy Quran:

"Truly no one despairs of Allah's Soothing Mercy except those who have no faith. " (Qur'an, 12: 87)

"Remember Me, and I shall remember you; be grateful to Me, and deny Me not"(Quran 2:152).

"When you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah" (Quran 3: 159).

Hence, a believer must always trust in God and in a situation of stress a feeling that Allah is with me and no one can harm me unless desired by Allah, is a great source of relaxation and calmness.

Meditation:

In one way or the other, meditation is a very strong tool for increasing concentration and relaxation. It is an intensely spiritual and personal experience. Purpose of the meditation is to channelize the awareness level in positive direction in order to transform one mind totally. Meditation means to turn inward and try to concentrate in your inner self.

Every religion has its own way of doing meditation with predefined benefits for stimulating sub-conscious through concentration. According to Husain (2006), one kind of meditation in Islamic spirituality is to concentrate on the word "Allah" by closing the eyes and imagining this deeply and with complete concentration (37). In *Naqshbandi* school of thought, practitioner is advised to concentrate on different verses of Holy Quran and image that holy lights are penetrating in his/her body, which gives a feel of internal satisfaction (42).

Prayer :

Prayer means to repeat the name of Allah and propagandize (37). In this way, it includes every activity ranging from '*tasbihat*' to '*namaz*'. From stress reduction point of view, '*namaz*' is most recommended. Its not only a source of direct relationship with God but also a complete exercise having tremendous scientific benefits. It is mentioned in the holy Quran:

"Oh you who believe! Seek help through patience and Salah.

Truly, Allah is with those who are patient." (2:153)

Ablution is one of the ways to bring down the blood pressure as you wash specific parts of your body with water. According to Husain (2006), during prayer Muslim move each part of the body in such a way which helps in regulating proper circulation of blood in required body parts (37). He also mentioned with reference to Dr. Herbert Benson, a Harvard University Researcher, "repetition of prayers; verses of Quran or enhancing Allah`s names or thoughts cause a relaxation response that leads to the lowering of BP and decreases in oxygen consumption and a reduction in heart and respiratory rates."

Conclusion:

Human is comprised of body and spirit. There are bodily strengths but one cannot deny spiritual strengths. Stress can generally be perceived as presence of negative thoughts. Spiritual/religious practices can provide sufficient energy for coping with the stress. But in order to get maximum benefits from spiritual energy for managing stress, one should perform the practices with true letter and spirit. Lack of concentration while performing religious/spiritual practices cannot provide desired results. Religious methods specified in Hindu and Islamic religion are simpler and doable for the followers and help in stress management. One can find empirical researches on the benefits of Yoga but situation is quiet unsatisfactory from Islamic practices point of view. There is a strong theological support available for Islamic practices in managing and curing workplace stress but there are no empirical researches being conducted for testing these propositions. This is somehow an unexplored area which needs to be tapped. Researches need to be conducted for finding solution of the organizational social problems with the help of spiritual practices. On the other hand, organizations should also provide awareness to the employees and encourage them to practice spiritual practices for reducing their workplace stress which ultimately increase employee's performance.

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