

Personality, Coping with Work Stress and Gender Differences on Reported Physical Health Symptoms and Life Satisfaction

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Abstract

Work stress has increasingly gained prominence as a global concern that resonates with mental health issues. At issue are the organisation-related stressors that need to be profiled to come up with a bespoke employee assistance programme. Employee assistance programmes include empowering employees to use coping strategies to realise better outcomes in the stress-mental health relationship. However, personality as currently studied using the five factor model recognises that individuals are different. On this basis, it is important to factor personality in stress management programmes. This study was carried out in Harare's financial services sector in 2021. It was found that there were statistically significant correlations between emotional stability, mental and physical health outcomes, namely depressive symptoms, general satisfaction with life and somatisation. It was also noted that both males and females had similar perceptions of work stressors with differences observed on job role clarity and job control. Women were also more likely to resort to emotion-focused coping. Regression analysis using a quadratic equation was run as the data were not normally distributed, and emotional stability was found to be predictive of somatisation ($p < .05$). The findings have implications for stress management, recruitment and selection. For many jobs in the financial services sector, it is important to consider emotional stability as this personality domain has implications for bespoke stress management programmes that could be designed to address stressors in the workplace. Organisations need to appreciate the diverse needs of individuals and come up with interventions that address both the sources of stress and the individual differences in stress responses. Fostering a supportive work environment, providing training and resources are crucial initiatives to managing stress in workplaces.

Keywords: Work stress, personality, somatisation, regression analysis, employee assistance programmes

Introduction

Work stress is a pervasive issue that affects employees across various industries and levels of responsibility. The impact of work stress extends beyond just the workplace as it influences personal physical and emotional well-being, as well as overall life satisfaction. Understanding work stress requires an exploration of various factors, including personality traits, gender

differences, and coping mechanisms. Work stress results from an imbalance between the demands placed on an individual and the resources at their disposal to cope with the stressors. This study sought to unpack the relationships between work stress, mental and physical health outcomes with the idea being to improve stress management in workplaces. It is important to realise that the development of targeted interventions to enhance employee well-being requires an understanding of the factors that contribute to job stress and gender disparities in coping techniques. At a local level, organisations must be able to determine factors that could result in stress in their employees. Understanding the stress drivers then becomes the first step in crafting a relevant employee assistance programme. Many stress management programmes have generally been impaired by the inability to recognise that the experience of stress is an individualised emotional experience. Consequently, any programme geared at addressing the issues needs to be alive to this fact. The search for relevant and easy-to-deploy stress management programmes is a never-ending quest as each organisation is facing the fluid Zimbabwean economic environment.

Literature review

Understanding personality: The five-factor model of personality

Personality factors have been observed to contribute to life satisfaction and reported physical health symptoms. An example is the fact that highly emotionally unstable persons tend to engage in negative outcomes as a result of viewing a situation as more serious than it would be in reality (Freidman et al., 2014). Previous studies have also reported women as struggling more to come to terms with negative outcomes when compared with their male counterparts. Consequently, emotional stability and gender variables, as suggested by Matud (2004), can partially explain these gender differences because women, in general, encounter less controllable and generally more negative life events when compared to their male counterparts. Related to this concept is the idea that men have been socialised to use more active and instrumental coping behaviours, while women have been socialised to employ more passive and emotion-focused behaviours (Matud, 2004, p. 1411). Based on the reviewed research, this study expected that higher tendencies to engage in emotion-focused coping would be associated with higher levels of reported physical health complaints and generally poorer life satisfaction.

A further personality factor that could be related to life satisfaction was extraversion. The sociality facet was of relevance, particularly concerning burnout among clinical psychologists.

Extraversion has been argued to be of importance in understanding individual worker engagement and well-being in public service occupations (Bakker, 2015). However, sociality could conversely also lead to more effort being exerted on the job and therefore resulting in workers facing a higher risk of exhaustion. Concerning gender, Yarnell et al. (2015) argued that women could often be socialised as a norm to prioritize other people's needs ahead of their own and that women tended to be more critical of themselves as well as to have lower levels of self-esteem and self-compassion (Yarnell et al., 2015). Furthermore, other studies found that women tended to be more engaged in their near social environment than men (Caprara, Steca, Zelli & Capanna, 2005; McDonough & Walters, 2001; Paro et al., 2014). For example, Caprara et al. (2005) concluded that women tend to show more empathy and provide more emotional support to others, whereas men are more likely to engage in immediate and concrete helping actions that resonate with problem-focused coping strategies (Diekmann & Clark, 2015; Gonzalez-Morales, Peiró, Rodriguez, & Greenglass, 2006). In addition, Paro et al. (2014) found that female medical students reported more emphatic and personal distress and emotional exhaustion compared to male students. Other research studies show that women reported more network-related events, that is, stressors experienced by others in their social network (McDonough & Walters, 2001).

Another aspect of sociality relates to individuals' self-construction. In brief, interdependent self-constructs refer to the tendency to identify oneself with the values prevalent in one's group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). On the other hand, an independent self-construct is the tendency to see one's identity as separate from others in the surrounding social environment (Nisbert & Masuda, 2003). Studies of self-construct in the U.S.A. have found that women tend to have a more interdependent self-construct whereas men have a more independent self-construct (Cross & Madson, 1997). For clinical psychologists, higher scores on the sociality measures (prosociality and relational-interdependent self-construal) might be associated with being more prone to identify aspects of client cases as incomplete and thus deserving more attention.

Conceptualising work stress

The detrimental physical and psychological reactions that arise when a worker's needs, resources, or capabilities are not met by the demands of their job are referred to as work stress (Cavanagh et al., 2000). Numerous factors, such as an overwhelming workload, a lack of control, inadequate support, role ambiguity, and competing demands, can cause this mismatch. Workplace stress has far-reaching effects that might include reduced productivity and job

satisfaction as well as major health problems like anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular disease.

Personality and its relationship with work stress

Personality characteristics have a significant impact on how people view and handle stress. The five-factor model (FFM), which is comprised of neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness, offers a thorough framework for comprehending these variations (Turiano et al., 2013).

Neuroticism: A personality domain

Individuals high in neuroticism are more prone to experiencing negative emotions in the form of anxiety, anger, and depression. They are more likely to perceive situations as stressful and were hypothesised to struggle to cope effectively with work stress.

Extraversion: A personality domain

Extraverts were generally more sociable, energetic, and optimistic. They tend to have a positive outlook and are better at seeking social support, which could buffer the effects of stress.

Conscientiousness: A personality domain

Those high in conscientiousness were on the whole more organised, dependable, and disciplined. They are likely to have effective coping strategies and a strong sense of control over their work environment, reducing the likelihood of stress.

Agreeableness: A personality domain

Individuals high in agreeableness tended to be cooperative, compassionate, and good-natured. They also maintain positive relationships at work, which can mitigate stress. However, they may also avoid conflict as a strategy to improve team dynamics and this invariably can lead to exacerbating stress levels in the long run.

Openness: A personality domain

Individuals high in openness tended to be creative, curious, and open to new experiences and cultures. Though they can also actively seek out difficult circumstances that can raise stress levels, they are often more adaptive and robust in the face of stress.

Gender differences in the work-related stress experiences

Gender potentially plays a crucial role in shaping the experience and management of work stress. Socialisation processes and societal expectations often lead to different stressors and coping mechanisms for men and women. This often holds in African societies where there are

generally well defined roles for males and females. Women are more likely to experience stress related to Work-social life balance, discrimination, and interpersonal relationships, particularly in workplaces. They often face the dual burden of work and family responsibilities, which can exacerbate experienced stress. Their male counterparts, on the other hand, may experience stress related to job security, performance expectations, and financial pressures.

Coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are strategies that individuals employ to manage the demands of stressful situations.

Coping strategies can be broadly categorised into problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Aldwin, 2007). Men are more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies, such as tackling the issue directly or engaging in physical activities. This active coping strategy involves addressing the source of stress directly. Effective coping can mitigate the negative effects of stress and enhance well-being. Strategies include time management, seeking solutions, and altering the work environment. For example, an employee overwhelmed by a heavy workload might prioritise tasks or delegate responsibilities to reduce stress. These strategies can be effective in resolving stressors but may overlook the emotional impact of the stress experience.

Emotion-focused coping involves managing the emotional response to stress rather than the stressor itself. Women tend to employ emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking social support and expressing emotions (Amin et al., 2022). Other strategies include engaging in relaxation techniques, and cognitively reframing the situation in a positive light. For instance, an employee might talk to a friend or family member about their stress or practice mindfulness to reduce anxiety. These strategies can be effective in managing stress but may not address the underlying problems.

Interaction of personality, gender and coping

The interaction between personality, gender, and coping strategies is complex and multifaceted. Personality traits influence the selection and effectiveness of coping mechanisms, while gender can moderate these relationships. Individuals high in neuroticism are more likely to employ maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance or denial, which can exacerbate stress. Extraverts on the other hand are more likely to seek social support, which can be an effective buffer against stress. Individuals high in conscientious tend to use problem-focused

coping strategies, which can help manage stress more effectively. On the gender variable, women often utilise social support and emotional expression as coping strategies, which could provide immediate relief but may not address long-term stressors. Men are more inclined to use problem-solving strategies, which can be effective in resolving stressors, but may neglect emotional well-being. However, depending on the stressor, it was noted that generally problem-focused coping tended to be the most effective coping method in workplaces.

Different coping profiles might arise from the interaction of gender and personality traits (Kuo, 2012). For instance, a very conscientious female worker may manage her stress effectively by combining problem-focused techniques with reaching out for social support. On the other hand, a neurotic male worker may experience difficulties with maladaptive coping, which raises stress levels.

How organisations have been intervening in the work stress

Organisations have a crucial role to play in the management of work stress through various interventions. Effective interventions can enhance employee well-being and productivity. Herein lies the challenge as they have to be certain of where and how they respond to the identified stressors within their control. The work environment itself is critical in creating a supportive work environment that can mitigate the levels of perceived stress (Baker & Schaufeli, 2008). There are many strategies that include clear communication, fair work policies, and a positive organisational culture. For example, providing employees with the resources they require to perform their tasks can reduce stress related to workload and role ambiguity.

Training and development through availing programmes that could enhance employee coping skills has been also noted to be beneficial. Stress management workshops, time management courses, and resilience training have been recommended so as to equip employees with the tools they need to manage stress effectively.

Employee assistance programmes (EAPs) also provide confidential counselling and support services to employees dealing with stress at the workplace. These programmes could address a wide range of issues, from work-related stress to personal problems. These could also be essential and well-appreciated resources for employees who may be in need.

Work-social life balance was also critical to addressing the work stress issue. This is because promoting equilibrium through employing flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting

and flexible hours, could aid employees in managing their stress much better. Encouraging employees to take breaks and vacations could be the panacea for burnout and even reduce their stress levels.

Methodology

The research design

A quantitative co-relational cross-sectional survey (N=209) was used to collect data on job demands, job control, job resources, job roles, and social support using the HSEMSIT (R, 0.84). The sample size of 209 was deemed sufficient for a regression model because a minimum of 30 responds is more than sufficient to test a model without recourse to bootstrapping. The coping strategy was the mediator. A Google Forms link was created and participants had to go through an ethics section where they agreed to complete the questionnaire and they were also advised that they could withdraw their participation at any moment. Online assessments are of great help as they guarantee anonymity. The closed-ended questionnaire was completed online as it enabled the researcher to collect data rapidly and it was also convenient for the participants. The data were collected from middle management grades and; therefore, all respondents had access to a computer and internet connectivity.

Instrumentation

Instruments with known psychometric properties were adapted for this study. Reported physical health symptoms were assessed using the Somatic symptoms scale (R, 0.80) whilst general life satisfaction was measured using the GSWL scale (R, 0.85). Somatisation and life satisfaction were the dependent variables.

Personality was assessed using the International Personality Items Pool (IPIP50). Life satisfaction was assessed using the general satisfaction with life scale. The Beck Depression Inventory was adapted to measure depressive symptoms. The Health and Safety Executive Management Standards Indicator Tool was used to profile job-related stressors.

Results

The researcher used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 26) to analyse the collected data. Data were exported from an excel file generated from the online google form responses. Descriptive statistics were indicated within the non-parametric tests done to test the study hypotheses, that is, there would be no statistically significant differences across gender on coping and experienced mental and physical health outcomes. The simple statistics carried

out were to ensure that the analytical process did not violate the assumption of normality in the data which is required to carry out inferential statistics. It was crucial to run normality testing as it sets the tone for any subsequent analysis.

Testing for normality

Testing for normality in inferential statistics is important for several reasons. Many parametric statistical tests, such as t-tests, ANOVA, and linear regression, assume that the data is normally distributed. A violation of this assumption can lead to inaccurate results, such as incorrect p-values and confidence intervals. While the central limit theorem states that the distribution of the sample mean will approach a normal distribution as the sample size increases, this approximation may not hold well for small sample sizes, particularly cross-sectional psychological data collected using questionnaires (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965). Importantly, tests that assume normality often lose power when the data are not normally distributed, leading to a higher likelihood of Type II errors (which is failing to reject a false null hypothesis). When normality is not present, other researchers have considered transforming the data, such as using log-linear transformation or using non-parametric tests that do not assume normality, or employing bootstrapping methods to make more reliable inferences. In this study, even with transformation, the data was found to be skewed.

Table 1: Normality Testing Table

Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
SOMATISATION	0.098	209	0.000	0.959	209	0.000
DEPRESSION	0.154	209	0.000	0.926	209	0.000
GSWL	0.079	209	0.003	0.984	209	0.016
a. Lilliefors Significance Correction						

Table 1 shows that the outcome variables were all skewed using both the Shapiro-Wilk and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests.

Following the realisation that the data were not normally distributed the Mann-Whitney U Test was performed on the dependent or outcome variables. The following Table 2 summarises the results of the non-parametric testing of dependent variables.

Table 2: Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of SOMATISATION is the same across categories of Gender.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.019	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of DEPRESSION is the same across categories of Gender.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.510	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of General Satisfaction with Life is the same across categories of Gender.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.416	Retain the null hypothesis.
Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .050.				

Table 2 above shows the statistically significant differences in somatisation with females reporting statistically higher levels of perceived physical ailments. There were statistically significant differences in the dimensions of depression and general satisfaction with life.

Summary descriptive scores on somatisation

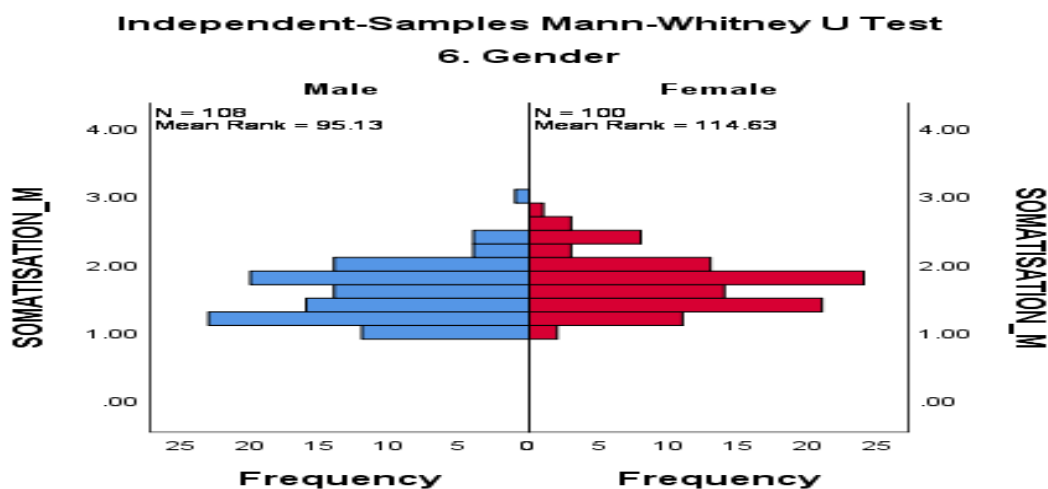


Figure 1: Somatisation and Gender

Figure 1 shows the mean scores with females having a higher mean score compared to their male counterparts.

Differences across gender on work stressors, coping, physical and mental health outcomes

Table 3: Independent Samples Test between Males and Females

<i>Independent Samples Test between Males and Females</i>											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error Dif	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
JOB DEMANDS	Equal variances assumed	.720	.397	-1.240	207	.216	-.14207	.11456	-.36792	.08379	
JOB CONTROL	Equal variances assumed	2.034	.155	2.666	207	.008	.26922	.10096	.07017	.46827	
JOB RESOURCES	Equal variances assumed	.074	.786	.976	207	.330	.13849	.14196	-.14138	.41836	
JOB ROLE	Equal variances assumed	1.014	.315	2.208	207	.028	.15835	.07170	.01699	.29971	
PROBLEM FOCUSED COPING	Equal variances assumed	.086	.769	.439	207	.661	.06041	.13776	-.21118	.33201	
EMOTION FOCUSED COPING	Equal variances assumed	7.550	.007	2.488	207	.014	.25154	.10112	.05219	.45089	

Results on coping strategies

Statistically significant differences were noted on emotion-focused coping and the summary diagram run from the Mann-Whitney U test shows the coping strategies based on gender.

Table 4: Coping Strategies and Gender

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of COPING_AVOIDANCE is the same across categories of Gender.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.494	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of COPING_PROBEMFOCUSED is the same across categories of Gender.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of COPING_EMOTIONFOCUSED is the same across categories of Gender.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.464	Retain the null hypothesis.
Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .050.				

On profiling of the organisation stressors, it was found that there were significant differences across genders in *Job Control* and *Job Role Clarity*.

There were also statistically significant differences in coping strategies with females noted to resort more to emotion-focused coping in comparison to their male counterparts. The summary below shows the average scores derived from the Mann-Whitney U test.

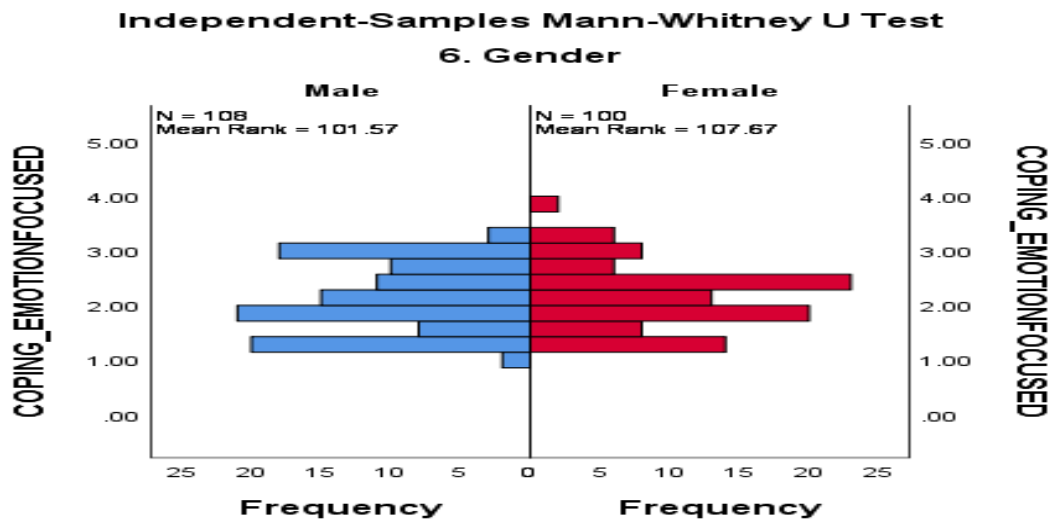


Figure 2: Coping and Gender

Graph showing means for emotion-focused coping strategies. The higher mean score of 108 for females against 100 for males shows that the former engaged in emotion-focused coping more than their male counterparts.

Personality and coping

Table 5: Correlations Table on Personality and Coping

Correlations Matrices for Personality and Coping Strategies								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 COPING_AVOIDANCE	1							
2 COPING_PROBEM FOCUSED	0.120	1						
3 COPING_EMOTION FOCUSED	.410**	.157*	1					
4 EXTRAVERSION	0.125	.254**	-.189**	1				
5 AGREEABLENESS	0.003	.362**	-.151*	.323**	1			
6 CONSCIENTIOUSNESS	-0.059	.359**	-0.041	.318**	.468**	1		
7 EMOTIONAL STABILITY	-0.040	.360**	-.278**	.346**	.420**	.233**	1	
8 OPENNESS	-0.050	.318**	-0.007	.147	.434**	.499**	.234**	1
** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).								
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).								
N=209								

Table 5 above shows the correlations between the five personality domains and the coping strategies employed. Noteworthy are the statistically significant inverse relationships between emotion focused coping and the domains of extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability.

Emotional stability as a predictor of mental and physical health outcomes

A linear and quadratic equation was run with emotional stability as a predictor of somatisation, depression and general satisfaction with life. A quadratic regression analysis was run due to the non-normality of the data. Table 6 below illustrates the results.

Table 6: Regression Analysis Table

Model Description		
Model Name		MODEL_1
Dependent Variable	1	SOMATISATION
	2	DEPRESSION
	3	GSWL
Equation	1	Linear
	2	Quadratic
Independent Variable		EMOTIONALSTABILITY
Constant		Included
Tolerance for Entering Terms in Equations		0.0001

Table 6 above shows the regression analysis with emotional stability, a personality domain as a predictor of somatisation (reported physical health symptoms), depression and general satisfaction with life.

Model Summary and Parameter Estimates

Dependent Variable: SOMATISATION_M

Equation	Model Summary					Parameter Estimates		
	R Square	F	df1	df2	Sig.	Constant	b1	b2
Linear	.068	15.058	1	207	.000	2.100	-.149	
Quadratic	.068	7.563	2	206	.001	2.258	-.250	.015

The independent variable is EMOTIONALSTABILITY.

Figure 3: Model Summary and Parameter Estimates

The model above indicated emotional stability (as a predictor variable) to be statistically significant predictor of somatisation that accounted for 7% of the variance in the reported physical health symptoms.

Discussion

This study largely demonstrated that high job demands, coupled with low decision latitude, were generally related to low life satisfaction and higher reported physical health symptoms. These results go a long way in supporting the hypothesis that high levels of work stress could be linked to reported physical and mental health outcomes. Significant correlations $p < .01$ were found among the work stress variables and stepwise regression analysis demonstrated the effects of job demands and job resources on reported physical health $p < .001$. The five-factor model of personality was used to predict susceptibility to mental and physical health symptoms among the participants. It was found that individuals low in emotional stability tended to experience stressors more than those high in emotional stability. This finding resonates with a study by Muntean et al. (2022) who found a negative correlation between emotional stability and psychological well-being. This study also showed that women faced more stressors, particularly from role clarity and job roles within work spaces. This result resonates with the work-social life balance factor when comparing males and females. Men were generally more competitive and appear to cope better with work stress compared to their female counterparts. Coping strategies were almost equally employed particularly problem-focused coping because work environments by their nature require one to solve problems related to productivity. This resonates with the findings of Berridge and Cooper (2000) who found that women also tended to steer more towards social support as a coping mechanism when the going got tough. Women were more likely to seek advice and bank on the support of their colleagues. All the same, it was also noted that women tended to report higher levels of reported physical health symptoms compared to their male counterparts. To some extent, gender then becomes a factor in the stress-coping relationship. Coping was also found to be closely linked to personality variables with extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness being closely linked with active coping mechanisms. As Barling and Carson (2008) opined, the coping-personality link had implications for the type of employee assistance programme that the organisation may design. Increasingly, it is becoming apparent that these three dimensions of personality need to be factored into selection decisions and; furthermore, in stress management training. It is important to view employees as individuals with different stress tolerances and these differences cannot be divorced from the coping mechanism they are likely to employ. Work stress is indeed an everyday reality that both men and women face in the workplace and by profiling the stressors, organisations become better positioned to come up with bespoke programmes that could assist individuals afflicted by the work stress epidemic. Mental health

is an issue that can no longer be ignored as work stress has indeed shown clear relationships with both mental and physical health outcomes (ILO, 2016). Importantly, stress management programmes need to be guided by objectivity as there are many tools at the disposal of human capital practitioners to help them understand the nature of the stressors in their specific organisations.

The study was limited by its cross-sectional nature and future researchers are encouraged to use longitudinal and mixed methods designs in order to get a more holistic view of stressors within their organisations. A pre-test to determine current levels of stress and their sources, followed by a stress management programmes are crucial to comprehensively tackle stress within the workplaces. Post-tests would then determine the efficacy of the stress management programme as instituted. Longitudinal designs would also ensure that the stress management of employee assistance programme is improved as it could be rolled out in future endeavours. The reality is that workers in Zimbabwe and across the globe are increasingly facing volatile, uncertain, and complex environments. Workplace stress is dynamic and subject to vary based on a number of circumstances, including workload, role changes, organisational changes, and events in one's personal life. These variations are captured by longitudinal designs, which offer a more thorough knowledge of the evolution of occupational stress over time.

Conclusion

This study has confirmed that work stress is a reality as evident in the link that was established between high levels of work stress and reported physical and mental health indicators. Employers consequently have a moral and legal obligation to re-engineer jobs to come up with programmes that reduced mental and physical demands placed on workers. It can no longer be business as usual when stress has been confirmed to be related to organisational variables. When designing stress management programmes, it is important to consider the personality of individuals as there is no magic bullet to handling stress, particularly at work where individuals differ in their perceptions of stress and the resultant mental and physical health outcomes due to work-related stress.

Work stress is a complex phenomenon influenced by personality traits, gender differences, and coping mechanisms. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective strategies to manage stress in the workplace. Organisations must recognise the diverse needs of their employees and implement interventions that address both the sources of stress and the individual differences in stress responses. By fostering a supportive work environment,

providing training and resources, and promoting work-social life balance, organisations can enhance employee well-being and productivity, creating a healthier and more resilient workforce. Human capital practitioners indeed can no longer afford to ignore the mental health of the worker. It is therefore important to understand stress within organisations through profiling it using valid and reliable tools.

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