

# COVID-19 Pandemic: Coping with Professional Stress and Mental Health

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**Abstract:** *The present study was carried out during COVID-19 pandemic. One hundred college teachers, including 50 male and 50 female participated in the present study. A questionnaire was used to obtain information on socio-personal variables. Standardized scale was used to assess stress during COVID-19 and an inventory was developed and used to assess mental health status of teachers. Teachers were selected through personal contact. Data was collected through Google form. Professional stress role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict, pressure from others, under participation, powerlessness, poor peer relations, low status, and strenuous working conditions. Mental health aspects included contentment, resilience, self-confidence, relationship with others, positive focus and optimism. Different strategies were suggested for management of stress and positive mental health.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Stress Management, Coping Strategies, College Teachers

## I. INTRODUCTION

Professional or occupational stress is a stress related to individual's profession or occupation. The causes of professional stress could be expectations and pressures that do not match with an individual's knowledge and skills; and as a result the person is unable to cope with that. Stress can become a serious health problem and majority of diseases are mainly caused by stress. Conflict between personal and expectations from the organization and lack of control over the situation can lead to stress. As reported by Gigantesco and Lega (2013), psychosocial stressors in the workplace are associated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. Johnson et al. (2005) commented that teaching profession also comes under the array of stress; hence making it more demanding and challenging.

Mental health is a state of well-being in which a person can recognize his/her skills and abilities to cope with stress and problems of everyday life. A person with sound mind and health is able to work productively and efficiently for making contribution to the society. Sometimes in our lives we may experience mental illness which affects our mental well-being leading to a range of symptoms, experiences and psychological problems.

Emotional, psychological and social well-being are important areas of mental health and well-being. It affects how a person feels, think and act; and how an individual handles stress, relate to others and makes healthy choices in life. Keyes (2006) identified three components of mental health: emotional, psychological and social well-being. Emotional well-being includes happiness, interest in life, and satisfaction; psychological well-being includes being good at managing the responsibilities of daily life, having good relationships with others, and being satisfied with one's own life; social well-being refers to being a contributing member to society, feeling part of a community, and believing that society is a better place for all living people.

Mental health is strongly related to stress. Coping with the effect of prolonged stress can be challenging. Chronic and prolonged stress can disturb the immune system, digestive system, cardiovascular system, sleep, and reproductive system. Over a period of time, continued strain on body from stress may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and mental disorders such as depression or anxiety (NIMH, 2019).

In a study Meenakshi et al. (2019) reported that college teachers experience moderate level of occupational stress and professional burnout. Occupational stress leads to professional burnout, which further leads to psychological problems such as depression in long run. The authors suggested strategies to respondents for management of occupational stress and to reduce professional burnout.

Dealing with mental health problems is not an easy task. Some of the methods to deal with stress and mental health problems include- medication, counseling and psychotherapy, behavior therapy, hospitalization, peer and social support. Complementary and alternative approaches are also very useful. Complementary approaches include mediation, yoga, massage, and chanting mantras.

In the present research study professional stress and mental health of college teachers was assessed. Intervention programme was planned and strategies were suggested to teachers to deal their stress and promote mental health status. Teachers practiced these strategies daily for about minutes for a period of one month and impact was assessed.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Locale of the Study and Sample Selection

The study was conducted on 100 college teachers (50 male and 50 female) working in Haryana state. These teachers were working in Govt. and Private Colleges and were selected through personal contacts. Thus, sample selection was purposive. Age of the selected respondents ranged from 28 years to 56 years, with mean age of 39.6 years. For intervention, 20 college teachers, 10 male and 10 female, participated in intervention programme.

### 2.2 Methodology

A questionnaire was prepared to gather information on socio-personal variables. Occupational Stress Index developed by Srivastava and Singh (1984) was used to assess professional stress of college teachers. Nine aspects were chosen from this scale with 36 items to be rated on five point scale (never, seldom, sometimes, mostly and always). For positive statements, scores were 1 to 5; and for negative items, scores were 5 to 1. Mean scores were computed for various components of professional stress. Total scores were computed for professional stress.

An inventory was developed to assess the mental health status of academicians. Different aspects were- contentment, resilience, self-confidence, relationship with others, and positive focus and optimism. This inventory consisted of 20 items to be rated on five point scale (never, seldom, sometimes, mostly and always), 12 items were positive and 8 items were negative. For positive items scores were 1 to 5 and for negative items, scores were 5 to 1. Mean scores were computed for different dimensions of mental health. Mean score was also computed for overall mental health status.

Intervention strategies for coping with stress and mental health included connecting with family and friends for social and emotional support; meditation, yoga, physical exercise and healthy diet for physical health; listening to music, watching comedy programmes and chanting mantras for positive mood, relaxation and spirituality.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Professional Stress among College Teachers at Pre-Testing Stage

Means and SDs were computed for professional stress among college teachers. As shown in the Table 1, the means for role overload, role ambiguity and role conflict stress were 16.71, 12.22 and 14.91 respectively. Means for stress due to pressure from others and under-participation were 14.21 and 14.88 respectively. Mean scores of stress due to powerlessness and poor peer relations were 15.29 and 13.10 respectively. Mean scores of stress due to low status and strenuous working conditions were 13.01 and 15.17 respectively. Mean score for total professional stress among college teachers was 130.09.

**Table 1:** Professional stress among college teachers at pre-testing stage (n=100)

| Sub-scales of professional stress | Mean  | SD   |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|
| Role overload                     | 16.71 | 3.28 |
| Role ambiguity                    | 12.22 | 2.41 |
| Role conflict                     | 14.91 | 3.51 |
| Pressure from others              | 14.21 | 2.92 |
| Under participation               | 14.88 | 2.82 |
| Powerlessness                     | 15.29 | 3.11 |
| Poor peer relations               | 13.10 | 3.27 |
| Low status                        | 13.01 | 3.02 |
| Strenuous working conditions      | 15.17 | 3.15 |

|                             |        |       |
|-----------------------------|--------|-------|
| Overall professional stress | 130.09 | 23.02 |
|-----------------------------|--------|-------|

### 3.2 Mental Health Status of College Teachers at Pre-Testing Stage

Means and SDs were computed for mental health status of college teachers. As shown in the Table 2, the means core for contentment was 11.54; for resilience aspect mean was 10.34; for self-confidence the mean score was 11.31; for relationship with others the mean was 14.21; and for positive focus and optimism was 12.13. The mean score for overall mental health status of teachers was 59.62.

**Table 2:** Mental health status of college teachers at pre-testing stage (n=100)

| Aspects of mental health     | Mean  | SD   |
|------------------------------|-------|------|
| Contentment                  | 11.54 | 2.11 |
| Resilience                   | 10.34 | 2.33 |
| Self-confidence              | 11.31 | 2.01 |
| Relationship with others     | 14.21 | 2.93 |
| Positive focus and optimism  | 12.13 | 2.67 |
| Overall mental health status | 59.62 | 4.32 |

### 3.3 Impact of Intervention Programme on Professional Stress and Mental Health Status of College Teachers

Awareness was created among college teachers about use of different coping strategies to manage professional stress and to promote their mental health status. A booklet was prepared on coping strategies with professional stress and was emailed to 20 teachers who participated in intervention programme. Teachers were requested to use combination of different methods daily for about 30 minutes for a period of one month so that it could become part of their daily life. Different strategies included yoga, medication, balanced diet, massage, recitation of mantras, listening to music and bhajans etc. After a gap of one month selected teachers were post-tested. Only twenty teachers participated in intervention programme. Paired-t test was used to examine impact of intervention programme on professional stress and mental health status of college teachers.

### 3.4 Comparison of Professional Stress among College Teachers at Pre and Post-Testing Stages

Paired-t test was used to compare professional stress among college teachers at pre-testing and post-testing stages. As depicted in Table 3, there was significant decrease in professional stress of college teachers after exposure to intervention programme. The decrease in level of stress was due to the impact of coping strategies used by teachers for management of stress.

**Table 3:** Comparison of professional stress among college teachers at pre- and post-testing stages

| Sub-scales of professional stress   | Pre-testing Mean | Post-testing Mean | Difference |
|---|------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Role overload   | 16.71            | 13.32             | 3.39*      |
| Role ambiguity  | 12.22            | 9.07              | 3.15*      |
| Role conflict   | 14.91            | 10.10             | 4.81*      |
| Pressure from others  | 14.21            | 10.13             | 4.08*      |
| Under participation   | 14.88            | 10.33             | 4.55*      |
| Powerlessness   | 15.29            | 10.07             | 5.22*      |
| Poor peer relations   | 13.10            | 10.14             | 2.96*      |
| Low status  | 13.01            | 10.02             | 2.99*      |
| Strenuous working conditions  | 15.17            | 13.12             | 2.05*      |
| Overall professional stress   | 130.09           | 96.18             | 33.79*     |
| Note: *Pre and post-testing means differ significantly at 5% level of significance. |                  |                   |            |

It can be inferred from these findings that coping strategies play significant role in management of stress.

### 3.5 Comparison of Mental Health Status of College Teachers at Pre and Post-Testing Stages

Paired-t test was used to examine the impact of intervention programme by comparing the mean scores of mental health status of college teachers at pre and post-testing stages. As shown in Table 4, there was significant improvement in mental health status of college teachers at post-testing stage. It can be interpreted from these findings that coping strategies including meditation, yoga, healthy diet, connecting with family and friends etc play significant role in promoting mental health status of individuals.

**Table 4:** Comparison of mental health status of college teachers at pre- and post-testing stages

| Aspects of mental health     | Pre-testing Mean | Post-testing Mean | Difference |
|------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Contentment                  | 11.54            | 15.16             | 3.62*      |
| Resilience                   | 10.34            | 15.31             | 4.97*      |
| Self-confidence              | 11.31            | 15.82             | 2.57*      |
| Relationship with others     | 14.21            | 16.14             | 4.51*      |
| Positive focus and optimism  | 12.13            | 16.17             | 4.04*      |
| Overall mental health status | 59.62            | 78.65             | 19.03*     |

Note: \*Pre and post-testing means differ significantly at 5% level of significance.

## IV. DISCUSSION

*Results of the present research study revealed that after exposure to intervention programme in the form of yoga, chanting mantras, connecting with family and friends, there was significant reduction in professional stress and significant improvement in mental health of college teachers.*

Managing stress and mental health problems can be really difficult, especially when a person is not feeling well. But, if used in a correct manner on regular basis with determination that he or she wants to overcome stress and promote his or her mental health, yoga and other complementary therapies are one of the best options. A holistic approach to our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing helps in the flow of energy through our body. As a result we feel relaxed.

The findings of the present research study get support from the literature reviewed. In a study on complementary therapy, Onishi et al. (2016) reported that complementary therapies could be used when suffering from stress as a form of self-management and to develop skills to reduce stress. The complementary therapies were found to relieve tension, anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, fatigue, confusion, and vigor in high-stress nurses. In a systematic review of literature conducted by Ravalier et al. (2016) on complementary therapies and employee well-being, the authors reported that mindfulness and meditation based interventions were most effective in improving psychosocial health and work performance of employees.

There are spiritual benefits of chanting God's name and it helps in alleviating physical and psychological ailments, increasing concentration and reducing sorrow (Sanatan Sanstha, 2014). Psychosomatic diseases take place due to mental stress may be cured by chanting mantras. While chanting one has to concentrate and if mind wanders, individual has to bring the mind back to chanting. In this process, the individual learns to control the bad thoughts and become introspective. This process helps in management of negative thoughts and relieves stress.

In another study, Sharma and Singh (2014) reported that chanting of OM and Gayatri mantras offers a relaxed outlook in life. Meditation helps in conquering the neurotic tendencies and makes the mind peaceful and happy. Abrahao et al. (2019) also found that the use of complementary therapies significantly reduced respondents' stress, depression, fatigue, anxiety, and, consequently their quality of life.

## V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

During COVID-19 pandemic, college teachers experienced professional stress and mental health problems. Yoga, meditation, chanting of mantras, connecting with family and friends and healthy diet helped the respondents to reduce their stress and promote their mental health. Hence, it can be concluded that intervention programme in the form of complementary therapies have significant contribution in management of stress and mental health problems.

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