

# Crucial Personal Factors Leading to Stress in University

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Stress can happen to all of us whether we are awake or asleep. Stress can be experienced at night when we try to sleep or are having a nightmare, in the traffic on the way home, or even at work. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the occurrence of stress among staff and the individual factors that contribute to stress. The sample of 50 respondents was randomly selected among staff in University A. The data of this study has been evaluated descriptively using SPSS version 2.0. The descriptive analysis was completed on six sub domains, i.e personal problems, a lack of personal appreciation, personal financial situation, work environment, personal support, and personal beliefs. The results showed that personal problems had a higher magnitude of stress compared to other subdomains. This means that personal finance, health problems, personal conflict, and unstable emotional controls have an influence on the personal problems that contribute to stress. Dual approaches involving both supervisors and co-workers are recommended in alleviating individual stress in the own workplace.

**Key words:** *Stress, personal problem, financial, appreciation, higher education.*

## Introduction

Most people think that stress is something undesirable but it is not always necessarily the case. We need a minimum amount of stress in our lives to motivate us to take actions. Besides, stress often leads to good outcomes. For example, we take action and solve problems when our mum is nagging us however, sometimes, stress can lead us to depression and anxiety which leads to terrible outcomes. In the workplace, stress is quickly becoming the single greatest cause of ‘disease’ and has significant consequences for both workers and their workplace. This so called “disease” will be more likely to attack employees due to their individual factors. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the occurrence of stress among staff and the individual factors that actually contribute to the stress.

## **Problem Statement**

Happiness is an important state required by human beings and it affects human life physically and mentally. According to Sulaiman (2014), employees are unhappy at work due to several factors such as communication gaps from the upper level to the subordinate, limited concern of the development of employee careers by the superiors, the ignorance of employee capacity, lack of welfare benefits for employee, and lack of appreciation by superiors. These factors are important to be taken care as the level of employee satisfaction affects the employee's emotions i.e. stress and consequently this will affect the current behaviours in an organisation (Rashid et al., 2014).

Munira (2017) states that the unhappiness experienced by individuals will affect the whole of human life either from both physical and mental aspects. In Malaysia, it has been recorded that 62.3 percent of individuals being diagnosed as mentally ill and 61 percent of their patients blamed themselves for being mentally ill. The 3rd National Health and Morbidity Study Report in 2006 also reported a total of 3 million out of 26 million Malaysians who were suffering from mental health problems. Mental illness will cause individuals to suffer and feel unhappiness, especially at work. This situation will have a massive impact on the productivity and well-being of employees.

According to Lunberg and Cooper (2011) depression will cause stress that leads to the distraction of individuals' well-being survival and organisational performance. Other side effects involve the feelings of sadness, anxious, emptiness, hopeless, and feeling worthless, angry and restless. Furthermore, a number of cases were referred to the counselling centre in (University A) and this can be seen as evidence of stress being faced by individuals. The most alarming consequence of this stress is that employers may lose interest in working, suffer loss of appetite and surprisingly this could lead them to suicide attempts. This study was conducted to examine the factors that attribute to the level of stress among staff based on the individual domain.

## **Literature Review**

Stress is the result of a burden or conflict experienced in a person. Stress in the organization occurs when the job requirements do not match the capabilities, abilities, and resources of employees. Employees who experience stress will change behaviour and exhibit adverse effects on personal health, as well as work productivity. The change in behaviour experienced by the employee is where his behaviour is inappropriate or unequal to the needs and expectations of the organization and other colleagues (Ma'arof, 2001). This will prevent the achievement of the organization and even affect the performance of other colleagues.

The majority of individuals are aware of the existence of symptoms of stress. However, individuals who are still letting the symptoms continue will suffer harm to their psychological and physiological aspects (Korolija and Lunberg, 2010; Lazarus, Rodafinos, Matsiggos and Stamatoulakis, 2009; Myoung-Hee, Chang-yup, Jin-Kyung and Kawachi, 2008 and Zafir, 2007). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), a situation can be considered stressful depending on one's assessment, whether it is burdensome or anything can be perceived as of potential danger to their well-being. Individual disabilities that meet the needs of these resources will cause individuals to face stress.

Stress is seen as a process that has pros and cons depending on individual assessment. According to A Model of Stress, three factors that can potentially contribute to stress among individuals in the workplace are environmental factors, organizational factors, and personal factors. The personal factor is identified as the last factor that contributes to employee stress. The three most potent elements contribute to worker stress are family problems, economic problems, and employee personality. The type of personality will also determine the individual behaviour and ability to perform the task. Usually, an extroverted person is less likely to experience stress than an introverted person. Further, a person who is communicating in society tends to be less stressed than an anti-social person.

According to Cooper and Cartwright (1994), stress at the workplace can be defined as one of the most costly occupational health issues. The detrimental implications for individuals and organizations are manifold and can result in serious physical and psychological illness for individuals and this can mean major resource loss for the organization. The variation of stress is different, although influenced by the same factor. This is due to the way individuals perceive and respond to the attributes of stress. The description of stress is personal for each individual, one person finds stress would be demanding and stressful while others may perceive it as challenging and stimulating.

Stress can be reduced with work-life initiatives, which can be seen in organization culture (Deery, 2008). Achieving an organizational culture that is accepting of work-life balance programs may take time as the culture of the majority Indian organization is not very inclusive (Baral and Bhargava, 2011). The organization should understand the experience of what employee needs exist in establishing work-life balance at the workplace. In India and the United States, there is continued support for organizational cultures that provide a family-friendly environment and flexible working hours (Kalliath et al., 2011). According to Isa et al., (2019), there is a positive impact between family support and happiness at the workplace. Furthermore, Wayne et al., (2013) indicated that employees could feel less stress when they are at home. Therefore, family-friendly culture and home environment will help employees and organizations to reduce stress at the workplace.

Personal financial problems are often accompanied by financial illiteracy of individuals. Individuals are found to be overspending, have a lack of budgeting, incur too many debts, and demonstrate inadequate shopping and spending skills as the main causes of employee financial troubles. Therefore, employers should provide workplace financial education for their employees (Garman et. al., 1999). This study was also emphasized by (Helman & Paladino, 2014) the finding that financial education will help employees to overcome issues with personal finances and thus improve their financial well-being. According to Leech & Garman (1998), financial stress is related to job productivity of an individual in the workplace. By providing workplace financial education, employees can improve their personal finance and will have a positive return of investment to the organization.

In an evolving world of advanced technologies, organizations are struggling to focus on work production and cause a lot of external demands and conditions. Subsequently, individual stress will occur due to the burden of workload that does not match individual skills or knowledge. This case has attracted organizations to provide individually oriented stress management programmes. According to Giga et. al., (2003), the programme is a stress-management intervention that targets individuals and includes one-to-one counselling, relationship training, lifestyle education, and behaviour change strategies. On the other hand, by providing an interesting working environment, it can improve employee well-being (Tews et. al., 2017), relieve employee anger (Tews et. al., 2012; Leitão, 2013), emotional exhaustion (Karl et. al., 2007), and work pressure (Karl et. al., 2005).

In addition, employers who can express appreciation for their employees' work are able to drive employee productivity while simultaneously keeping their employees happy. Therefore, expressing appreciation is a vital element to maintain in order to create work engagement. Based on the description, (Schaufeli et. al., 2002) indicates that work engagement involves a positive, self-fulfilling, and work-related psychological state. Christian et. al., (2011) agrees that work engagement is a crucial personal factor that can determine employees' job performance. Therefore, employers must be creative to enhance sincere appreciation that matches employee efforts on task.

## **Methodology**

This study aimed to figure out the level of stress among staff and the individual factors that contribute to stress. This study involved 50 respondents who were randomly selected among staff in University A. The respondents were from various backgrounds including different ages, genders, and periods of service. All the data was analysed descriptively using SPSS version 2.0.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are that individuals were more vulnerable to stress when facing their personal problems which attributed to 46 percent, followed by no personal appreciation 34 percent; personal finance; work environment; and personal support achieved the same score of percent, respectively and personal beliefs with 2 percent. Table 1 summarizes the finding as shown below.

**Table 1:** Individual subdomain that leads to stress

No.	Subdomain	Frequency	Percentage
1	Personal Problem	23	46.0
2	No Personal Appreciation	17	34.0
3	Personal Finance	3	6.0
4	Work Environment	3	6.0
5	Personal Support	3	6.0
6	Personal Belief	1	2.0
	Total	50	100.0

**Source :** Respondents

A total of 50 respondents consisting of 56 percent of women and 44 percent of men were involved in this study. Previous studies had reported that there was more burnout among women than men (Hallsten et. al, 2002), while others found small or no differences between them (Benbow & Jolley, 2002). Bharat (2003) identified that both men and women have a more positive work-family balance. Men in dual-earning couples were frequently preoccupied with work at home, whereas women professionals indicated that a preoccupation with family matters interfered with work.

In addition, more than half of the respondents (84.9 percent) were aged between 31-60 years old, while 15.1 percent are below 30 years old. Meanwhile, the most frequent service period of the respondent group was between 11 and 30 years (61.7 percent). According to the data, most respondents are experienced workers and expert in their field of work. Several theories had accounted for age difference for both quantity and quality of work-related stress, thus most of them are in favour of older workers. Although, stress over career development opportunities might be less harmful to the older workers compared to the younger workers according to Kooij et. al., (2011).

Under the personal problems' subdomains, several factors contributing to individual stress were identified: personal finance, health problems, personal conflict, and unstable emotional controls. Those factors are the source of a high percentage value for the personal problem domain. Akmal (2017) conceded that the personal problems of the employees were also a



barrier factor for organisational excellence. In the context of University A, this personal problem is associated with financial problems, health, and attitudes faced by staff. According to (Garman et. al., 1996), poor financial behaviour is often escorted with personal financial problems. Poor financial behaviour is ‘personal and family money management that has negative impacts on one’s life at home and/or at work,’ This financial problem is parallel with a number of work tasks and caused multiple effects on individual stress.

In this context, respondents focus more on personal economic elements to enhance their happiness. According to the respondents, the annual salary increment and annual bonus payout can be a mechanism that contributes happiness and reduces personal problems. Personal problems faced by staff can also implicate the lack of inspiration. Financial rewards and employee performance have a strong correlation, thus employees will work more energetically if the performance is added to by financial rewards (Saeed et. al., 2013). This financial benefits result in the positive performance of employees at work.

Further the most popular feedback from respondents was that a strict promotion system in the workplace was necessary. The changes in promotion policies caused the application for promotion to fail and the failure is associated with limited financial support from the organisation. It is seen as disturbing to set the direction for work performance and career enhancement. Subsequently, respondents raised an issue about the inequivalent tasks given by supervisors. For an example, a subordinate with grade N19 was asked to create a paperwork policy. In this case, the supervisor has given unrelated workload to the subordinate which is not relevant to his or her job scope. Therefore, personal support plays a significant role in alleviating workload stress. In this point of view, the staff see recognition and appreciation may be taken into account from the supervisor as intermediaries to reduce stress.

As a key to achieving organisational goals, employers should be aware of employee welfare in order to keep the organization performance on track. Additionally, other aspects that can lead to employee commitment and loyalty to organisations need to be explored and action taken. This is because employees with loyalty values to the organisation will give their best commitment without expecting a reward in the assignment. In USA, 51 percent of supervisors said that they recognise employees who do a good job. Then at the same organisation, 17 percent of the employees reported that their supervisors recognize them sufficiently (Society for Human Resource Management, 2012). In fact, 65 percent of the workforce reported that no recognition at work in the past 12 months (Rath and Clinton, 2004). Interestingly, research shows that non-financial factors are actually key to improving employee morale and motivation (Mercer, 2011).

However, rewards need to be given in order to incentivise and motivate employees to be more competitive. It can be proven through the findings that employees will be happier if their contribution is being recognised and rewarded. The feelings of appreciation and recognition are so crucial in a work setting because employees want to know whether what they have done are doing matters.

Additionally, respondents mentioned that their supervisors gave an inconsistent score for their performance assessment and at the same time did not come up with appropriate explanations. Without a sense of being valued by supervisors, staff would start feeling like a commodity or that they are being used. When they do not feel valued, this will have negative impact on their work performance. Respondents stated that 'Employers are not concerned about their career development.' That statement concluded that respondents had less job satisfaction due to the level of the employer's concern about their career development. Meanwhile, Zarina, Aishah, and Muhammad (2018) recommend recognition and appreciation as a priority by an organisation to avoid the decline of staff motivation.

Nevertheless, the work environment in an organisation has a strong influence in determining the level of employee happiness. Respondents found that some work environments still need to be improved in order to ensure that staff performance is at the maximum level. Therefore, Abdul Said (2017) believes that the work environment needs to be improved so that employees will not be stressed. Respondents noted the existence of restrictions on the use of creativity in implementing their tasks. The most worrying is that employees will lose their sense of satisfaction in work and become less creative in completing their tasks.

Additionally, respondents stated that “open-minded” and mutual acceptance in an organisational culture is a must to overcome misunderstanding or conflicts between supervisors and co-workers. Respondents found that teamwork and an excellent professional relationship would lead to successful achievement for individuals and the organisation. It is recommended that dual approaches between supervisors and co-workers may be necessary to create a culture of appreciation. An “Any-direction” approach model will work well if supervisors and co-workers offer on workplace culture. Further, all staff will be trained to communicate appreciation by saying “Thank you” and through actions to enhance performance by creating organisational conditions that match the satisfaction on-task effort.

## **Conclusion**

The feeling of being part of the organisation causes employees to feel owned by the organisation. Therefore, to ensure employee perspectives are always relevant to the organisation's future needs, employees need to know their roles clearly and be able to multitask. The willingness to learn something new and beyond the existing field of expertise



is the advantage that every employee needs to meet for future career achievements. A creative and energetic working environment can be a platform for employees to feel happier, for example, typically, the ergonomic workstation can increase motivation to work productively.

In addition, employees are encouraged to train to be a leader themselves. This method will help employees to be more responsible for achieving their goals for the sake of their careers. The responsibility of being sincere and trustful will make employees feel happy about what was being achieved. It is also recommended for individuals to be positive in all directions. This action can help employees achieve their level of happiness because the way individuals perceive and respond will affect their happiness. The ability to manage and handle stress, conflict and anger helps employees to be more positive and calmer while working on their allocated tasks.

What can be done by individuals to be positive is to practise gratefulness and the willingness to accept other opinions. Reverting to the teachings of Islam that emphasise the basic concept of the Creator would encourage individuals to always remember that every human being has their own advantages, disadvantages and fate. By practising this concept, individuals are able to accept the outcomes that happen in their life sincerely.



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