

## Exploring Employee Mental Health, Coping Mechanisms, and Workplace Support: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

**Objective.** The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the experiences and viewpoints of Pakistani employees with regard to workplace assistance, coping mechanisms, and mental health.

**Method.** Purposeful sampling was used to recruit a total of 16 participants who had had mental health concerns at work. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, which were then transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis to discover patterns, themes, and subthemes.

**Results.** This study identified three main themes: mental health issues in the workplace, assessment of client capacity to cope with workplace stress, and preventative measures. These topics shed light on the relationship between health issues and productivity at work, offer methods for handling stress and making decisions at work, and emphasize the value of enhancing mental health and calming workplace tension. These findings underline the importance of organizational support, effective communication, work-life balance, and self-care in promoting employee wellbeing and productivity.

**Implications.** This research has implications for the creation of more effective interventions and policies to support the mental health and well-being of Pakistani employees in the workplace. The findings imply that companies should be more aware of the difficulties employees have in managing their mental health and provide assistance in the form of flexible work arrangements and training for management on mental health awareness. Employers can establish a healthy work environment and enhance the well-being of their employees by doing so.

**Keywords.** Pakistani employees, Mental health, Workplace assistance, Coping mechanisms, Stigma, Flexible work arrangements



## **Introduction**

Mental health is increasingly being recognized as a significant factor in both the physical health of employees and their productivity at the workplace in Pakistan. It is an essential component of one's overall happiness and well-being. According to the World Health Organization, depression and anxiety are two of the leading causes of disability in the world. Moreover, the World Bank estimates that lost productivity due to work-related stress might cost the global economy up to one trillion dollars annually (WHO, 2021). As a result, employers in Pakistan are developing a greater awareness of the significance of addressing issues related to mental health in the workplace through the implementation of preventative measures and policies of support (Awan, A. G., & Tahir, 2015; Sohail et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020). In order to acquire a more in-depth understanding of mental health in the workplace in Pakistan, one way that can be utilized is the investigation of the experiences and perspectives of Pakistani workers. The in-depth exploration of human experiences and views that is made possible by qualitative research has the potential to shed light on difficult and intricate topics like mental health (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Previous qualitative studies carried out in Pakistan and other countries has shown that workers have to overcome a number of challenges in order to keep their mental health in good condition while they are on the job. Workers frequently have the misconception that expressing their mental health issues to their employer or coworkers may result in unfavorable repercussions such as being discriminated against or having their employment terminated (Clement et al., 2015; LaMontagne et al., 2014). Many studies have been conducted to study the coping mechanisms that workers in Pakistan and other countries use to take care of their mental health while they are on the job. According to the findings of a study, workers may participate in self-care activities including going on walks, practicing mindfulness, and reaching out to their colleagues for social support (Ducharme et al., 2020).

On the other hand, these coping mechanisms aren't always going to work, and employees may run into roadblocks like time constraints, a lack of resources, or conflicting professional and personal obligations. Still, there are strategies to deal with stress (Murphy, & Krus, 2022; LaMontagne et al., 2014). Research has also shown how important workplace support is to improving employees' mental health. Research have shown, for instance, that supportive policies such as flexible work arrangements and mental health awareness training for managers can help eradicate stigma and build a more friendly workplace culture. (Bilsker et al., 2016; Lerner et al., 2015).

In light of these findings, additional qualitative research is required to analyze the experiences and perspectives of Pakistani workers with regard to mental health, methods of coping, and support in the workplace. This type of research can be used to inform the establishment of programs and policies that are more effective in supporting the mental health and well-being of Pakistani employees in the workplace.

### **Objective**

This qualitative study aimed to better understand the experiences and viewpoints of Pakistani employees with regard to workplace assistance, coping mechanisms, and mental health.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

In Pakistan, employee experiences and perspectives on mental health, coping methods, and workplace assistance were investigated using a qualitative research approach. As it allowed for an in-depth investigation of human experiences and perspectives, qualitative research was particularly suited to examining complicated and nuanced subjects, such as mental health (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

#### **Sample and Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling was used to select 16 participants for the study, including 9 men and 7

women with ages ranging from 28 to 43 who are currently employed in Pakistan. Employees who had struggled with their mental health at work were included. The sample size was determined by the data saturation, and recruitment continued until no

new themes could be identified in the data (Guest et al., 2006). Table 1 shows the details of the demographic characteristics of the study population.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population (n = 16)*

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Male	9	56.25
	Female	7	43.75
Profession	Doctor	3	18.75
	Business Owner	2	12.50
	Marketing Professional	2	12.50
	Clerical staff	2	12.50
	Media professional	2	12.50
	Customer service representative	2	12.50
	Nurse	2	12.50
	IT professional	1	6.25

*Note.* Mean age of the respondents was  $33.19 \pm 2.88$

### Data Collection

With the help of subject matter experts, including two mental health professionals, one HR professional, and a manager, the interview guidelines were created. The interview guide was developed using the research questions and relevant literature on workplace support, coping skills, and employee mental health. The experts gave input on the questions and assisted in making sure they were comprehensive, relevant, and sensitive to the needs of the research population.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or through mobile conferencing as the main method of gathering data. The interviews were audio recorded, then verbatim transcribed. Throughout the interviews, the researcher took field notes to document nonverbal cues and background information. The resulting information was subjected to a thematic analysis in order to uncover significant themes and patterns relating to

worker mental health, coping skills, and workplace support.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. Participants were given a page of information detailing the objective, methods, and potential risks and benefits of the study. Before taking part in the trial, participants supplied written consent. Participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any time, and all data was stored in a secure, anonymous manner. Before beginning, the study received permission from an institutional review board.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary data analysis technique for this study because it permits a flexible and iterative approach to discovering patterns, themes, and categories in the data. Thematic analysis is a useful method for

analysing qualitative data that does not fit into predetermined categories or theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In comparison to other qualitative analysis techniques such as content analysis or grounded theory, thematic analysis allows for a more open-ended exploration of the data and can reveal themes and patterns that may not have been anticipated or predicted. When conducting qualitative research that frequently employs small sample sizes, thematic analysis is also suitable for data analysis. Because it allowed for a flexible and iterative approach to finding patterns, themes, and categories in the data, thematic analysis was selected as the best method of data analysis for this study. This methodology was appropriate for both the research questions and the nature of the qualitative data. These are the steps that comprised the analysis:

1. **Data familiarization:** To fully comprehend the data, the researcher read and reread the interview transcripts.
2. **Creating first codes:** The researcher recognized and labelled the crucial aspects of the data, which were then used to create initial codes.
3. **Finding themes:** The codes were organized into possible themes, which were then examined and improved as the study went on.
4. **Examining Themes:** The final themes and sub-themes were examined and defined by the researcher.
5. **Theme definition and naming:** The themes were identified and defined by the researcher in light of their substance and applicability to the research objectives.

6. **Writing the report:** The researcher wrote a report that outlined the major themes and sub-themes and included excerpts from the interview transcripts to substantiate each claim.
7. **Validity and Reliability:** The following steps were taken to assure the study's validity and reliability: a) Triangulation: To triangulate the data, information was gathered from many sources, including interviews and field notes. b) Member checking: To confirm the validity and accuracy of the data, participants were given the chance to evaluate and comment on the findings. c) Reflexivity: Throughout the study process, the researcher considered their own prejudices and presumptions and recorded these reflections in a reflexive journal. d) Peer debriefing: The researcher discussed the study method and findings with peers in order to critically assess them.

## Results

This study examines workplace dynamics through interviews with 16 employees, aiming to uncover key themes. The three overarching themes are: Theme 1 delves into the prevalence and impact of mental health issues within the workplace; Theme 2 centers around the assessment of client potential to cope with stress at work; and Theme 3 encompasses the exploration of preventative measures to foster a healthier work environment. These themes provide insights into individual well-being, organizational practices, and the employee experience. Each theme includes subthemes that offer a detailed exploration of the complex issues involved (see table 2).

**Table 2**

Theme	Subthemes
1. Mental health issues in the Workplace	1. Workplace health issues 2. Experience with Work-Related Health Issues
2. Assessment of client potential to cope stress at workplace	1. Presentation and Workplace Performance 2. Workplace Stress Management 3. Feedback and Decision Making 4. Workplace Change and Adaptation
3. Preventative measures	1. Mental Health Awareness and Understanding 2. Managerial Role in Employee Mental Wellness 3. Impact of Mental Health on Workplace Performance 4. Workplace Policies and Practices for Stress Reduction 5. Employee Support and Self-Care 6. Employee Well-being and Support Networks

**Theme 1: Mental Health Issues At workplace**

Occupational health concerns emerged as a subtheme. The participants discussed their experiences with health conditions and their effects on the workplace. For instance, one participant stated, *"I was diagnosed with cardiac MR, but it has not significantly affected my employment. My only problem arises when my blood pressure occasionally increases"* (WPE-1). This quotation illustrates how a particular health condition may occasionally impact work performance. A further aspect of workplace health issues mentioned by participants was the tension and exhaustion caused by work load. A participant stated, *"Sometimes, due to the weight of my work, I became stressed and physically exhausted"* (WPE-7). This quote illustrates the effect of work demands on a person's mental health and physical vitality.

A second subtheme that emerged from the interviews was the participants' experiences with health issues related to the workplace. Participants described instances in which their health conditions impeded their capacity to perform their jobs effectively. One participant described their experience, stating, *"Recently, in a stressful environment, I encountered a similar situation. I had a burden that I had no prior experience with, and I did not know much about it... This was the source of my stress, and I was unable to focus on*

*my work because these thoughts kept repeating in my consciousness"* (WPE-8). This quotation illustrates how unfamiliar work tasks and high levels of tension can contribute to mental distress and inhibit job performance.

**Theme 2: Evaluation of Client Capacity to Cope with Workplace Stress**

The Presentation and Workplace Performance subtheme revealed employees' methods for managing their responsibilities and meeting deadlines. One participant explained, *"When you labor harder and put forth more effort, the project is completed before the deadline. After the allotted time, you must labor overtime in order to work and prepare in time for the deadline"* (WPE-12). This quotation emphasizes the participant's proactive coping strategy of putting in extra effort to complete tasks ahead of schedule. Further, the subtheme of Workplace tension Management addressed the techniques employed by participants to manage tension in the workplace. According to one participant, *"Well, there's a technique. First, I slow down the moment, and then I convince myself that everything is alright. Difficult circumstances will pass, and things will improve. Initially, I attempt to comprehend this. People generally refer to this as reflection. However, the technique I use is to first consider the circumstance, then consider the worst-case scenario if things don't go well, or consider the*



*best-case scenario if things go well. But there is also the option to engage in pre-reflection. Then, I consider how I can enhance it. Everything about what I should do and how I can do it becomes crystal clear in my mind"* (WPE-13). This quote highlights the importance of self-reflection, visualization, and problem-solving for stress management.

Further, the subtheme of Feedback and Decision Making examined the perspectives of participants on feedback and its impact on their decision-making process. Before reaching a decision, pros and cons are considered, according to one participant *"How much things on this page are good and how much things on this page are evil, and how much loss and how much gain are possible on this page. Not only do I benefit, but others do as well. When I determine that the loss is less than the benefit, I make that choice. Consequently, I imagine that after making that choice, my existence would be as follows"* (WPE-16). This quote exemplifies the participant's evaluative approach to decision-making, which takes into account multiple factors and considers prospective outcomes.

The subtheme of Change and Adaptation in the Workplace highlighted participants' approaches to handling situations requiring adaptation. One participant described their approach to problem-solving, stating, *"If the situation is directly related to me or involves me, I would immediately strive to find a solution. I would attempt to identify applicable solutions and implement them... I would seek the counsel of a superior or a colleague who could provide me with a second opinion on the situation. I would present the issue and my proposed solution and then solicit their feedback"* (WPE-5). This quote exemplifies the participant's proactive and collaborative approach to problem-solving by seeking counsel and integrating diverse perspectives.

### **Theme 3: Preventive Measures**

Participants in the discussion emphasized the importance of promoting mental health and reducing workplace tension through preventative

measures. One participant stated, *"It is essential for mental health that after you have mentally exerted yourself, you can engage in any outdoor activity that distracts you from your work... And fresh air also has a very positive effect, as both your mind and body become refreshed"* (WPE-11). Another participant mentioned the importance of work-life balance and using breaks or music therapy to alleviate stress during work, stating, *"Whenever I get bored during work, I must take a break or try to have some music therapy, like listening to some favorite music that refreshes me a bit"* (WPE-12). These strategies indicate that employees recognize the need to prioritize mental health in their daily lives.

The Managerial Role in Employee Mental Wellness emerged as an additional subtheme, highlighting the significance of managers in promoting the mental health of employees. Participants emphasized the significance of being sensitive to employees' requirements and setting clear work boundaries. One participant detailed, *"If someone is struggling with a problem, we should be sensitive to their requirements and do what we can to assist them... If a supervisor observes an employee exceeding these limits and the employee expresses concern, the supervisor should attempt to accommodate the employee"* (WPE-1).

The subtheme Impact of Mental Health on Workplace Performance highlighted the negative effects that mental health issues have on job performance. Participants acknowledged that mental health issues can hinder productivity and result in physical stress symptoms. One participant described their experience, stating, *"If a person is experiencing mental health problems, it may be difficult for them to generate quality work... Moreover, physical symptoms such as fatigue, dizziness, headaches, and muscle discomfort can be linked to stressors that negatively impact job performance"* (WPE-1).

Participants also discussed stress-reduction workplace policies and practices. They emphasized the significance of policies that consider the impact of certain situations on the mental state of employees and suggested implementing strategies

such as breaks and participation in activities such as walking or jogging. One participant stated, *"Sometimes your policies and compliments are such that they interfere with your work because they cause mental distress... So they affect your work, but if you take them in a positive light, as I do, when I feel bad I take a short vacation from my work and my busy mind. I also unwind a bit and engage in various outdoor activities... This can also mean that your relationships do not deteriorate, that you do not display aggression, and that you complete your work in peace"* (WPE-11).

Further, the subtheme of Employee Support and Self-Care highlighted employee strategies for seeking support and engaging in self-care. Participants emphasized the significance of taking breaks, seeking emotional support from superiors and peers, and recognizing early warning signs of mental health problems. One participant shared, *"Whenever I feel a little burnt out or stressed, I simply lock up my office, turn off my computer, and go for a walk... I require additional emotional support from my superiors and friends"* (WPE-2).

Lastly, the subtheme of Employee Well-being and Support Networks emphasized the significance of balancing solitude and social connections. Participants acknowledged the advantages of spending time alone, but emphasized the importance of social interaction in preventing feelings of isolation and loneliness. In addition, they emphasized the importance of relaxation exercises, problem-sharing with trusted individuals, and understanding of mental health by managers and executives. One participant stated, *"Spending time alone can be beneficial, but it's essential to maintain a healthy balance by also spending time with friends and family... Taking pauses and engaging in relaxation exercises can assist with stress management... "Discussing problems with a close friend or loved one can also facilitate problem-solving"* (WPE-6).

## **Discussion**

The qualitative data in this study reveals a number of significant themes and subthemes

regarding mental health issues at workplace. Under a theme regarding mental health issues at workplace the experiences of individuals with health issues and their consequences on work performance emerged as one subtheme. Participants talked about their own health issues, such as cardiac MR and high blood pressure, and how these issues occasionally affected their capacity to do their jobs well. This topic is consistent with earlier evidence that highlights the link between wellbeing and productivity at work (e.g., Frone, 2000). Another subtheme that emerges from the interviews is the stress and exhaustion induced by work demands. Participants discussed how the stress and physical tiredness brought on by their profession affected their mental health and general vigor. This result is in line with earlier studies that recognized burnout and work-related stress as major issues in occupational health (e.g., Maslach et al., 2001; Bakker et al., 2004). The adverse impacts of excessive workloads on employee well-being are highlighted.

Importantly, the interviews illuminated the challenges encountered by participants whose health conditions were not adequately addressed by their workplaces. Participants reported anger over inadequate accommodations and a lack of support, which had an adverse effect on their health and productivity at work. This conclusion emphasizes how crucial it is for employers to be aware of and responsive to their employees' health requirements in order to ensure their wellbeing and productivity. Previous research (such as Amstad et al., 2011) have stressed the importance of organizational support and accommodations in fostering employee health and performance.

In terms of second theme "evaluation of client capacity to cope with workplace stress" The qualitative data in this study reveals a significant subthemes and patterns pertaining to workplace change and adaptation, workplace tension management, feedback and decision-making, and presentation and workplace performance. Participants in the subtheme of Presentation and Workplace Performance talked about how they handle their workload and adhere to deadlines.

They stressed proactive coping techniques including exerting extra effort, setting priorities for tasks, and effectively managing time. These results are consistent with other literature (e.g., Parker et al., 2010) that emphasizes the value of proactive actions and efficient time management in improving workplace performance.

The subtheme of "Workplace Tension Management" exposed the methods used by participants to handle stress at work. They talked about how to deal with stress by thinking about oneself, visualizing solutions, and addressing problems. These techniques are consistent with earlier research (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Saks & Gruman, 2014) that highlights the significance of self-regulation and cognitive assessment in managing workplace stress. Further, participants in the subtheme of Feedback and Decision Making talked about how they evaluate potential outcomes and pros and disadvantages while making decisions. They also acknowledged the value of taking input to heart, even when it's unfavorable. These results are consistent with earlier work (e.g., DeRue et al., 2011) that highlights the value of reflective decision-making processes and the contribution of feedback to the promotion of learning and growth. Furthermore, the participants' methods for dealing with circumstances needing adaptation were highlighted by the subtheme of Change and Adaptation in the Workplace. They placed a strong emphasis on proactive problem-solving, soliciting advice, and incorporating many viewpoints. These results are consistent with earlier research (e.g., Bala & Venkatesh 2013) that highlights the value of adaptable behaviors, teamwork, and requesting support in managing workplace change.

Regarding the third theme "preventive measures" the qualitative data reveals the subthemes and patterns concerning employee well-being and support networks, managerial involvement in employee mental wellness, the effect of mental health on workplace performance, and the promotion of mental health and reduction of workplace tension. These results complement earlier research in the topic and add to it. Further,

participants in the subtheme on enhancing mental health and lowering workplace tension underlined the value of preventative actions like taking breaks, going outside, and using music therapy to reduce stress and revitalize the mind. These tactics are in line with other research (e.g., Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Trougakos et al., 2008) that emphasizes the advantages of leisure activities, breaks, and relaxation techniques in boosting mental well-being and reducing stress.

The subtheme "managerial role in employee mental wellness" emphasizes the importance of managers in fostering employees' mental well-being. Participants stressed the significance of managers promoting effective communication, establishing clear work limits, and being sensitive to employees' needs. These results are consistent with earlier literature (e.g., Bakker et al., 2005) that highlights the importance of supportive leadership, unambiguous communication, and work-life balance in fostering employee well-being and mental health. Moreover, the subtheme on the effect of mental health on job performance draws attention to the detrimental consequences that mental health problems can have on productivity. The fact that mental health problems might reduce productivity and cause physical stress symptoms was accepted by the participants. These results are consistent with earlier research showing the negative effects of mental health issues on work performance, such as decreased productivity, absenteeism, and presenteeism (e.g., Hilton et al., 2008; Dewa et al., 2010).

The participants' recommendations for putting into practice policies that take into account how various events affect employees' mental states and methods like taking breaks and engaging in outdoor activities are highlighted by the subtheme of stress-reduction workplace policies and practices. These results are consistent with earlier research that emphasizes the value of implementing organizational practices and policies that support worker wellbeing and stress reduction, such as flexible work schedules, wellness initiatives, and welcoming work environments



(e.g., Hammer et al., 2011; Amstad et al., 2011). Employee support and self-care as well as employee well-being and support networks are subthemes that focus on the participants' methods for seeking help, practicing self-care, and striking a balance between their solitary lives and their social lives. These tactics are consistent with other research (e.g., Eby et al., 2005) that highlights the value of social support, self-care routines, and work-life balance in enhancing employee well-being and mental health.

Several potential policy and decision-making avenues are suggested by the implications of these findings. Organizations ought to think about creating rules and procedures that support workers' mental health and wellbeing. This can entail offering tools and assistance for stress management, advocating for work-life balance, and encouraging a cooperative and open leadership style. Organizations can also set up clear guidelines and expectations to support workers in efficiently managing their workloads and avoiding burnout. A happier and more effective workforce can result from policies that value mental health and promote self-care activities like taking breaks and exercising outdoors. Additionally, managers must to receive training on how to identify and attend to the mental health needs of workers, offer assistance and criticism, and foster a positive work environment. These results emphasize the significance of a comprehensive strategy for employee well-being that takes into account both individual and organizational aspects.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study offers insightful information on people's perspectives and experiences with regard to workplace mental health issues and wellbeing. The findings are consistent with earlier research, which has focused on the effects of health issues on productivity, the harmful effects of work-related stress, and the significance of organizational support and accommodations for employee well-being. The study also illuminates the methods people use to deal with stress at work, make choices, adjust to change, and advance their own mental health. These results have policy and

decision-making ramifications, highlighting the necessity for organizations to give mental health top priority, build supportive leadership, put stress-reduction policies and procedures in place, and offer resources and support for employee well-being. Organizations may establish a safer and more effective working environment by addressing these problems.

## **Limitations**

Because only qualitative information from a small number of Pakistani employees was used in the study, it may be challenging to apply the findings to other ethnicities and cultures. Also, the study makes no mention of how effectively employees manage stress, which suggests that additional research is required. Moreover, the opinions of managers and employers on mental health services at work were not examined.

## **Recommendations**

To learn how well employees deal with stress, more research is required. In order to apply the findings in broader contexts, future study should use a larger and more varied sample of employees. Researchers should investigate how managers and employers feel about mental health support at work in the future. The findings of this study can be utilized to develop therapies and accommodations for the workplace, such as social support, a variety of tasks, and flexible work schedules, to enhance employees' mental health and wellbeing.

## **Declaration**

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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**Availability of Data and Materials:** Information about the dataset and analyses for the present study is available from the corresponding authors.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:** Informed consent was obtained from all study participants prior to administration.

**Competing Interest:** The authors declare no competing interests.

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