

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND MINDFULNESS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- There is a need for organizations to be innovative and keep on adapting to changes and new circumstances in today's highly competitive world. Accordingly, some challenges emerged for both organizations and employees in adapting to the new situations as well as work-related daily routine tasks. Adaptation and coping capabilities of the employees have become an essential part of the work environment. These challenges have created stress among employees, affecting their personal lives and business lives. A concept of "Mindfulness" that enables people to be flexible and adaptable in adverse environments, and this, in turn, reduces people's stress levels is used in business life as well. The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors affecting employees' occupational stress and clarify their coping capabilities using mindfulness during turbulent times.

Methodology- There are qualitative and quantitative studies about occupational stress and mindfulness in business and psychology disciplines. This research consists of an extensive literature review regarding the factors found in the literature, including stress and employee coping capabilities in terms of mindfulness, and an empirical field study applied through an experimental group. They had an eight-week MBSR course and a survey applied before and after the training, in 2021. The data from the research was analyzed through the SPSS 25 program.

Findings- According to literature, employees' stress levels increased because of many factors like workload, time pressures and deadlines, extended working hours, work/family conflict, and an environment of uncertainty in general. On the other hand, in the literature, the factors affecting employees' coping capabilities with stress are two crucial: employee well-being and resilience at work. The analyzed data from the experimental study supported the literature that mindfulness training reduces the stress level of employees while increasing their resilience and well-being levels.

Conclusion- The study encourages Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs to be applied to employees during challenging times when there are high levels of uncertainty and stress. Experiential studies of mindfulness interventions demonstrate that mindfulness serves to reduce stress and improve well-being and resilience.

Keywords: Stress, mindfulness, resilience, well-being, coping capability.

JEL Codes: M10, M12, M19

1. INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress is a problem for employees and organizations in terms of mental health, well-being, and its effects on tasks. Studies support the argument that mindfulness training has benefits for work engagement, burnout, leadership, productivity, and cognitive functioning (Bartlett et al., 2019; Pattnaik & Jena, 2020). Workplace stress affects job performance including decision-making, problem-solving, and productivity. Mindfulness improves attention, awareness, flexibility (cognitive and responsive), and tolerance, and reduces prejudice and misperception. This enables employees to behave effectively and not respond automatically (Shapiro et al., 2015). Mindfulness also improves the coping mechanisms and fast recovery connected to resilience. Mindfulness creates an environment that supports learning, and this compassionate, non-judgemental environment activates the neural systems that support learning and adapting to the situation (Shapiro et al., 2015).

During turbulent times, employees are expected to adapt to the changing circumstances. As an example: The COVID-19 virus was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 (Weigelt et al., 2021; Kondratowicz et al.,

2021). Fear of an unknown disease, uncertainty, and governmental restrictions triggered a sudden and comprehensive switch to remote life, both professionally and personally (Kondratowicz et al., 2021; Weigelt et al.2021). Approximately 68 % of the global workforce began to work under nationally-imposed pandemic restrictions (ILO, 2020). This unexpected situation decreased people's level of well-being by more than 71 % (Kondratowicz et al., 2021). People had both pleasant and unpleasant experiences in their personal and professional lives.

Stress is a part of human life; it is inevitable. According to Lazarus, a person's cognitive appraisal decides whether stress is threatening or challenging (distress), or motivating (eustress) (Pandey & Gaur, 2005). Through our experiences, we tend to label the events as good or bad. The COVID-19 pandemic has given each of us diverse experiences, and these have affected our perceived stress levels accordingly.

Perceived stress causes both psychological and physical changes. Accordingly, working conditions affected workers' levels of well-being, resilience, self-efficacy, and self-awareness. In turn, the workers' performances were affected. Mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment, non-reactively, non-judgmentally, and open-heartedly (Alidina S., 2010). Mindfulness is a tool that enables people to be flexible and adaptable in adverse environments, and this, in turn, reduces people's stress levels.

The second part of the study reviews the literature about occupational stress, the relationships between resilience and stress, well-being and stress, and mindfulness. The third part discusses the experimental research, including the methodology, sampling, scales, and hypothesis testing. Moreover, the fourth part mentions the research model, and the experimental research findings are discussed. In the last chapter, the study is concluded.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Occupational Stress

Stress has many definitions, from the feeling of illness to anxiety that causes depression (ILO, 2016). Hans Selye defined *stress* as the biological and non-specific response of the body to the environment of change or demand in 1936. (Selye, 1976; Valanciene et al., 2020; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The rapidly changing working environment and global competition create challenges in adapting to new situations among employees. (ILO, 2016).

Stressors cause stimuli to be triggered (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), paving the way for psychological and physical responses (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Psychological responses may be a lack of concentration, depression, anxiety, burnout, boredom, and easily getting frustrated. Those responses accompany by bodily responses like headaches, sweating, stomach problems, cardiac problems, breathing problems, and so on. The stressors also lead to stressful behaviors like aggressiveness, making more mistakes, addictions, and so on. (Valanciene et al., 2020). A stressor can be caused by an environmental event (ILO, 2016), a biological situation or can also be an emotion or thought (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Workers' interactions create stressors (like interpersonal demands, policies, or conditions at work) (Simmons & Nelson, 2007), defined as psychosocial hazards. They are the factors that may cause stress in the work environment. Such as workload (overload or underload), time pressure, working hours (longer working, unpredictable or inflexible working schedules), high uncertainty, fragmented work, facility problems (availability, fixing, or maintenance problems), role problems (role ambiguity, conflict), communication problems, career problems (over or under promotion, payment problems, job insecurity), role conflict, lack of participation or control over work, social or physical isolation from work, lack of support from superiors, and conflicts due to home and work duties. (ILO, 2016).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, sudden changes in peoples' lives happened and made homes their new workplaces. (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). Remote working has been the new working type in the world. The remote working employee percentage in 2020 became 88% globally (Global Workplace Analytics, 2020). New stress sources have arisen due to remote working: Work and family balance, social and workplace isolation (Mulki, 2020), uncertainty about the future of work (Chanana, 2020), communication problems, overworking, and burnout (Prasad et al., 2020).

2.2. Resilience and Stress

Resilience is deemed a prominent psychological capacity that implies how individuals sustain and bounce back (Rahman & Cachia, 2021) from adversity stronger and even more resourceful (Avolio, *et.al.* 2010). It is particularly defined as the positive psychological 'capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility (Luthans, 2002). There is a plethora of empirical research that has revealed positive emotions are likely to enhance resilience in the face of adversity, thus putting emphasis on its state-like quality (Tugade, Fredrickson & Barrett, 2004). The insight provided by this capacity does not imply a risk-free life, but rather enables individuals to exercise effective management of scarce resources toward a more auspicious life despite risks (Luthans, et.al. 2007).

The adverse effects of stress can be healed through the high resilience levels of employees. According to Shatte et al., a high level of supportive work environment increases employee resilience and reduces anxiety, and depression, while increasing employee attendance, productivity, and performance (Shatte et al., 2017).

2.3. Well-Being and Stress

As Wiland (2022) reminds the academia humanity had not been satisfied with discreet modes of well-being within their societies since ancient times; instead, since Socrates, the focus has explicitly been on the well-being of the whole community, in other words, *polis* (city). Inevitably the state of well-being for an organization stems from the well-being of individuals. Employee well-being is the whole experience that an employee has in the workplace. Those are emotional, psychological, physical health, and happiness (Prahan & Hati, 2019). Well-being at the workplace is a requirement rather than an option to improve productivity in business settings (Baccarani et al., 2013; Dinesh et al., 2022). Wright & Bonett (2007), and Valkenburg (2022) assert positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction as the fundamental constituents of well-being. Employee well-being reduces the potential costs of illness, absenteeism, and low production. Improves employee participation and job involvement even in challenging situations (Prahan & Hati, 2019).

The occupational stressors affect the well-being of employees. High-stress levels cause physical and mental problems including anxiety, burnout, and physical symptoms such as cardiovascular problems (ILO, 2016).

2.4. Mindfulness

According to John Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Panditharathene & Chen, 2021). It is a skill that can be learned and developed through practice. It enables people to become aware of their thoughts, feelings, thoughts, and present moment experiences without judging. (Steinhouse, 2010). In addition, practicing mindfulness has effects on the perceived relationship with the experience (Shapiro et al., 2012). Which improves resilience and boosts employee abilities to cope with adverse experiences (Steinhouse, 2018).

Heedful engagement supplied by mindfulness facilitates modifiable feedback capability to stress-generating factors (Choi et al., 2021). Besides, according to Yusuf et al. (2019) stress reduction is a natural trait that has been embroidered into mindfulness. Mindfulness and mindfulness-based practices reduce the symptoms of stress both physically and psychologically. It increases the hormone of melatonin levels and decreases blood pressure, pain, and somatic health problems. Positive emotions arise, social connectedness, motivation for the achievement of a goal, positive relationships, and life satisfaction (Glomb et al., 2011).

Mindfulness is used to improve well-being toward oneself (hedonic well-being) and others (eudaimonic well-being) (Rehman et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2022). Hedonic well-being is taken as subjective actuality and contexted as a person's satisfaction with life, generally called also as happiness (Jones & Drummond, 2022; Wijngaards et al., 2022). On the other hand, psychological well-being is generally associated with eudemonia and gauged with personal growth, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, positive relations, purpose in life, and autonomy attributes (Ryf & Keyes, 1995; Chan et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2022). Jackson Preston (2022) advises a simpler or in other words an easier-to-manage quad structure which is composed of individual, interpersonal, communal, and societal stages of well-being resulting in a hierarchically incrementing performance of the employees in a holistic manner. This societal communication helps in the attenuation of stress and enhances a healthier self and a better quality of life (Carotta et al., 2022; Jones & Drummond, 2022; Wijngaards et al., 2022). The motivation to achieve goals is also backed by well-being (Jones & Drummond, 2022).

Mindfulness is regarded as an outstanding tool not only for amplifying the well-being of employees (Christopher et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2021; Jones & Drummond, 2022) and university students (Rehman et al., 2021) but also for avoiding retrogression of it amongst employees (Creswell, 2017; Dinesh et al., 2022). Besides, mindfulness is used to predict various performance indicators from productivity to turnover in order to generate continuity in employees (Wright & Bonett, 2007; Wijngaards et al., 2022) and university students (Yusuf et al., 2020; Simonsson et al., 2021); and their good performance level in a circadian rhythm by reducing stress (Baccarani et al., 2013; Danish et al., 2022; Ito et al., 2022; Jones & Drummond, 2022). A current study by Zheng et al. (2022) conducted in China reveals that mindfulness studies deflate adverse feelings which helps to improve subjective well-being and serves as an antecedent to facilitate the required background for psychological well-being. Rehman et al., (2021) state that this development generates by social connectedness and utilizing mediation practices.

The most common structured and the applied mindfulness-based program is the mindfulness stress reduction (MBSR) program. It was created by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. (Kabat-Zinn, 2019). It is an eight-week long program, with 2.5 hours of weekly sessions and an additional six hours of mindfulness day (Kabat-Zinn, 2021). The MBSR program has a growing interest all around the world, since its supportive role in health care and stress (Lehrhaupt & Meibert, 2017).

To sum up, according to the literature, stress is a natural part of human life and exists in various areas including business life. Occupational stress has adverse effects on employees' well-being and resilience levels. However, mindfulness training has supportive effects on employees and decreases the level of stress. Mindfulness also increases employees' well-being and resilience levels (Figure 1). This study is based on that information and is applied to the Turkish context accordingly.

Figure 1: The Relationship Between Stress, Well-being, Resilience, and Mindfulness

	OCCUPATIONAL STRESS	MINDFULNESS
STRESS		Decreases
WELL-BEING	Decreases	Increases
RESILIENCE	Decreases	Increases

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to be an experimental study. Before the study was conducted, an online survey was prepared to measure the sample employees' perceived stress levels, well-being, and resilience levels. An experimental group of 34 people was employed from both a food company and an insurance company. The participants were voluntarily selected and attended the MBSR training. During the training, the participant number decreased to 33.

The MBSR training was given to two companies separately for eight weeks. Participants were asked to fill out the survey before and after the training.

3.1. Measures

The survey was created from three different scales whose reliability and validity were scientifically tested and adapted to the Turkish context.

First of all, the Perceived Stress Scale was developed by Cohen, Mermelstein, and Kamarck in 1983 (Klein et al., 2016). The scale was translated into Turkish and adapted by Eskin et al. in 2013. According to their study, the internal consistency of Cronbach's Alpha was .82, and the correlation of test-retest was .88. The study showed that the Turkish version of the Perceived Stress Scale is both reliable and valid to be used in studies in Turkey (Eskin et al., 2013). The scale has ten questions.

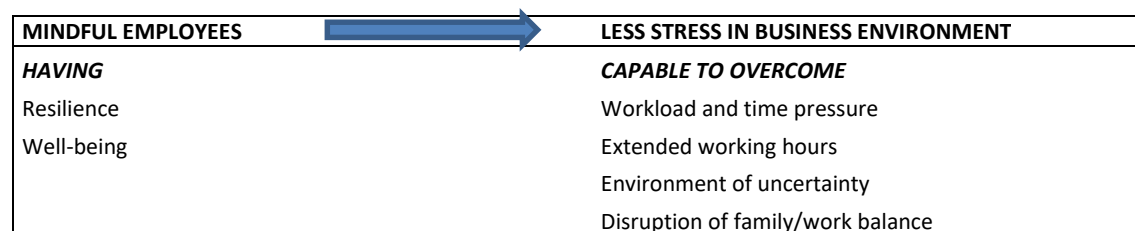
Secondly, The World Health Organization developed The WHO-5 Well-being Scale in 1998 (Topp et al., 2015). It was translated and adapted to Turkish by Erhan Eser in 1999. The internal consistency of Cronbach's Alpha was .81 (for adults) and the correlation of test-retest was .63.9. The study showed that the Turkish version of the WHO-5 Well-being Scale is both reliable and valid to be used in studies in Turkey (Eser, 1999). The scale has five questions.

Thirdly, the Brief Resilience Scale was developed by Smith et al. in 2018 (Malik & Garg, 2018) and translated and adapted to Turkish by Tayfun Doğan in 2015 (Doğan, 2015). The internal consistency coefficient was .83 and the correlation of test-retest was between .49 and .66. According to the findings of the study, the scale has validity and reliability for studies in Turkey (Doğan, 2015). The scale has six questions.

3.2. Research Model

The model of the study is provided in Figure 2. The model of the study claims that mindfulness improves the employee's coping capacity with stress, decreasing perceived stress levels. Those attending the eight-week MBSR course will be mindful employees and have a substantial capital of resilience and well-being to cope with the strain and stress of the business environment. The employees may have to cope with occupational stress sources such as workload, time pressure, extended working hours, uncertainty related to the business environment, and problems related to family and work balance disruption. The MBSR training develops the personal awareness of employees and improves the observation capacity of responses. This ability supports employees' coping capabilities in challenging times and reduces stress.

Figure 2: A Conceptual Framework of Remote Working, Stress, and Employee Coping Capabilities in terms of Mindfulness



3.3. The Hypothesis

The hypotheses were formed according to the literature that mindfulness has a significant effect on reducing stress levels and increasing the well-being and resilience levels of people.

Hypothesis 1: MBSR training is significantly effective in reducing the stress level of employees.

Hypothesis 2: MBSR training is significantly effective in increasing the well-being of employees.

Hypothesis 3: MBSR training is significantly effective in raising the resilience level of employees.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data from the online survey was collected before and after the MBSR training. After the data was collected, t-tests were prepared to test the hypothesis via the SPSS 25 program. The findings related to the hypothesis testing are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: MBSR training is significantly effective in reducing the stress level of employees.

Table 1: t-Test Results for Comparing Experimental Group's Pre-test and Post-test Stress Levels

Measurement	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	t	p
Pre-test	34	30.05	5.82	33	-6.020	0.00
Post-test	33	23.93	5.21			

According to the t-test results of the experimental group (Table 1), the application of the MBSR program was significantly effective in reducing the participants' stress levels [$t(33) = -6.020$; $p < 0.05$]. Before the MBSR program, the experimental group's mean stress level was calculated as $\bar{X}_{\text{pre-test}} = 30.05$. After the MBSR program, this mean level was calculated as $\bar{X}_{\text{post-test}} = 23.93$. This result showed that applying the MBSR program had a significant effect on reducing the participants' stress levels. Based on this finding, it can be said that the tested hypothesis should be accepted.

Hypothesis 2: MBSR training is significantly effective in increasing the well-being level of employees.

Table 2: t-Test Results for Comparing Experimental Group's Pre-test and Post-test Well-being Levels

Measurement	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	t	p
Pre-test	34	15.38	3.28	33	4.263	0.000
Post-test	33	18.15	2.97			

According to the t-test results of the experimental group (Table 2), the application of the MBSR program was significantly effective in increasing the participants' well-being levels [$t(33) = 4.263$; $p < 0.05$]. Before the MBSR, the experimental group's mean well-being level was calculated as $\bar{X}_{\text{pre-test}} = 15.38$. After the MBSR, this mean level was calculated as $\bar{X}_{\text{post-test}} = 18.15$. The finding that emerged according to the calculated values showed that applying the MBSR program to the participants had a significant effect on their well-being levels. Based on this finding, it can be said that the tested hypothesis should be accepted.

Hypothesis 3: MBSR training is significantly effective in increasing the resilience level of employees.

Table 3: t-Test Results for Comparing Experimental Group's Pre-test and Post-test Resilience Levels

Measurement	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	t	p
Pre-test	34	18.97	3.22	33	4.656	0.000
Post-test	33	21.87	4.14			

According to the t-test results of the experimental group (Table 3), the application of the MBSR program was significantly effective in increasing the resilience levels of the participants [$t(33) = 4,656$; $p < 0.05$]. Before the MBSR program, the experimental group's mean resilience level was calculated as $\bar{X}_{\text{Pre-Test}} = 18.97$. After the MBSR program, this mean level was calculated as $\bar{X}_{\text{post-test}} = 21.87$. The finding values showed that applying the MBSR program to the participants significantly increased their resilience levels. Based on this finding, it can be said that the tested hypothesis should be accepted.

To sum up, this study is the first MBSR applied study to employees in Turkey in business administration science. The study supported the hypothesis that MBSR training applied to Turkish employees significantly reduces the perceived stress level. It has also supported the other hypothesis that MBSR training has increased the level of well-being and resilience after the

training. Those findings show that mindfulness training improves employees' psychological capital and becomes a supportive instrument for challenging experiences in business.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Stress is an undisputable ingredient of human life. When stress occurs, our perceptions shape our way of thinking, emotions, and automatic reactions. In terms of business, stress blurs or blocks employees' vision and prevents them from finding effective or alternative solutions to the problems. Effective management of psychological capital renders companies adaptive and balanced in challenging situations. There is no shortage of evidence when one intends to highlight the relationship between employees' well-being and resilience levels increase when stress decreases. Employees with a high level of well-being and resilience are more likely to feel happier and healthier. They engage more in their tasks and become more productive.

There are numerous sources of stress in work life, especially under the circumstances, employees have been introduced during global pandemics. Demands, workload, time pressure, having long working hours, having uncertainty, and family and work balance disruption (COVID-19 times) may cause stress to employees. According to the literature, mindfulness supports employees by improving their awareness and attention, which creates flexibility and rapport in any situation. Employees with strong psychological capital adapt quickly to sudden and unexpected changes in the business environment. The flexible and liberated way of thinking through mindfulness training makes the challenging problems to be solved.

The proposed conceptual model in this paper suggests that employees who are supported through mindfulness training experience less stress, have a high level of well-being, and are more resilient in their business life. Based on relevant literature, the model suggests that employees who undergo an MBSR training program become psychologically more equipped to overcome the strains of business life. The relationships embedded in this model might provide a guideline for organizations in search of turning their work environments into capable settings adapting to challenging situations with the support of their employees. The ability to embrace adversity and become aware of reality without biased perceptions will change the adverse effects of situations into learning opportunities. The MBSR (Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction) program appears as an appropriate method to use to validate the model. The experimental part of the study supported the conceptual model and the literature that employees having mindfulness training (MBSR) have their perceived stress level decreased, and their well-being and resilience (psychological capital) levels increased.

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