

## Impact of Covid-19 on front office-related stress

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**During the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, several critical issues emerged regarding the new ways of interaction between customers and front desk employees, generating new stressors that should be considered to evaluate new methods of stress management. The relationship with the public represents a source of stress for front office employees. Customer-related social stressors can influence psychological well-being and can have different pathophysiological effects on the organism that, as a result, affect the job performance of the worker. Various coping strategies can mitigate or exacerbate the discomfort perceived by the employee, leading to a positive stress response (mitigation) or to a disadaptive one (exacerbation) reaching burnout syndrome at the very end. Numerous studies underline the need to improve customer service behavior, the necessity to create a client-centered behavior and highlight the role of supervisors in stress management and reduction.**

Frontline workers are under immense and unprecedented pressure working during the COVID-19 pandemic, putting at risk their physical, mental and social well-being. New stress factors making the management of the customer-employee interaction even more complicated appeared during the pandemic. Stricter hygiene standards, social distancing, barriers, obligatory routes and use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) play a major role in exacerbating conflicts, creating an unfavorable environment in predisposed subjects. Frequent absence from work, reduced productivity while at work, burnout, depression and anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), unhealthy behaviors (using tobacco, alcohol or other substances), and an increase in the risk of suicide are among the most frequent harmful consequences on the mental well-being of workers exposed to excessive stress for prolonged periods.

The aim of this review is to discuss the peculiarities

of well-known risks related to customer services in the COVID-19 context, also underlining the possible coping strategies that frontline workers can take.

### *Psychological effects and coping*

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events. There are essentially 2 types of coping: the adaptive one, successful in facing stressful events, and the maladaptive one, unable to sustain the individual in his conflicts (1). Cognitive rumination and social rumination, as a way of social sharing of stressful episodes, belong to the maladaptive coping strategies, and it is known that frontline workers are prone to ruminate after an unpleasant encounter with impolite customers (2-4). Coping strategies have a limitation of effectiveness and burnout syndrome may develop when they are not sufficient. Burnout syndrome is characterized by emotional exhaustion,

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depersonalization and reduction of personal abilities that can occur in people who, by profession, are in constant contact with or take care of others. It is associated with a loss of interest towards people with whom the worker carries out his business. Burnout syndrome is considered more common among women than men and mainly involves young people in the depersonalization process (cynicism) (5). Four major themes of customer-related social stressors (CSS) have been identified: customer verbal aggression, disliked customers, ambiguous customer expectations and disproportionate customer expectations (6), among which, verbal aggression shows the strongest association with job burnout (7, 8). Moreover, disliked customers and ambiguous customer expectations are slightly less related to burnout, while disproportionate customer expectations do not show a significant influence (9, 10).

#### *Pathophysiological effects*

The presence of pathophysiological changes involving different systems is documented as being associated with the aforementioned psychological problems. Gastrointestinal and sleep disorders are among the most common and have been shown to be related to different stressors including interpersonal and role conflicts (11). The level of stress perceived by the individual, for example, is strongly correlated to the development of peptic ulcer and acts as an adjuvant cofactor in combination with the known organic causes (presence of *Helicobacter pylori*, long-term use of aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) (12, 13). In addition, it is well known, both scientifically and empirically, that stress can cause bowel dysfunctions, altering mobility, permeability and gut microbiota (14). Insomnia has a close interconnection with stress and a fundamental role is recognized in the hypothalamic, pituitary, adrenal (HPA) axis in which the release of corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH), adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), cortisol or corticosterone, noradrenaline and adrenaline plays a key role in the levels of attention and arousal (15). Tension-type headache is also heavily related to stress, thanks to the role of second-messenger pathways that are recognized

in pain-generating processes (excessive production of NO, persistent activation of NMDA receptors, etc.) (16). The immune system may also be affected, due to demonstrated interrelationship between the neuro, endocrine and immune systems (17). In fact, a neuroimmune axis has been identified and, through an intricate system of chemical messengers (noradrenaline, serotonin, histamine, neuropeptides, endogenous opioids, TRH, neurotensin), a mutual exchange of information takes place between these systems (18). Furthermore, it has been shown how stressful situations can reduce the level of natural killer (NK) cells, leading to autoimmune disorders and, possibly, to tumors, given the fundamental role of NK cells in the recognition and destruction of cancerous cells (19-23).

#### *Job performance decline*

Customer incivility, with all its consequences, may affect job outcome, leading to a poor job performance, a reduction of extra-role customer service and an increase in turnover intentions (24-26). Employees who are often exposed to unfair treatment by customers tend to experience job dissatisfaction (27, 28). Customer verbal aggression can predict disengagement, defined as a lack of commitment, interest and enthusiasm to work or a workplace, resulting in negative job stances (29, 30). Even minor verbal aggression from a customer can impair the short-term working capacity of front desk employees (31), implying a decrease in their attention regarding the task and a reduction of their courtesy, competence, decision-making, and sales skills (32). On the other hand, high levels of intrinsic motivation can counteract the negative effects of customer mistreatment, resulting in high levels of job performance and, subsequently, in job satisfaction and commitment to the workplace (33, 34). Another factor that can mitigate the effects of customer incivility is the leadership style of the supervisor. In fact, an empowering leadership style, in contrast with the "laissez-faire" one, is able to moderate the emotional burden of customer misbehavior (8, 35). Furthermore, a high level of supervisor support stimulates employees in providing extra-role customer service while facing uncivil customers (36).

### *COVID-19 related stressors*

The advent of the Coronavirus required new rules of access to the workplace and a different management of the relationship between customers and employees in the front office. Empirically, 5 stressors can be identified by these new regulations: stricter hygiene standards, social distancing, barriers, obligatory routes and use of PPE. Cleaning and disinfecting environmental surfaces and personal hand hygiene are among the stricter hygiene standards required during the pandemic. They may induce stress caused by fear of contagion. Currently available scientific evidence shows that the survival time of the virus on surfaces varies depending on the type of surface considered, from several hours (e.g. on paper) to several days (e.g. on plastic and stainless steel) (37). The same distress goes for social distancing, with the lack of clarity regarding the guidelines being a cofactor in inducing strain. The latest findings suggest that physical distancing of at least 1 m is deeply related with protection, but distances of 2 m or more might be more effective (38). Barriers and obligatory routes, predisposed in order to regulate the flow of customers, produce stress, especially in employees, generating a sense of claustrophobia, and in customers, creating the perception of wasting time. The use of PPE, especially in individuals not used to it, evokes distress due to the consequent limitations in dexterity and visibility and because of the discomfort produced by heat stress and liquid loss (39, 40).

## DISCUSSION

### *Our experience and suggestions*

In our experience, frontline workers could adopt different coping strategies to deal with pandemic-related stress. First of all, identify the elements over which you have control and those over which you do not have, in order to implement improvement strategies on the controllable disturbing elements. Social sharing, intended as sharing negative experiences between colleagues, can improve the way in which stress is dealt with. Staying up-to-date and looking for information from reputable sources like WHO and the local health authority on topics

such as case identification, infection prevention and control (IPC) is advisable in order to gain awareness. In this context, online courses from a reputable provider are an excellent source. On the other hand, avoiding information overload, limiting exposure to media coverage, including through social media, and avoiding unverified sources of medical information is appropriate. Cultivating family relationships and staying connected with friends via text or video chat and virtually participate in meals or social activities are able to relieve stress. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet, daily exercise, enough sleep time and, possibly, adhering to prescribed therapies, is fundamental to keep down stress levels and stave off unhealthy coping behaviors such as consuming tobacco, alcohol, or other substances. It is also essential to become familiar with employees' rights and duties; for example, clarifying the rights for compensation and treatment in the event of infection or legal protection from harassment and violence. As previously stated, supervisors play a key role in moderating stress in frontline workers because they provide both emotional and material support, such as job adjustments (e.g. flexible hours, rotation to less stressful tasks), protective gear or further training. Finally, when distress persists and it is harder to cope with daily activities at work, contacting a health professional is definitely necessary. Consider also using local resources that have been developed for the COVID-19 response such as psychological support hotlines and remote counseling services.

All customer-related social stressors have been aggravated by the necessary measures put in place in the pandemic era and, in combination with the newer ones, they could exacerbate conflict in a context of high emotional content. It would be necessary to investigate the effects of these measures on the stress perceived by office workers in direct contact with the public, with the aim of finding solutions that can positively affect the work organization. Under normal circumstances, different methods of stress management and improvement approaches have been proposed, for example: weekly communication meetings to obtain feedback, refresher courses in effective coping strategies, training programs

centered on co-worker/supervisor support strategies and the use of experienced senior managerial employees as mentors (24, 36, 41). Moreover, it has been highlighted that front/back office configurations are functional in creating client-centered care, predisposing the customer to a fair relationship (42). In addition, a system of task clarification and social praise has been suggested, being able to increase employee customer service behaviors (41, 43). In the COVID-19 context, further improvement strategies should be adopted so that stress can be minimized. First of all, workers should be educated and updated on COVID-19-related issues. The training should be calibrated on an all-round knowledge of the coronavirus, with the exclusion of excessively complex themes associated with medical practice that could be confusing. Furthermore, employees ought to be trained on the correct procedures currently adopted, focusing on the explanation of the underlying reasons behind them. This training program would transform front office employees into educators capable of informing customers of the benefits of COVID-19 preventive measures. Trained employees could also mitigate customers stress, making them much more willing to deal with delays and positively affecting their behavior toward front-office workers.

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