



## COUNSELLING AS A PANACEA FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN

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**ABSTRACT:** *The main objective of this paper is to explain and identify the issues of stress during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and how counselling can serve as panacea for it. To do this, several research works was made to collect information in terms of the meaning of counselling, stress, Epidemiological Instances of Stress; casual causes, psychological effect of COVID-19 and also treatment and strategies in which counselling can serve as a panacea during and beyond the pandemic lockdown, since stress is practically common and unavoidable circumstance. This paper seeks to provide information to individuals from all facets of life on the issues of stress during global health crisis and beyond, and also how counselling can serve as panacea to manage and deal with the problem effectively.*

**KEYWORD:** Stress, Counselling, COVID-19, Pandemic, Lockdown, Psychological Effect

### INTRODUCTION

Individuals are known to have experience stress during their lives. Stress is not a respecter of person, though it may be unique and personal, that what may be relaxing to one person may be stressful to another. Nobody is free from bitter moment of survival. The fact remains that we sometimes get happy exciting and glorious moment and at other time experience uncertainties. Currently the world is experiencing a global pandemic of coronavirus disease also known as (COVID-19). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) has declared the outbreak as Public Health Emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020 and pandemic on 11 March. The emergence of the virus has posed serious threat, uncertainties and challenges worldwide. WHO and other relevant agencies suggest that COVID-19 has infected thousands of peoples resulting to psychological trauma and subsequently to death, the number of the victims is on increased every now and then. In Nigeria, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on 27<sup>th</sup> February has diagnosed a 44-years Old Italian citizen in Lagos state. Started from Lagos in February 2020, it has now penetrated all over the country. COVID-19 has directly or indirectly affected many individuals emotionally, economically, politically and socially.

Coronavirus disease is an infectious disease recently discovered in December 2019 at Wuham, China. COVID-19 spread primarily through droplet of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes (WHO, 2020). It was recommended that people should practice respiratory etiquette (for example by coughing into a flexed elbow; washing of hands regularly with soap or alcohol base sanitizer; wearing of nose mask; social distance of 3-4 meters). As at this time, there is no specific vaccine or treatment for COVID-19. However, there are many ongoing clinical trials for the potential treatment. In Nigeria,



NCDC is given update on the daily basis for numbers of infected persons, recovery as well as death. On similar vein, WHO is providing update information as soon as clinical findings become available.

The wide spread and increased in the numbers of the infected persons of the COVID-19 has serious put panic and fear to individuals which has affected their daily routine resulting to different psychological alignment such stress. Nevertheless, three (3) things are for sure; firstly, COVID-19 is real; secondly, COVID-19 has no vaccine; and thirdly counselling can help. What is then a counselling?

Counselling is a learning-oriented process, which occurs usually in an interactive relationship with the aim of helping a person learn more about themselves and to use such understanding to enable the person to become an effective member of society (Salawu & Abdulkadir, 2011). Akinade (2001) defined counselling as a set of procedures used in assisting individuals in solving problems that arise in assisting various aspects of their lives or in assisting them to maximize their overall personal development, so that they could be more useful to the society in which they live. To Oladele (2007), counselling donates a wide range of procedure including advice giving, support in times of trouble or need, encouragement, information giving, and test interpretation. Thompson and Poppen (1972) also defined counselling as a person-to-person relationship in which one person helps another to resolve an area of conflict that has not been hitherto resolved. Denga (1986) indicated that counselling is a personalized dialogue, interview or interaction between the client or counsellee experiencing problem and the counsellor who tries to render help. He describes it as “personalized dialogue” due to the fact that problems brought by the clients are of private nature and require some confidentiality. Gesinde cited in Sambo (2008) view the term counselling as “an in-depth interaction between two or few individuals with the intent of assisting the client to better understand himself in relationship to his or her present and future problems. Thus, counselling focuses basically on areas of nurturing and healing emotionally, problem management, decision making, crisis management, support and life skills training. It is now obvious that, counselling plays a vital role and gain an insight into the origin and development of emotional difficulties, leading to an increased capacity to take rational control over feelings and action.

Effective counselling is a good antidote to stress in general and COVID-19 in particular. Counselling as it involves a relationship between the counsellor and the client in which the counsellor assists the client to explore his difficulties. The client while undergoing counselling is expected to unburden his problems, while the counsellor employs his professional skills in assisting him/her. Techniques such as rapport, empathy, confrontation, probing, confidentiality, and encouragement are used in the counselling relationship. Many individuals are experiencing fear and stress more especially during this COVID-19 lockdown as the number of the infection is on increase on the daily basis. So, it is of important to look at this problem from steam eyes and provide antidote and create awareness for management of stress among individuals as the virus is not a death sentence.

The etymological origin of the word stress makes the term very easy to understand. It is a common word in the field of psychology and psychiatry parlance. Stress in a medical or biological context, is a physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. Melgosa cited in Uzeoshi (2012) explained that stress comes from the Middle English word “stresses” which was the short form of distresses or distress. Dictionary of



Behavioural Science (1988) define stress as a reaction to physical injury, violence, severe losses, danger, separation etc. stress can be produced by high intensity of noise, natural disaster, electric shock and death of a beloved one. Mallum (2000) explained that stress is a very serious problem among people in all sphere of life; business, politics etc. This can cause hypertension and responsible for premature death of many especially men. A moderate dose of everyday stress is not harmful to the psychological and biological functioning of every individual, as everyone need optimum level of stress to survive (Uzoeshi, 2012). Uzoeshi further explains that an overdose stress is harmful and could lead to death. People may die in their sleep as a result of stress, and strain for the burden of the recent pandemic if not address. Stresses can be external (from the environment, psychological, or social situations) or internal (illness, or from a medical procedure). Stress can cause or influence the course of many medical conditions including psychological conditions such as depression and anxiety which ultimately affect the social, emotional, and psychological well-being of an individual. Stress can either be acute or chronic. Acute stress is the amount of stress needed to perform at our best in some life situation for example, giving a public lecture, interview for a new job, examination, fighting etc. It is a normal and positive to life situations and it is transient and last for maximum of 90 minutes. On the other hand, chronic stress occurs when acute stress becomes persistence and prolonged. Every individual therefore is expected to function at the equilibrium level to avoid its harmful effect.

Stress according to Psychiatrists, is mental health issue. Mental health disorders are not uncommon, and the global burden of mental health disorders is projected to reach 15% by this year (2020). By this time, it is estimated that common mental disorders such as stress, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse-related disorders, will disable more people than complications arising from AIDS, heart disease, accidents, and wars combined. This is an astonishing statistic and poses serious questions as to why mental health disorders are not given much more attention that it currently receives.

Stress is a serious disorder that involves emotional, behavioural, cognitive and physiological changes that are severe enough to change person's daily routine (functioning). The victims may feel hopeless and think of death or suicide. Research shows that prolonged periods of stress which releases the hormone cortisol can decrease proper cell function, thereby contributing to numerous emotional and physical disorders including depression, anxiety, heart attacks, stroke, hypertension and immune system disturbances that increase susceptibility to infections. Research suggests that a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors play a role in stress. Stress can occur along with other serious illnesses, such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and Parkinson's disease, and can make these conditions worse and vice versa.

### **Psychological Effects of COVID-19**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly sweeps the world, it is inducing a considerable degree of fear, worry and concern on the population at large among certain groups in particular, such as older adults, care providers and people with underlying health conditions. From the counseling perspective, some of the effects of this pandemic as new measures are introduced- especially quarantine, isolation, social distancing, use of face mask, restrictions on social gathering include the following:



1. Fear of having COVID-19: As a known fact, COVID19 is a novice disease in Nigeria, hence virologists as well as physicians have little or no knowledge on it, yet this virus disease is everywhere on our media houses (both local and international). Not all what we heard on the media is correct and accurate, some stories begin to circulate showing towns and cities full of death bodies, this created fear and confusion which led to individuals to emotional difficulties.
2. Career related anxiety: The corona virus disease pandemic has forced employers and businesses to change the way they operate. Recently, a Nigerian airline, Air Peace, has sacked over 70 pilots across its fleet. It also reduced staff salaries by up to 40 per cent. The management of the airline however linked the pilot's disengagement to the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this lockdown, many businesses were closed, commercial motorcycle (achaba) was banned, motor parks were closed putting different jobs at risk. The pandemic has hit every corner of the economy, so badly that it has become very impossible to live without reviewing salaries and wages of employees.
3. Lack of individual space: As more than 25 million people are placed on lockdown in parts of Nigeria in an effort to curtail the spread of coronavirus, poor people in congested neighborhoods are worried about how they will cope (BBC, 31st March, 2020). Most people find it very difficult to remain indoors because of lack of spaces that will accommodate them and their families.
4. Loneliness: People experienced more depression and loneliness during the early COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new study by Indiana University researchers. The investigation looked at the prevalence of depression and loneliness during the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, when social distancing and other restrictions were put into place, they found that depression and loneliness were being experienced at considerably heightened rates.

### **Counselling as Panacea for Stress Management during COVID-19 Pandemic**

Only few ministries, companies, association industries/organizations have employees counselling programme presently (Fortune, 2012). With the recent global health crisis, Nigeria as nation most individuals, companies, and groups are faced with the current phenomenon of stress as a result of the COVID-19 and little or none of them have panacea for it. Some of individuals are prone to stress due to the COVID-19 and some as the kind of personality they are. Thus, the needs for counselling arise. Individuals benefit from understanding what help counselling can provide. So many aspects of an individual day-to-day living causes stress ranging from work, school, home, societal/environmental, religious stress, current COVID-19 pandemic and economic meltdown being experienced over the country and globally. Presently the world over, some employer of labour can no longer afford to pay their staff as it used to be and also cannot provide the adequate incentives, and material needed to work effectively. This therefore in turn, affects the workers physically, emotionally and socially.



Counselling provide remedies to stress. Firstly, ministries, industries/organizations should deem it to create the office of a counselling employee and employ a professionally trained counsellor/psychologist to carry out the following functions:

1. **Advice:** the giving of advice requires a counsellor to make judgment about a counsellee problem and to lay a course of action. Thus, stressed individuals need advice on how to cope with stress and also workers need to be advised on how to manage conflicts in their place of work
2. **Reassurance:** this is a way of giving courage to persons going through problems and making them feel confident that they are pursuing a suitable course of action. Counselling provide this remedy for stress
3. **Clarified thinking:** this tends to be a normal result of emotional release, but a skilled counsellor can aid this process. In order to clarify the counsellee thinking, the counsellor serves as an aid only to refrains from telling the counsellee what is right. Further, not all talking. All or part of it may take place late as a result of development during the counselling relationship. The result of any clarified thinking is that a person is encouraged to account responsible for emotional problems and to be more realistic solving them.
4. **Reorientation:** another function of counselling is reorientation of the counsellee. Reorientation is more than mere emotional release or clear thinking about a problem, it involves a change the employees physics self through a change in basic goals and values. For example, it can help recognize and accept their own limitation. It is largely a job for professional counsellors who know it uses and limitation and who have necessary training.
5. **Resolve conflict:** counselling resolve conflict in an industry in that cases where there are conflicts, the counsellor/psychologist present should be able to resolve a conflict that arises from management and staff to ensure maximum productivity and job satisfaction.
6. **Innovation:** the counsellor/psychologist can also reduce stress in the ministries by introducing new ideas/measures that will relieve workers from stress and make working condition conducive and also try out some negotiation on behalf of the staff with the management. Example of such innovative ideas include planning a get together for management and staff where they will get to rest from work and interact with each other properly, negotiation for welfare scheme for workers and if possible, pay arrears.
7. **Training, recruiting and promotion:** the industrial psychologist/counselling psychologist also qualified to train staff and also to evaluate them from time to time and see their level of performance to ascertain if they are due for promotion or incentives.





8. **Communication:** counselling can also improve both upward and downward communication in the industry. In an upward direction, it is a key for employees to express their feeling to management. As many people have said it, often the top managers in an organization do not know how those at the bottom feel. The act of counselling initiates an upward signal and if the channels are open some of these signals will travel higher. Counselling also achieves downward communication because counsellor help interpret company activities to employees as they discuss problems related to them and when cordial relationship exists between management and staff, it helps to reduce stress and depression in the place work.

*Source: Coined from function of counselling: Davis and Newstorm in organizational behaviour (7<sup>th</sup> Edition) pg 48-482.*

## CONCLUSION

Finally, Sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, despairs, feeling down, withdrawal from social contact, loss of sleep, poor appetite, having a loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities these are symptoms familiar to all of us and more especially during this global health crisis, but, if they persist and affect our life substantially, and it may be stress (This can only be confirmed after series of diagnosis by experts in behavioural sciences, clinical psychology and medicine). Stress is different from the fluctuations in mood that people experience as a part of normal life. Temporary emotional responses to the challenges of everyday life do not constitute them. Likewise, even the feeling of grief resulting from the death of someone close is not itself stressed if it does not persist. Stress is not normal but it is inevitable. There causes are permanent aspects of human lives. The factors are intertwined with our daily lives routine, so let live our life to the fullest by consulting counselling psychologist.

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