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## Contact Center Healthcare Worker Stress Levels During Times of Rapid Change

Christine Dvorak  
christine.dvorak@go.winona.edu

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**Contact Center Healthcare Worker Stress Levels  
During Times of Rapid Change**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the Department of Leadership Education  
College of Education  
of Winona State University

by

Christine V. Dvorak

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Science

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<a href="#">Chapter 1: Introduction</a> .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	1
Problem Statement .....		2
Purpose of the Study .....		3
Background of the Problem .....		3
Research Questions .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
Limitations/Delimitations .....		5
Definition of Terms.....		5
Summary .....		5
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....		8
Overview of the Problem .....		9
Factors Contributing to Stress.....		10
Change Fatigue .....		11
Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) .....		11
SARS, COVID-19 and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) Outbreaks.....		12
Theoretical Framework.....		12
Origin of the Problem.....		13
Leadership Response.....		15
Summary .....		15
Chapter 3: Research Methodology.....		17
Research Design.....		17
Sample and Setting .....		18

Instruments.....	18
Data Collection Procedure .....	19
Data Analysis .....	20
Summary .....	21
Chapter 4: Results .....	22
Introduction.....	22
Description of Sample.....	22
Data Analysis .....	22
Summary .....	29
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions.....	31
Discussion and Conclusions .....	31
Leadership Implications.....	34
Recommendations for Future Research .....	35
Summary .....	36
References.....	37
Appendix A.....	433
<u>Appendix B .....</u>	<u>435</u>
<u>Appendix C .....</u>	<u>436</u>

## **Introduction: Chapter 1**

Stress levels of healthcare workers are at an all-time high. Recent research has shown that several factors create anxiety for healthcare workers such as increasing workload, long hours, expanding job demands, a reduction in work control and autonomy to name a few (Meese et al., 2021). The COVID-19 virus impacted workplace stress in healthcare organizations when it was announced as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020,). Healthcare organizations during the pandemic, felt the pressure of personal protective equipment shortages, high employee absenteeism, and rapidly changing protocols.

Prolonged stress often leads to burnout which can be extremely problematic for healthcare organizations, causing employees to lose empathy for the patients that they support (Meese et al., 2021). When healthcare employees are struggling with well-being, it can impact the overall patient experience as it can be incredibly hard for employees that are emotionally exhausted to show care for themselves and others (Clouston, 2019). When this occurs a negative patient experience may result which not only impacts the care provided but also the business outcomes of the medical organization.

Research has explored how stress impacts front line staff employees within healthcare organizations yet one study outlined that more research is needed to better understand the stress levels of support roles within healthcare organizations as a gap has been identified (Billings, 2021). Contact center employees working in healthcare, continue to experience rapid change and elevated patient expectations which may be increasing stress and burnout. It is vitally important to understand how stress is impacting these crucial behind the scene's roles. Healthcare organizations need to understand if support staff are experiencing similar levels of stress as

workers that are on the front-lines during times of rapid change. The knowledge of this information will give leaders clear ways to offer support to employees. This introduction will present the purpose of the study, the background of the problem, limitations, delimitations, and a definition of terms.

### **Problem Statement**

Healthcare organizations are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and burnout. Leaders of healthcare employees need to understand what staff need in order to feel psychologically safe during times of rapid change. Rapid change will continue to be a normal part of working in healthcare which means leaders need to understand how to support staff. Many studies focus primarily on healthcare workers on the front line. Little is known about how times of rapid change have impacted the stress levels of support staff in a healthcare setting. There is a gap in knowledge of whether healthcare workers in contact centers are experiencing the same levels of stress as front-line healthcare workers during times of rapid change.

Healthcare contact center employees must be agile and adjust to constantly changing information and protocols as they often are the first point of contact when patients call a medical facility. Leaders need to deploy various tactics to support staff when handling the change management of frequent change. The question that remains is whether the support, should be the same type being offered to staff providing face-to-face care. It is critical for leaders of healthcare contact centers to understand how employees are handling times of rapid change in order to offer the best support.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change with healthcare staff working behind the scenes in a contact center. This study will focus on contact center employees working in a healthcare setting where rapid change is frequent and how this impacts individual stress levels. The research currently shows that burnout and increased stress is on the rise for the front-line staff working in healthcare (Meese et al., 2021). To better support contact center employees, it will be imperative to understand the causes of stress and burnout in their roles. Once that is established, leaders can begin to strategize on ways to best support their staff and their well-being to ensure the patient experience remains optimal. What has not been established is whether the same tactics can be used for both the patient facing and non-patient facing employees. Several studies have shown that leaders can deploy specific tactics to psychologically support their staff when their well-being is in jeopardy (Adeyemo et al., 2021; Meese et al., 2021).

This study will be conducted through a survey software program titled Qualtrics, observations and interviews using open-ended questions with current contact center employees working in a healthcare setting. The research approach uses a mixed methods approach.

## **Background of the Problem**

Leadership support is critical in healthcare organizations as staff continue to experience rapid change. One specific study was able to pinpoint several themes that employees value from their leaders. Even though this study was done during the pandemic the themes echo what employees need from leadership daily such as transparent communication, feeling safe, being appreciated, being heard, and providing the resources needed to do their job well (Adeyemo et al., 2021). These six themes focus primarily on responses from patient facing healthcare workers.

Healthcare employees working in contact centers interact with patients daily. Although interactions are not face-to-face, contact center employees deal with staff shortages, rapidly changing process flows, and revisions to standard operating procedures. Contact center employees often spend time reassuring patients that may feel scared, anxious, or uneasy about traveling for medical care. Contact Center employees handle emotionally volatile patients that share frustrations with delays, reschedules, and a lack of access due to backlog from the pandemic. A recent study explored the factors that contribute to high distress in healthcare teams. It was discovered that all healthcare workers that participated in the study were at risk for elevated stress levels suggesting focus on their well-being would be important (Meese, et al., 2021). The gap in knowledge in several articles articulates that more exploration is needed to understand the stressors' healthcare workers are experiencing during high stress situations.

Another concept that is impacting stress and burnout among healthcare workers is the increasing frequency of morally stressful situations. When healthcare workers face stressful situations, this often increases their burnout as it can have a perceived negative impact on their personal set of values (Jokwiro et al., 2022). Employees may feel they are not providing the level of care that they expect to provide according to their personal beliefs and values. One study explained that burnout has several negative impacts on the patient experience such as lower patient satisfaction, a reduction in the quality of care and potentially increased medical errors (De Hert, 2020). This is yet another reason why it is critical for healthcare organizations to understand the impact of stress on their staff as it clearly impacts the patients that they serve.

### **Research Questions**

To determine how times of rapid change impact stress levels of support staff in healthcare contact centers, the following research questions will be used.



RQ1. What are the factors contributing to stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?

RQ2. What interventions can healthcare leaders utilize to reduce stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

This study was voluntary and limited to healthcare employees working in a contact center in one medical organization in 2022. The scope is narrow, focusing on contact center employees working behind the scenes and not providing face to face care to patients. The survey could have limitations due to the honesty of the participants.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms support this research study.

**COVID-19** - Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (World Health Organization, 2021, para. 1).

**Contact Center** – Department that manages customer interactions through various communication channels such as phone, text, instant messaging, and written communication. They also handle inbound and outbound calls to communicate with customers (Maza, 2020, para. 1).

**Front-line** – Front-line health care workers are those directly providing services where they are most needed, especially in remote and rural areas (Frontline Health Workers Coalition, 2022, para. 2).

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 provided the purpose and background of the study. Several research questions were introduced along with study limitations and delimitations. There is also a section to cover

key terms. There are many studies that have explored the stress levels of front-line healthcare workers during times of rapid change and how leaders can support staff. It is important to understand how times of rapid change impact stress levels of healthcare workers that are not providing face to face patient care. A study of stress related experiences for the non-patient facing staff will determine the factors behind stress and how the organization can better support employees during times of rapid change. Leaders of healthcare organizations need to ensure all employees feel supported and have guidance. High stress situations will often occur with little warning or time for planning. If more is known about how stress impacts staff, leaders will have tactics that can be deployed quickly and efficiently. When organizations go through sudden rapid change, time should be set aside to better understand approaches to use in the future when similar events occur.

Chapter 2 consists of a review of literature to highlight previous studies that support how stress can impact healthcare employees leading to burnout and negative impacts on patient care and where gaps in the research have been identified. This section will include a look into the theoretical framework that supports the area of inquiry for this study. This chapter will also include the significance of the study.

Chapter 3 covers the research methodology. The research design will be explained along with the research sample. The research questions will be identified and the rationale for the study. There are several other elements that will be explored, including the study setting, instrument use and data collection procedures.

Chapter 4 reviews the findings of the study and shares key results. This chapter will also share characteristics of the study and a description of study participants.

Chapter 5 explains if the study findings are similar or different than previous studies. This chapter also includes a conclusion about the study and how it impacts leadership within organizations.

## Chapter 2 Review of Literature

The recent pandemic is not the first event that has brought forward rapid change for healthcare workers forcing employees to adapt to chaotic work environments. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change and how that impacts the stress levels of contact center employees in a healthcare setting that do not have face to face patient interactions. The research questions include: RQ1. What are the factors contributing to stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change? RQ2. What interventions can healthcare leaders utilize to reduce stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?

In this chapter, several key components are discussed. The chapter starts with a search of terms placed in a table format, that was used to find literature for this area of study. The second section includes an overview of factors contributing to stress and how healthcare workers have adapted to times of rapid change during previous pandemics. The third section covers the theoretical framework that supports the study of inquiry. The last section covers an origin of the problem based upon previous studies.

Figure 1

Keywords and Phrases

### *Keyword/Keyword Phrases & Alternatives*

- COVID-19/Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome/Middle East Respiratory Syndrome
- Stress in healthcare
- Leadership in healthcare during pandemics
- Front-line staff effects of pandemic
- Contact Centers
- Support Staff in healthcare
- Burnout in healthcare
- Rapid change in healthcare
- Work related stress

- *Change fatigue*

The Darrell W. Krueger Library at Winona State University was the primary source used for researching literature. Several databases were used including Business Source Premier, EBSCO, Pub Med and Google Scholar.

### **Overview of the Problem**

Healthcare employees that work in a challenging environment often struggle with excessive demands from patients which can impact their engagement and desire to provide quality care (Borrelli et al., 2022). Borrelli et al. (2022) stated that human suffering and workload pressures are sources of stress in many healthcare workers. The concept of burnout has been studied in recent decades and healthcare is one of the highest risk groups to develop burnout symptoms. There are many factors that contribute to burnout for healthcare workers which in turn can increase turnover, medical errors and reduce efficiencies within an organization (Reith, 2018). According to Reith (2018) the recent stressors are stemming from the implementation of electronic health records. Reith (2018) noted that this new tool for medical care has increased clerical burden on providers often resulting in increased work hours and burnout.

Contact center employees are often faced with high emotional demands which can contribute to a reduction in well-being, motivation, and increased turnover (Alcover et al., 2020). Alcover et al. (2020) explained that support by an organization may result in high levels of employee motivation and well-being which can result in higher customer satisfaction, higher productivity, and financial success which benefits all parties. Work related stress has an enormous impact on healthcare organizations as it often increases absenteeism and turnover

while reducing job commitment and productivity which can lead to errors and patient complaints regarding the quality of care received (Karadzinska et al., 2014).

Schaefer & Moos (1993) stated that healthcare work stressors fall into three domains which include: relationship stressors, task stressors, and system stressors. The relationship stressors stem from interactions with co-workers, supervisors, and other staff where stress can occur due to communication problems, lack of teamwork and conflicts with others (Schaefer & Moos, 1993). The task stressors originate from duties that employees are required to perform in their job and how prepared they are to do those tasks. The stress arises from patients that are uncooperative, a lack of knowledge and competence, and having to deal with emotionally sensitive patients (Schaefer & Moos, 1993). The last domain is system stressors which relate to the overall management of the work unit and resources available to staff. The stress that arises in this domain comes from heavy workload and understaffing (Schaefer & Moos, 1993). It is important to understand the factors that contribute to stress in contact centers so leadership can offer appropriate support.

### **Factors Contributing to Stress**

Healthcare organizations are facing rapid change primarily due to advances in technology, changing disease patterns and new treatments that are quickly being identified (Nilsen et al., 2020). Technology changes include advancements in electronic health records where providers are expected to document their work and perform increasing clerical burden related to regulatory and quality initiatives (Nilsen et al., 2020). Healthcare organizations also face increasing pressure to meet societal norms and patient expectations. As noted in one study, patients often expect greater access, a positive experience and to have a say in their care and any

decision making (Nilsen et al., 2020). These factors contribute to rapid change in healthcare organizations and increased stress levels of stress and burnout.

High rates of organizational change continue to have effects on employee health and well-being. According to Nilsen et al. (2020) a reduction in organizational commitment, reduced productivity, work-related stress, emotional exhaustion, and mental health issues are just a few of the effects that organizational change can have on healthcare employees.

### ***Change Fatigue***

Change fatigue is another issue that can impact healthcare workers. The introduction of meaningful use standards by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid, has impacted how healthcare workers utilize the electronic health record. The standards are in place to improve the quality, safety and efficiency of healthcare and are often tied to financial incentives (Mayer & Hammelef, 2013). The meaningful use standards contribute to increased clerical burden for healthcare workers which can increase stress due to additional workload.

Previous pandemics can provide insight into how employees previously adapted during times of rapid change.

### ***Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)***

The SARS outbreak was discovered in Asia in 2003 and lasted about six months. The disease spread through more than two dozen countries. The SARS outbreak provided healthcare organizations with key takeaways that could be applied to future pandemics.

The research work of Maunder et al. (2008) shared lessons around how healthcare organizations need to have supportive and collaborative teams in place prior to the start of a major event to protect staff from undue stress. Maunder et al. (2008) explains the importance of effective training to ensure staff have the skill sets needed for positions, tactics for coping and

psychological safety. Another key point Maunder et al. (2008) explained was the importance of supervisors valuing the viewpoints of staff in decision making procedures along with handling items within the work unit in a fair and transparent manner. Several best practices can be utilized from the previous pandemics when leading healthcare center employees.

### ***SARS, COVID-19, and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) Outbreaks***

When reviewing past pandemic approaches a cross sectional study by De Brier et al., (2020), was performed using information from SARS, MERS, and COVID-19. This team of researchers provide several considerations to protect the mental health of healthcare workers. De Brier et al. (2020) articulated that support from the organization was critical. De Brier et al. (2020) explains that leaders should provide an opportunity for employees to feel heard and validate their feelings. The other key factors of research suggested that leaders create work environments that are safe while working to reduce the amount of change along with increasing control the employee has over their work (De Brier et al., 2020). These tactics help safeguard the mental health of health care workers. Leaders may create an open space for employees to share concerns and offer unlimited support as employees work to balance work/life stressors. Leaders have control over changing job demands and can bring in employees early in the process to assist with buy-in and necessary changes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theory is used in qualitative research to shine a light on how the study uses the knowledge gained from the research (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Theory can help create boundaries, the direction of the research, and the analytic approach that the researcher will take (Collins & Stockton, 2018). This study utilized the transactional theory of stress and coping to explore the challenges support staff in healthcare face during times of rapid change.



The transactional theory of stress and coping is a theory of emotion which focuses on how an individual processes a difficult situation and how that stressor impacts the individual's emotional response (Wanzer et al., 2005).

As Folkman and Lazarus explained in 1984, individuals respond to a stressful event by an initial assessment on whether the event is harmful physically or in terms of self-esteem or core beliefs. In a secondary appraisal the person considers if there are resources to manage the stress which can result in a coping strategy (UKessays, 2018). Coping strategies are either problem based or emotional based. If the stressor is problem based it will be perceived as a challenge, but one that can be managed or removed. If the stressor is emotional based and considered a threat that cannot be resolved, the coping strategy of avoidance, distancing and acceptance are often deployed (UKessays, 2018).

People continuously look for threats to their well-being. If a threat is identified, they start to consider strategies to deal with the stress (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010). Within a healthcare contact center, there are several strategies that can be used to respond to the threat. Employees when exposed to stress, may choose to ignore the stress, talk to their manager about the stressor to try to reduce or eliminate the stress, or may leave the organization (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010). Understanding the type of stressor is key in order to determine the appropriate coping strategy for an individual to use in order to move forward.

### **Origin of the Problem**

Due to previous pandemics, there is research data, stating healthcare workers experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, and a reduction in their overall mood due to extreme pressure, putting many at risk for burnout (Blake et al., 2020). Blake et al. (2020) shared that leaders in healthcare need to support staff by being transparent and maintaining a safe space during times

of rapid change. The researchers determined through stakeholder feedback that there was a need to supply staff with support through digital options that focus on well-being (Blake et al., 2020 p. 13). Using various leadership tools supports employees and protects their mental health.

Grailey et al, (2021) reported staff working during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced burnout, changes in team members due to redeployment, and increased workloads. The impact of reductions in personal protective equipment also created a new level of stress for healthcare employees working on the front line.

Frontline staff are not the only employees impacted by stress during periods of rapid change. Norhayati et al. (2021) suggested that non-healthcare providers experienced similar stressors even without direct contact with COVID-19 patients. Non-healthcare providers were impacted by increased work and fear of infection even though these providers were not treating sick patients.

Horn et al. (2021) shared that stress increased due to rapid and unplanned work reorganization and that healthcare workers need support during times of rapid change when their roles are impacted. As the pandemic worsened many employees were asked to work in different capacities to cover absent staff and to assist with increased workloads. The current pandemic has impacted every single role within healthcare organizations leading to an increase in overall stress and burnout.

Billings et al. (2021) focused on 46 qualitative papers that covered different pandemics over the past 20 years used meta-synthesis to reveal eight key themes. The themes expressed by Billings et al., (2021) prove to be useful in the current pandemic, but also when planning for future areas of rapid change within healthcare organizations. The themes focus on various topics such as adequate safety equipment, volumes of work to reduce burnout, and the importance of

just in time training (Billings et al., 2021). The remaining themes consisted of maintaining transparent communication, enhancing peer support focusing on mental health training, balancing work/life demands, reducing stress and moral injury fatigue, and mental health monitoring (Billings et al., 2021).

### ***Leadership Response***

There are many common themes in research papers written about how to lead healthcare workers during times of rapid change. Adeyemo et al. (2021) explained that during times of rapid change, leaders should involve staff in decision making, be as transparent as possible, and be empathetic when communicating. These are just a few of the ways that leaders may support staff in order to help reduce stress.

Resilience enables healthcare workers to improve stress, potentially reduce the risk of burnout and maintain a well-being during times of rapid change (Brown et al., 2021). The same study goes on to share that during times of rapid change frontline healthcare workers desire support from their peers, leaders, and the organization (Brown et al., 2021). Staff need to know leaders and team members are there to provide guidance and support.

Adeyemo et al. (2021) stated there are six recurring themes when leading healthcare workers during times of rapid change. These themes were identified as what healthcare workers desired from leaders during the start of the pandemic (Adeyemo et al., 2021). Six themes discussed were clear communication, safe working conditions, schedules with flexibility, various forms of appreciation, being present and providing the right resources to do their jobs (Adeyemo et al., 2021). This information can assist healthcare leaders in providing support teams need to stay engaged, motivated, and focused on providing quality care during times of rapid change.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 2, there were several sections that covered the literature review. The first section shared a table of the search terms used for this area of study. In section two, an overview of the problem shared factors that contribute to stress and rapid change in healthcare and a few outcomes that were discovered from previous pandemics. In section three, the theoretical framework was discussed that was used for this area of study. The transactional theory of stress and coping provides a solid guide as the research is analyzed. The last section covered the origin of the problem which looked at literature studies that focus on the causes of stress among healthcare workers and how leaders can respond.

Chapter 3 covers the research design and sample size used to understand factors contributing to stress for contact center employees in a healthcare setting and the interventions leaders can use to reduce stress for staff during times of rapid change. Chapter 3 covers the survey method and how the data was collected and analyzed.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

Mixed methods research links both qualitative and quantitative approaches together to create a more holistic understanding than achieved by either alone (Michigan Medicine, 2017). The mixed method approach uses both statistical trends and stories to study human problems (University of Michigan Family Medicine, 2022). Qualitative research starts with an assumption and the use of a theoretical framework to assist the researcher in addressing a problem by understanding the meaning an individual or group ascribes to a human problem (Creswell, 2012). Quantitative data is typically displayed through numbers and statistical data. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change with healthcare staff working behind the scenes in a contact center. This chapter includes the research design, participant sample, research setting, instruments and the data collection process that was used for this study.

#### **Research Design**

The convergent design of mixed methods research combines quantitative data from surveys and qualitative data from open ended interview questions. The data from both sources is then reviewed to see if the data merges and is comparable. The overall study design will be mixed methods. The qualitative approach is used when the researcher needs a better understanding of an issue. This approach empowers individuals to share their point of view about the issue through stories and narratives (Creswell, 2012). The quantitative approach is used to assist with drawing conclusions through survey tools. To determine how times of rapid change impact stress levels of support staff in healthcare contact centers, the following research questions will be used: RQ1. What are the factors contributing to stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change? RQ2. What interventions can healthcare

leaders utilize to reduce stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?

This study uses a convergent mixed methods approach with multiple methods to gather data and facts through observations, online surveys, and interviews within a contact center where participants work in their normal daily setting. The research type was deductive using the transactional theory of stress and coping.

### **Sample and Setting**

The participants for this study were randomly selected individuals working in a contact center in a healthcare organization. Within the contact center a normal day consists of varying volumes of incoming phone calls to schedule medical appointments. Contact center staff are also responsible for making outbound calls to assist patients with scheduling appointments. The individuals in the contact center also juggle multiple high priority tasks such as last minute reschedules due to provider ill calls, monitoring wait lists, managing communication messages through various communication channels, incoming faxes, processing medical records, and managing internal test and consult orders. Contact center staff are also working in a hybrid manner where some employees are on campus while other employees are teleworking.

The option to participate was voluntary and individuals were able to opt out at any point during the study. The research subjects were either observed during a normal workday, asked to fill out an online survey, or participated in a one-on-one interview for this study. The survey was sent to 190 participants and five participants were asked to answer interview questions.

### **Instruments**

The instrument in this mixed methods study is the researcher. The data will focus on factors contributing to stress in their roles during times of rapid change. Online surveys will

consist of Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The interviews include several open-ended questions.

Qualtrics software was used to assist with analyzing data and identifying common themes. Those themes allow for further exploration during one-on-one interviews. The expected outcome is to establish common stressors and how leaders can respond to employee needs to reduce stress and burnout in healthcare organizations.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The data for this study was compiled using multiple methods after the IRB was approved as exempt status. The data collected through online surveys was confidential with no identifying characteristics of the participant. The one-on-one interview information was kept confidential and the only identifier was the word participant and the interview number.

The online survey asked participants how often during times of rapid change they felt stressed, if the appropriate amount of work was assigned to them, and what parts of their current position bring high levels of stress during times of rapid change. The survey also inquired about frustrations, emotional factors, and challenges they faced during times of rapid change. The last part of the survey asked the participants what the organization could do to minimize their stress during times of rapid change.

The one-on-one interviews focused on three primary questions. The first question focused on times of rapid change at work and what the participant did to keep their stress level manageable. The second question focused on how the participant's peers helped them adjust to the new changes and whether their help had a positive or negative impact on their stress level. The last question focused on having the participant share a few ways in which their supervisor

helped to reduce their stress level while implementing the new change. The information obtained during observations was also kept confidential with no employee identifiers.

### **Informed Consent**

An initial email was sent randomly to employees working in the contact center to see if they were interested in filling out the survey. Standard language was in the survey to state that responding to the survey constituted their consent and that the study was voluntary and they could stop participating at any time. A follow-up email was sent one week later as a reminder if participants were interested in filling out the survey.

Interview participants also gave consent to participate in the study. There were no identifiable characteristics in their responses that could be traced back to the participant. The one-on-one interviews consisted of three open-ended questions. The interviews last between 15 and 30 minutes.

The data is stored on a secure personal server within the organization's firewall where only the researcher has access to the data. The data was kept private and will be destroyed three months after the study is completed. There are no identifiers linking the responses back to individual participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used for the survey questions. A thematic approach was used to analyze the interview questions for this mixed methods study. A thematic approach allows the investigator to keep the research questions in mind along with focusing on the aim of the study and using a theoretical framework to help explain the knowledge gained (Grad Coach, 2022). The thematic approach focuses on analyzing the data in a way that bias is minimized as the



researcher continues to review the data and identify themes (Grad Coach, 2022). With this approach the researcher should keep an open mind and expect the unexpected (Grad Coach, 2022). The thematic approach suggests that the researcher keeps detailed notes and takes advantage of any visualization techniques such as graphs to share common themes that the data is expressing (Grad Coach, 2022). The thematic approach allows the researcher to trust their analysis.

Triangulation allows the researcher to use multiple methods or data sources to help develop an understanding of the problem (Carter et al., 2014). Triangulation is used in qualitative data to test the validity of the information provided during the study (Carter et al., 2014). The data for this mixed methods research study was done in a method triangulation manner which uses multiple methods of data collection focused on one specific issue (Carter et al., 2014). This study focused on the triangulation method using observations, online surveys and one-on-one interviews that were used to gain knowledge around the factors creating stress during times of rapid change for contact center employees.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3 the research methodology was explained. This chapter included the research design, rationale and included the research questions. The research setting, population, the sample, and the selection of participants along with instruments and data collection was shared. Finally, the data analysis approach was described.

In Chapter 4, the results of the research study are thoroughly explored using the transactional theory of stress and coping. This chapter shares the knowledge gained as research questions were explored with study participants.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to explore the factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change with healthcare staff working behind the scenes in a contact center. There is a gap in knowledge of whether healthcare workers in contact centers are experiencing the same levels of stress as front-line healthcare workers during times of rapid change. The research questions for this study include: RQ1: What are the factors contributing to stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change? RQ2: What interventions can healthcare leaders utilize to reduce stress for support stress in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?

The first part of this chapter provides the results from the Qualtrics online survey. The second part of this chapter provides the results from one-on-one interviews with contact center staff.

### **Description of Sample**

Ninety-four contact center employees voluntarily completed the Qualtrics online survey. There were five individuals that agreed to do a one-on-one interview where three additional questions were asked.

### **Data Analysis**

The findings of the two research questions were obtained from a nine question Qualtrics Survey and a three-question one-on-one interview. The findings were analyzed through Qualtrics Software and a thematic approach.

To explore the factors contributing to stress in healthcare contact centers, several survey questions were asked in regards to the first research question. RQ1: What are the factors contributing to stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?

Survey Questions (SQ) used to answer the hypothesis are below:

SQ1: During times of rapid change, how often do you feel highly stressed in your role? (Likert Scale: Always, Very Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never)

SQ2: I have an appropriate amount of work assigned to me? (Likert Scale: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither agree nor Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly Disagree)

SQ3: What parts of your current position bring you the most stress during times of rapid change? Choose your top three stressors. (Options included: Incoming Phone Calls, Epic Scheduling System, Workqueue Management, In Basket Management, Instant Messaging, Co-workers, Productivity Expectations)

SQ4: What factors contribute to stress during times of rapid change in your role? Select the top 3 stressors you experience. (Options included: Job Demands, Work Environment, Volume of Work, Time Pressures, Communication Issues, Lack of Teamwork, Not Being Prepared for Change)

SQ5: During times of rapid change at work, what is something that frustrates you?

SQ6: What are the emotional factors contributing to stress in your role during times of rapid change?

SQ7: What challenges in your role contribute to stress during times of rapid change?

SQ8: What are the most stressful aspects of your role during times of rapid change?

Survey question one read “During times of rapid change, how often do you feel highly stressed in your role?” The responses were Likert scale and out of 94 responses 67% of the participants identified that they always or very often felt highly stressed in their role during times of rapid change. About 29% of the participants sometimes felt highly stressed in their role during times of rapid change. In response to survey question two which read, “I have an

appropriate amount of work assigned to me” out of 94 responses 54% of the participants strongly agreed/somewhat agreed that they have an appropriate amount of work assigned to them.

Participants somewhat disagreed/strongly disagreed that the appropriate amount of work is assigned to them making up 38%. In response to survey question three, “What parts of your current position brings you the most stress during time of rapid change (choose your top three stressors)” participants identified the top three stressors which included: incoming phone calls (24%), productivity expectations (19%), and work queue management (16%). In response to survey question four, “What factors contribute to stress during times of rapid change in your role? Select the top three stressors you experience” the top three factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change included: volume of work (23%), job demands (20%), and time pressures (18%).

The first open ended question was question five, “During times of rapid change at work, what is something that frustrates you.” There were three themes that emerged in the responses. The three themes included: Not being prepared for the change (39%), high volumes of phone calls/patient frustration (15%), and lack of communication (10%). When exploring the theme of not being prepared for the change, many participants felt there was not adequate time dedicated to learning about the change prior to implementation. They felt more time dedicated to learning was needed. Participants eight and 15 provided this information about not being prepared for the change:

“Not having enough time to prepare along with being asked to work overtime in order to complete the required training.”

“It is frustrating when there is not enough training to learn of rapid changes. We are given a small amount of information and are expected to know all the details/instructions

of the change, but it is never enough. We do not have any extra time in our department to focus on the change in advance. It is always a “learn as you go” process because of short timing, short staffing, technical issues within the training module, and a lack of information/examples.”

Another theme was high phone call volumes which can make it difficult to handle changes when the participants may be moving slower due to a learning curve or a system change. Often patients can become frustrated which increases the frustrations of staff. Participant 41 stated the following regarding high phone volumes/patient frustration theme:

“Phones are very busy plus all the other tasks that need to be done. We often do not feel like we accomplished anything and the numbers keep going up.”

The last theme around communication also created frustration for participants as it was either too much or not enough to ensure they were properly prepared for the change being rapidly implemented.

Participant 37 and 67 provided this information about communication:

“Often in times of rapid change, communication is either lacking or there is too much communication and it is difficult to keep up with the changes.”

“When changes come out of the blue, with no explanation or rationale. We have no idea that a change is coming or a chance to give input. The impact of multiple changes on top of each other that are supposed to make things more efficient in fact seem to have slowed everything down as the learning curve takes some time for an office this size with the minimal training and prep, we receive.”

The second open ended question was survey question six which read, “What are the emotional factors contributing to stress in your role during times of rapid change?” Three main themes

were identified with the responses from participants which included: fear of failing/anxiety (47%), not providing good patient care (15%) and frustration (6%). Several participants shared that during times of rapid change the fear of failing was a big emotional factor. Participant one stated the following which focused on fear of failing:

“Fear of failing or messing things up. Not being able to remember it all and concerned that I am no longer smart enough to do my job.”

Participants felt unable to provide the level of customer service they expect of themselves when they were struggling with change and system changes. Participant four and 12 stated the following which focused on not providing good patient care:

“Due to increase inefficiencies with changes, I feel I am not providing as good a service to patients as I want to and as they deserve.”

“Feeling like I am unable to provide the necessary patient care when I am stressed/frustrated during times of rapid change. I am a quick learner but when things do not work correctly it reflects on the customer service that I provide to patients which I take very personal.”

The third open ended question was survey question seven which read, “What challenges in your role contribute to stress during times of rapid change?” Three themes emerged which included: staffing/access (28%), leadership response (22%), and communication (8%). Many of the participants expressed that not having enough staffing or access to complete patient itineraries was a common challenge that created additional stress during times of rapid change. Participant 13 stated the following about the staffing theme:

“Challenges are staffing, we are never fully staffed or need additional help.”

Participant 21 stated the following regarding how leadership poses a challenge:

“Leadership is not always available to help when struggling with new things or if you have questions on how to do something.”

Many felt during times of rapid change leaders need to be accessible to help with questions and to clarify process flows rather than being in meetings. The participants’ felt leadership was not always available to assist with questions. The last theme of communication is another challenge that many face especially now working in a remote environment. Participants may need a rapid answer to a question but need to wait until another team member frees up and can respond via instant messaging.

Participant nine stated the following regarding communication:

“Having to read many emails while receiving many phone calls. We cannot do both at the same time.”

The fourth open ended survey question was survey question eight, “What are the most stressful aspects of your role during times of rapid change?” Two themes emerged which were phone calls (32%) and leadership (12%). The biggest issue many participants expressed was how stressful it can be to handle phone calls when trying to manage a new change whether that is system or process related. Participant 22 stated the following about phone calls:

“Navigating challenges while having to take an onslaught of phone calls from patients.”

The other issue that was stressful was leadership as they often were unable to answer or escalate issues with the new change. This poses a level of stress on the team when looking for support and guidance from their supervisory team. Participant 43 stated the following about leadership:

“Leadership seems to know the same amount about the change that we do, and are not able to answer questions we have about the change.”

To explore the factors contributing to stress in healthcare contact centers, one specific survey question focused on the second research question. “What interventions can healthcare leaders utilize to reduce stress for support stress in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?”

Survey question nine was asked, “What can the organization do to minimize your stress during times of rapid change?” Several themes were identified for this question including: staffing/access (42%), systems thinking (36%), and leadership (13%). Participants clearly felt that adequate staffing and access is one way the organization can minimize stress during times of rapid change. If areas have enough staff, employees can better focus on process flow changes and feel comfortable slowing down a bit as they adjust to the change. Participant one stated the following about staffing/access:

“Additional support so teams do not feel bogged down by the day-to-day expectations so the work still gets done.”

Many participants felt that the organization needs to do a better job of evaluating the proposed change through systems thinking to determine all the potential impacts the change will have on downstream areas before implementation.

Participant 43 stated the following about systems thinking:

“If implementing a change, look at the change from all angles to determine what questions, glitches, or negative outcomes that may arise.”

One-on-one interviews were performed with five individuals currently working in a healthcare contact center. These individuals were asked three open-ended questions that supported the two primary research questions being used in this study. The first open ended question was, “During times of rapid change at work, what have you done to keep your stress level manageable?”



Participants identified tactics they use at work and outside of work. The common themes included: focusing on quality of work versus quantity of work, having the option of overtime to better manage the workload, understanding the why behind the change so they can focus on the task at hand, and taking stretch breaks along with walking. The second open-ended question was, “During times of rapid change, how have your peers helped you adjust to the new changes? Did their help have a positive or negative impact on your stress level as the change was being implemented?” Participants shared two main themes on the positive impact peers can have during times of rapid change. They shared that when team members understand the change and are available to share knowledge and ideas with each other their stress level is more manageable. Participants noted that they prefer to avoid peers that are negative during times of rapid change. The third open-ended question was, “Think back to a recent change in your work unit. Can you share a few ways in which your supervisor helped to reduce your stress level while implementing the new change?” Participants identified several themes for this question including: being heard, having a voice at the table to share ideas for improvement, having frequent huddles, and having leaders available to troubleshoot issues real time. The participants shared that having a leader available to answer questions and listen to frustrations can help reduce stress during times of rapid change.

### **Summary**

This chapter focused on the findings of what factors contribute to stress during times of rapid change in contact centers. The researcher used a survey and one-on-one interviews to gather data for this study. There were 95 participants in this study. During times of rapid change 67% of the participants felt highly stressed. In terms of workload, 54% felt they had an appropriate amount of work assigned to them. Factors that contribute the most stress in contact

centers during times of rapid change include: incoming phone calls, productivity expectations, and managing the work queue. The other main sources of stress identified by participants were the volume of work, job demands, and time pressures. Participants identified that the biggest frustrations during times of rapid change were not being prepared for the change, high phone call volumes, patient frustrations and lack of communication. Participants identified three main emotional factors that contribute to stress which include: fear of failure/anxiety, not providing good patient care, and frustration. Participants identified several challenges in their role that contribute to stress including: staffing/access, leadership response, and communication. Participants identified phone calls and leadership as the most stressful aspects of their job during times of rapid change. When focusing on how the organization could minimize stress during times of rapid change, participants identified three themes: staffing/access, systems thinking, and leadership. Interview participants identified they currently manage their stress by focusing on the quality of work versus the quantity of work, being able to work extra hours to manage the workload, understanding the why behind the change and taking breaks to stretch and walk. Interview participants shared two themes on how peers help reduce stress during times of rapid change by: understanding the change and being available to share knowledge and ideas. Interview participants shared several ways that leaders have helped during times of rapid change in the past. Those tactics included: when leaders can listen to the team, having a voice at the table to share ideas for improvement, having frequent huddles, and having leaders available to troubleshoot real time issues. Chapter five contains a discussion of the results along with leadership implications and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change with healthcare staff working behind the scenes in a contact center. This chapter discusses the key findings, compares those to the literature, shares how this information can impact leadership moving forward, and provides an awareness of where future research is needed.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The transactional theory of stress and coping was used for the theoretical framework. According to the transactional theory of stress and coping, individuals evaluate how events affect emotions and how a cognitive assessment is used to deal with stress and coping (Janse, 2021). According to the theory, individuals often use three types of stress management. Individuals deal with stress in a problem-oriented way, emotion-oriented way, or assessment-oriented manner (Janse, 2021). During the initial assessment, individuals assess situations as positive, irrelevant, or potentially dangerous (Janse, 2021). If the situation is considered stressful an assessment occurs on different levels. This assessment looks at items such as challenges in situations which are controllable, threats where loss is expected, and damage or loss after the damage has already taken place (Janse, 2021). The transactional theory of stress and coping shares that known behaviors of response to stress include: fleeing, fighting, denying, changing or behavioral alternatives (Janse, 2021). As stressful situations occur in healthcare contact centers, employees often react to rapid change in various manners. As outlined by the transactional theory of stress and coping, employees will either fight the change, deny the change, or embrace the change all which can occur at different time intervals. Leaders need to be able to meet employees where they are in the assessment process of the change in order to reduce their stress levels.

The research questions used for this study include: RQ1: What are the factors contributing to stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change? RQ2: What interventions can healthcare leaders utilize to reduce stress for support staff in healthcare contact centers during times of rapid change?

There were several key findings discovered through the research that can be summarized. During times of rapid change, 67% of contact center employees very often or always felt stressed even though 54% felt they had the appropriate amount of work assigned to them. Contact center employees identified that the top three stressors during times of rapid change were incoming phone calls, productivity expectations and work queue management. The literature review shared that healthcare employees that work in a challenging environment often struggle with excessive demands from patients which can impact their engagement and desire to provide quality care (Borrelli et al., 2022).

The main issues contributing to stress during times of rapid change were the volume of work, job demands, and time pressures. The literature review discussed that workload pressures are sources of stress in many healthcare workers (Borrelli et. al., 2022). The issues that frustrate staff the most during times of rapid change are not being prepared for the change, high phone call volumes/patient frustration, and lack of communication. According to the research, contact center participants shared that patient frustration was a key reason for their own frustration during times of rapid change. During times of rapid change, staff often experience a slowdown in the pace of their work output. Patients become upset due to longer wait times in the phone queue which can create even more stress for contact center employees. Also noted in the literature review, excessive demands from patients can impact engagement and a desire to provide quality

care (Borrelli et. al., 2021). The literature review determined that patients often expect greater access and a positive experience (Nelsen et. al. 2020).

The emotional factors that contribute to stress during times of rapid change include the fear of failing, not being able to provide good patient care, and frustration. The literature review identified that employees may not feel that they are providing the level of care that they expect to provide according to their personal beliefs and values (Jokwiro, 2022). Contact center participants identified that one of the biggest emotional factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change was not being able to provide good patient care.

The participants identified challenges in their role that contribute to stress during times of rapid change are staffing/access, leadership response, and communication. Participants also shared that the most stressful aspects of their role during times of change are phone calls and leadership. Contact center participants shared that one of the key challenges in their role contributing to stress during times of rapid change were staffing and access.

The research questions used for this study identified that contact center employees working in a healthcare center are experiencing the same types of stressors as patient facing employees working on the front-line. This statement relates back to the literature review that described various stressors that patient facing staff have been experiencing. When an organization has issues with access both patients and staff become frustrated which contributes to increased levels of stress for employees and a reduction of satisfaction for the patient experience. When employees resonate with organizational values that encompass patient care and the change being implemented impacts their ability to provide good patient care, it often becomes a large contributor to the stress they experience. The literature review highlighted that burnout has a negative impact on the patient experience such as lower patient satisfaction, a

reduction in quality of care, and a potential increase in medical errors (De Hert, 2020). As noted from the literature review the stress of employees has a direct impact on the level of service provided to patients.

The data from this research project has identified the importance that leadership plays in helping to reduce stress for contact center employees during times of rapid change. The literature review shared that employees need transparent communication, to be heard, appreciated, involved in decision making, and the resources to do their job (Adeyemo et. al., 2021). The literature review expressed that it is critical for the organization to support staff during times of rapid change (De Brier et. al., 2020). There were six themes the literature discussed that leaders can use to help employees with change which include: clear communication, safe working conditions, schedules with flexibility, various forms of appreciation, being present, and providing the right resources to the job (Adeyemo et. al., 2021). In alignment with the literature review, participants of this study expressed that organizations should ensure there is adequate staffing/access, a system thinking approach to any new change, and leadership accessibility during the early days of the change. The research participants also shared that leaders can assist with lowering stress levels by listening, allowing staff to have a voice at the table, host frequent huddles to make sure the team is moving forward together, and being available real time to help troubleshoot issues.

### **Leadership Implications**

Leaders can reduce stress for employees during times of rapid change by doing a few key actions. Leaders can make sure their calendars are open during the first few days of “go-live.” This ensures the leader is not at meetings and can be accessible to staff for support, troubleshooting issues and to listen if staff are frustrated. Another key action by leadership is to ensure

the team has the proper resources so they feel empowered as the change is rolled out. Staff also need to understand the why behind the change so they can better embrace the impact on their daily work. This should be done prior to the change occurring and is part of the change management process. Leaders can also verbally tell staff that the focus is on quality versus quantity of work during times of rapid change. When leaders share with staff that productivity levels are expected to reduce as everyone works to upskill on the new change, it removes the pressure to meet normal targets so staff feel empowered to focus their energy on learning and upskilling. Leaders can also offer voluntary overtime for those staff that are interested in keeping the work caught up knowing the slowdown may impact productivity. Leaders also need to keep the lines of communication open during times of rapid change. Leaders may want to consider daily huddles where the team can hear about updates, process flow changes, issues their peers are experiencing or to share work arounds needed if technology issues occurred during the roll-out. Leaders should also focus on making sure each employee has the time they need to complete training modules, test the change, and ask questions prior to the change being implemented. Healthcare organizations may need to consider alerting patients of major changes that may delay care. A call center message alerting patients of a change and potentially longer wait times allows the patient to better understand the reason for the longer than usual delay in speaking to an agent on the phone which may reduce frustrations and how they interact with staff once the call is answered. If leaders can implement the tactics outlined, the staff may experience less stress during times of rapid change. When staff have reduced stress levels, they are able to provide the level of service they have grown accustomed to. Staff learn that change can be a positive part of their role and an important organizational tactic to stay competitive.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It will be important moving forward to do additional research studies to better understand the impact of stress on employees during times of rapid change. One focus of research would be to test the concept of having additional staff to help during times of rapid change. Does having additional staffing during the first few days of an implementation reduce the stress level of employees? Participants also shared that taking deep breaths, walking, and connecting with peers reduces their stress level during times of rapid change. A future research project could be developed to study if stress levels reduce during times of rapid change when staff are purposely scheduled for brain breaks, walking/stretching breaks, and peer connections. These were all items expressed by participants that helped reduce their stress levels during times of rapid change. Organizations may need to try several tactics in order to help reduce the stress level of employees during times of rapid change.

### **Summary**

High levels of stress in contact center employees during times of rapid change can increase burnout which impacts the overall patient experience within healthcare organizations. Leaders can deploy several tactics to reduce the stress on contact center employees which allows individuals to better adapt to the change while reducing the pressure to meet normal productivity levels for the first few days of implementation. When employees are given the resources and support needed, they will not only survive but thrive during periods of rapid change.



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## Appendix A

### Qualtrics Survey

#### Factors Contributing to Stress for Support Staff in Healthcare Contact Centers During Times of Rapid Change

*If you agree to participate, responding to the survey or interview questions constitutes your consent. Participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time. Your responses will be kept anonymous.*

*Click Yes if you agree to participate in this study*

*Click No if you do not wish to participate in this study. Participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time.*

*Please complete the survey no later than September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022.*

Q. During times of rapid change at work, what is something that frustrates you?

Q. What factors contribute to stress during times of rapid change in your role?

Q. What parts of your current position bring you the most stress during times of rapid change?

Q. What are the emotional factors contributing to stress in your role during times of rapid change?

Q. What challenges in your role contribute to stress during times of rapid change?

Q. What are the most stressful aspects of your role during times of rapid change?

Q. During times of rapid change how often do you feel highly stressed from your role?

Always  
Very Often  
Sometimes  
Rarely  
Never

Q. I have an appropriate amount of work assigned to me?

Strongly Disagree  
Disagree  
Neutral  
Agree  
Strongly Agree

Q. What can the organization do to minimize your stress during times of rapid change?



## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

#### Factors Contributing to Stress for Support Staff in Healthcare Contact Centers During Times of Rapid Change

*If you agree to participate, responding to the survey or interview questions constitutes your consent. Participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time. Your responses will be kept anonymous.*

*Click Yes if you agree to participate in this study*

*Click No if you do not wish to participate in this study. Participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time.*

Q. During times of rapid change at work, what have you done to keep your stress level manageable?

Q. During times of rapid change, how have your peers helped you adjust to the new changes? Did their help have a positive or negative impact on your stress level as the change was implemented?

Q. Think back to a recent change in your work unit. Can you share a few ways in which your supervisor helped to reduce your stress level while implementing the new change?

## **Appendix C**

### **Subject Recruiting Letter**

I am reaching out to invite you to participate in a research study being conducted by Christine Dvorak, a master's student in Organizational Leader at Winona State University.

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change for healthcare staff working in a contact center. You will be asked to complete a brief survey about factors contributing to stress. The survey is online and will take about 5 minutes to complete.

Participation is completely voluntary. You may decide to stop participating or withdraw from the study at any time.

If you would like to participate in the study, please go to the Qualtrics survey: (Internal Organization Link)

This study has been reviewed by the Winona State IRB.

Your participation will be a great importance to build knowledge about factors contributing to stress during times of rapid change. For more information, contact Christine Dvorak at [Christine.Dvorak@go.winona.edu](mailto:Christine.Dvorak@go.winona.edu).