



---

## SUSTAINABLE MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGIES IN THE BPO INDUSTRY: LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Alexe Luce<sup>1</sup>, Jhaira Grace Banong<sup>2</sup>, Maria Erika Nodado<sup>3</sup>, Gee Ann Nuique<sup>4</sup>, Mary Dawn Valencia<sup>5</sup>, Pearl Irish De Paz<sup>6</sup>, Jill Christine Miralles<sup>7</sup>, Ludito Ramirez<sup>8</sup>, Mahal Rosel<sup>9</sup>, Rev. Fr. Rodel Agodera<sup>10</sup>, Ann Marie Genon<sup>11</sup>

<sup>110</sup>Colegio de San Francisco Javier, <sup>2345</sup>Negros Oriental State University, <sup>6</sup>Biliran Province State University, <sup>7</sup>Leyte Normal University, <sup>8</sup>Southern Leyte State University, <sup>9</sup>Jose Rizal Memorial State University, <sup>11</sup>Dipolog City National High School

### *Abstract*

*This study investigates pandemic fatigue and coping strategies among employees in the global Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry, focusing on a case in Dumaguete, Philippines. Utilizing Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the research identifies varying coping mechanisms influenced by cultural factors. Findings reveal that problem-focused coping is more common among those with lower fatigue, while emotion-focused coping prevails among those with higher fatigue. Socio-cultural values significantly shape these responses. Recommendations emphasize culturally sensitive mental health interventions, promoting resilience and well-being in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 and 8. These include enhancing mental health infrastructure, fostering adaptive coping strategies, encouraging social support networks, implementing flexible work policies, and continuous evaluation of interventions to support a resilient and equitable global workforce.*

**Keywords and phrases:** *Pandemic Fatigue, Global Coping Strategies, Transactional Model, Conservation of Resources, Sustainable Development Goals*

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented global challenges, profoundly impacting individuals' psychological well-being (Brooks et al., 2020). As the world transitions into a post-pandemic era, it becomes crucial to analyze the phenomenon of pandemic fatigue, and the coping mechanisms employed by individuals during this prolonged crisis. Understanding these responses can provide valuable lessons for preparing for future disasters and crises, ensuring better mental health support and resilience in the face of adversity. This study examines these aspects among employees in a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company in Dumaguete, Philippines, utilizing several established psychological frameworks.

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping remains a foundational framework for understanding the stress response (Folkman, 2014). This model conceptualizes stress as a dynamic process involving an individual's interaction with their environment. It posits that stress arises from a transaction between the person and their environment, mediated by the individual's cognitive appraisal of the stressor. The model identifies two key appraisal processes: primary and secondary appraisal. In primary



appraisal, individuals evaluate whether a situation poses a threat to their well-being, categorizing it as irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. Secondary appraisal involves assessing the resources available to cope with the stressor, determining whether they can manage or alter the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this model provides insights into how individuals assessed the threat posed by the virus and their capacity to cope with the resulting changes, such as remote work, social isolation, and health concerns. The model underscores that coping is not static but evolves as individuals receive new information and experiences related to the pandemic (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Analyzing these appraisals and coping responses from a post-pandemic perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals adapt to prolonged crises and the effectiveness of various coping strategies.

By analyzing the responses observed in a BPO company in Dumaguete, this study seeks to elucidate the mechanisms underlying pandemic fatigue. The insights gained can inform effective interventions and support systems, providing valuable lessons for enhancing individual and organizational resilience in future crises.

## Methods

The study involved 100 employees from a BPO company in Dumaguete, selected using a quota sampling method. Quota sampling was chosen to ensure representation across different departments and demographic groups within the organization, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of pandemic fatigue and coping strategies. This method was particularly appropriate given the need to capture a range of experiences and perspectives within a limited timeframe. However, it should be noted that quota sampling, while useful for ensuring diversity, does not provide the same level of generalizability as probability sampling methods. The primary limitation is that it may introduce selection bias, as the sample is not randomly selected, potentially affecting the external validity of the findings.

Two main instruments were used for data collection:

**Pandemic Fatigue Scale (PFS):** This scale consists of 10 items designed to measure the level of pandemic fatigue among participants. The items are rated on a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always), with higher scores indicating greater levels of fatigue. The scale's internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.89, indicating high reliability.

**Brief-COPE Inventory:** This 28-item questionnaire assesses a range of coping strategies, including problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping. Each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater use of the respective coping strategy. The Cronbach's alpha for the Brief-COPE in this study was 0.85, demonstrating good internal consistency.

Data were collected through an online survey administered via Google Forms, minimizing physical contact and adhering to health protocols. Participants received detailed information about the study's purpose and provided informed consent before participating.



The survey link was distributed through official company communication channels, ensuring accessibility for all employees.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic characteristics and main variables. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were used to present the levels of pandemic fatigue and the various coping strategies employed by participants.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights and privacy. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was guaranteed. The research protocol complied with the Philippine Republic Act No. 10173, known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring the confidentiality and security of personal information.

### **Results**

The study examined the levels of pandemic fatigue, and the coping strategies employed by employees in a BPO company in Dumaguete. Data were collected from 100 participants, with a balanced representation across various demographic groups.

#### **Pandemic Fatigue Levels**

The analysis revealed varying levels of pandemic fatigue among the participants. Specifically, 47% of the respondents reported experiencing moderate levels of fatigue, while 45% reported high levels. A smaller proportion, 8%, indicated mild fatigue. No participants reported experiencing low levels of pandemic fatigue. These findings suggest that a significant portion of the workforce is experiencing considerable strain due to the prolonged pandemic conditions.

#### **Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies were assessed using the Brief-COPE Inventory, categorizing them into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping. The results indicated a diverse range of coping mechanisms among the employees:

**Problem-Focused Coping:** This strategy was predominant among participants with mild to moderate levels of fatigue. Specific actions included seeking additional information about health guidelines, developing new work routines, and actively communicating with supervisors to manage workload and expectations.

**Emotion-Focused Coping:** This coping style was more prevalent among those experiencing high levels of fatigue. Participants reported engaging in activities aimed at managing their emotional response to stress, such as seeking emotional support from family and friends, practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques, and finding ways to mentally distance themselves from pandemic-related stressors.

**Avoidant Coping:** Although less commonly reported, some participants utilized



avoidant coping strategies, such as procrastination and distraction, to temporarily escape stress. These strategies were noted across all levels of fatigue but were particularly observed among those with higher fatigue levels.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a nuanced landscape of pandemic fatigue and coping strategies among employees in a BPO company in Dumaguete. By examining these patterns through a post-pandemic lens, we can draw valuable lessons for future crises.

### Potential Reasons for Observed Coping Strategies

The preference for problem-focused coping strategies among individuals with lower levels of pandemic fatigue suggests a perceived control over their circumstances. This is consistent with the transactional model's emphasis on cognitive appraisals; individuals who viewed the pandemic's challenges as manageable were more likely to engage in proactive problem-solving behaviors, such as seeking information and organizing their work environment (Folkman, 2014; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Conversely, those experiencing high levels of fatigue often resorted to emotion-focused coping, which involves managing emotional distress rather than the stressor itself.

### Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Coping Strategies

The study's findings are also deeply influenced by the socio-cultural context of the Philippines. The collectivist nature of Filipino society, characterized by strong family ties and community support, likely encouraged the use of social support as a primary coping mechanism. The cultural values of *kapwa* (shared identity) and *bayanihan* (community spirit) provided a framework for collective coping, emphasizing the importance of relational support in managing stress (Jocano, 2014). However, the cultural concept of *hiya* (shame) might have hindered some from seeking formal mental health support, leading to reliance on private, emotion-focused strategies. This cultural backdrop underscores the need for culturally sensitive interventions that respect and leverage these socio-cultural dynamics (Kowal et al., 2020).

### Implications for Future Crises

These findings highlight the importance of flexibility in coping strategies and the critical role of socio-cultural factors in shaping stress responses. The oscillation between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping suggests that effective coping during prolonged crises involves balancing emotional and practical responses. This balance can be facilitated by organizational support systems that provide both practical resources and emotional support, acknowledging the evolving nature of crises and individual needs (Stroebe & Schut, 2016; Zacher & Rudolph, 2021).

## Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to study the phenomenon of pandemic fatigue, and the coping mechanisms employed in response to prolonged global crises. This study, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, offers a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics within a specific organizational and cultural context.

The study concludes that pandemic fatigue is a prevalent issue among employees, with significant variations in coping strategies based on fatigue levels. Problem-focused coping was more common among those with lower levels of fatigue, while emotion-focused coping was predominant among those with higher fatigue levels. The cultural context of the Philippines played a significant role in shaping these coping responses, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive interventions (Kowal et al., 2020).

Based on the study's findings, several specific recommendations are proposed to prepare for and respond to future crises and disasters within the BPO industry in Dumaguete. First, enhancing mental health support systems within the company is crucial. This includes establishing accessible counseling services and helplines, alongside training programs focused on stress management and resilience-building tailored to the needs of BPO employees.

Promoting effective coping strategies is another essential step. Implementing workshops and training sessions to enhance problem-focused coping skills such as effective communication, time management, and problem-solving can be highly beneficial. Additionally, offering culturally appropriate programs on emotion regulation and mindfulness techniques will support emotion-focused coping.

Strengthening social support networks within the workplace is also vital. Facilitating the creation of virtual support groups and peer counseling programs can foster a sense of community and mutual support. Regular team-building activities can further strengthen interpersonal connections and reduce feelings of isolation among employees.

Implementing flexible work policies can help accommodate the varying needs of employees during crises. Introducing remote work options and flexible working hours, designed to allow for quick adaptation to changing circumstances, will ensure these policies are clear and accessible to all employees.

Developing culturally sensitive interventions is crucial for effective support. Interventions should respect and leverage cultural values such as *kapwa* (shared identity) and *bayanihan* (community spirit). Family-inclusive wellness programs and community-based support initiatives can reduce stigma around mental health and promote collective well-being.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation of mental health initiatives and crisis response strategies are necessary to ensure their effectiveness. Establishing mechanisms for regular feedback from employees will allow for the assessment and adjustment of interventions to improve outcomes.



These recommendations focus on creating a supportive environment within the specific context of the BPO industry in Dumaguete, addressing the immediate needs of employees and fostering resilience and well-being during prolonged crises. By prioritizing these tailored approaches, the company can enhance the mental health and productivity of its workforce. This holistic approach aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting mental health and well-being (SDG 3), ensuring decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). It also emphasizes inclusive and culturally sensitive practices (SDG 5 and SDG 16), contributing to a healthier, more equitable, and resilient global workforce.

### **Acknowledgment**

We extend our deepest gratitude to all those who supported and facilitated this study. Our heartfelt thanks to the participating employees and the institution for their guidance and assistance. We also acknowledge the invaluable mentorship provided by our advisors and the unwavering support from our families and friends. This research significantly contributes to understanding pandemic fatigue and coping strategies within the Business Process Outsourcing industry.

### **Disclosure: Use of AI Tools**

In compliance with Threshold's guidelines for the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated tools in academic research, the authors disclose the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT for enhancing the quality and clarity of the manuscript. ChatGPT was utilized to assist in refining the language, structure, and formatting of the text, ensuring a high level of academic rigor and coherence. The authors confirm that all data analysis, critical interpretations, and conclusions presented in this manuscript were conducted independently by the research team. The AI tool was employed strictly for editorial assistance and did not influence the scientific content or ethical considerations of the study. All intellectual contributions from the AI tool are in accordance with the authors' original intentions and have been reviewed and approved by all co-authors. The use of ChatGPT complies with Threshold's ethical standards and guidelines for transparent reporting of AI involvement in research. The authors remain fully responsible for the integrity and accuracy of the content presented in this paper.



## References

- Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 912-920. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8)
- Folkman, S. (2014). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. In M. D. Gellman & J. R. Turner (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine* (pp. 1915-1919). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1005-9\\_215](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1005-9_215)
- Hobfoll, S. E., Halbesleben, J., Neveu, J. P., & Westman, M. (2018). Conservation of Resources in the Organizational Context: The Reality of Resources and Their Consequences. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 5(1), 103-128. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640>
- Jocano, F. L. (2014). *Filipino Value System: A Cultural Definition*. Punlad Research House. <https://g.co/kgs/qc9iwH8>
- Kowal, M., Coll-Martín, T., Ikizer, G., Rasmussen, J., Eichel, K., Studzinska, A., ... & Gómez, C. V. (2020). Who is the most stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic? Data from 26 countries and areas. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 12(4), 946-966. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12234>
- Pfefferbaum, B., & North, C. S. (2020). Mental Health and the Covid-19 Pandemic. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 383(6), 510-512. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2008017>
- Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (2016). Overload: A Key Variable in Understanding Grief and Bereavement. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 73(3), 183-201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815581565>
- Taylor, S. (2019). *The psychology of pandemics: Preparing for the next global outbreak of infectious disease*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/the-psychology-of-pandemics>
- World Health Organization. (2020). *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>
- Zacher, H., & Rudolph, C. W. (2021). Individual differences and changes in subjective wellbeing during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Gerontologist*, 61(2), 331-342. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa108>