

# STRESS MANAGEMENT OF CORRECTIONAL PERSONNEL — ENHANCING THE CAPACITY OF MID-LEVEL STAFF

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is an integral part of a person's work life. It can be a positive challenge if it leads to constructive activities. It can be negative if it results to detrimental consequences like illness, poor performance and impaired interpersonal relationships. Stress in the workplace is not about to go away. It seems to be unavoidable, so individuals have to improve and deepen their capacity to handle it (Loehr, 1997).

Stress in the workplace is one of the causes of "poor productivity and burnout on the job" according to the Civil Service Commission. For this reason it issued Memorandum Circular No. 38, s. 1992, the "Physical and Mental Fitness Program for Government Personnel", and Memorandum Circular No. 6, s. 1995 requiring all agencies to adopt "The Great Filipino Workout" as an integral part of the National Fitness and Sports Development Program for government personnel. Both circulars underscore the importance of a healthy and alert workforce. "The Great Filipino Workout" is the physical fitness project that promotes a healthy lifestyle and a regimen of regular physical fitness activities as a strategy to reduce the level of risk factor of heart disease. Government agencies are authorized to allot one hour each week for the conduct of a health awareness programme and twenty minutes daily for the conduct of a wellness or fitness programme. It further requires that a reasonable period of time be included for physical fitness exercises by all participants in seminars and training courses, and those agencies must have a continuing physical fitness and sports activities for officials and employees.

One of the least studied components in the Parole and Probation Administration is the job-related stress of a Chief Probation and Parole Officer (CPPO). In correctional work, he/she is entrusted with the reform and rehabilitation of adult offenders who are released on probation or parole. He/she uses several interventions or activities to bring about or facilitate the positive change in the client's behaviours, attitudes, moral and spiritual values, aside from helping the client acquire skills for livelihood or find employment. He/she plays the role of a counsellor or life coach to the client under his/her supervision. Aside from being a supervisor of the client, the CPPO also conducts an investigation for every referral for probation or parole. In doing his/her varied roles in the workplace, the officer may have experienced stress which could affect his/her productivity at work and his/her physical, emotional and mental well-being.

This paper is an attempt to identify the sources of stress and levels of stress experienced by Chief Probation and Parole Officers (CPPOs) in the workplace. It describes their activities in coping with stress. It also presents their suggestions and recommendations regarding the management of stress to the agency.

The data in this paper are the responses of 68 out of 163 CPPOs who answered the questionnaires sent through e-mail. These officers belong to the category of professional and technical work in a supervisory capacity. Their position requires intensive and thorough knowledge of a specialized field usually acquired through completion of a bachelor's degree or higher degree course. Their position further requires supervisory skills to carry out the basic duties and responsibilities involving functional guidance and control, leadership, as well as line supervision. Among the specific duties of a Chief Probation and Parole Officer are the following:

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- Investigates all petitioners for parole and probation referred for investigation by the proper court or the Administrator;
- Instructs all parolees and probationers under his/her supervision on the terms and conditions of parole and probation;
- Keeps himself/herself informed of the conduct and condition of parolees and probationers under his/her charge and uses all suitable methods to bring about an improvement;
- Maintains a detailed record of his/her work and submits such written reports as may be required by the Administrator or that court having jurisdiction over the parolee and probationer under his/her supervision;
- Utilizes community resources and enlists qualified residents of the province, district or city where he/she is assigned, who are willing to act as volunteer parole and probation aides;
- Supervises the training of volunteer parole and probation aides and oversees the latter's supervision of parolees and probationers; and
- Exercises the supervision and control over all field assistants, volunteer parole and probation aides and other personnel of the parole and probation office.

## **II. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

The respondents were allowed to give multiple responses to the questions in the survey. They were asked to identify the sources of stress in the workplace, describe the level of stress, and identify and describe the frequency of their de-stressing activities within and outside the office. They were also asked to give suggestions and recommendations for stress management in the agency.

### **A. Profile of Respondents**

The ages of the 68 respondents in this survey range from 38 to 64 years old. Their mean age is 48.67 years. Their length of service with the agency, the Probation and Parole Administration, ranges from 10 to 36.5 years. The mean length of service is 23.24 years. Twenty-four of the respondents (35.29%) are males while 44 are females (64.71%). As of 2013, the data for the entire agency show that there are 163 Chief Probation and Parole Officers of whom 50 are males and 113 are females.

### **B. Sources/Causes and Levels of Stress in the Workplace**

The respondents were allowed to give multiple responses to the questions in the survey. Their responses when asked as to the specific causes of stress in their work are shown in Table 1. Their descriptions of this source of stress — Very stressful, Moderately stressful, and Stressful — are in the same table.

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Table 1. Sources and levels of stress in the workplace

Sources/Causes of stress	Level of stress			Total
	Very stressful	Moderately stressful	Stressful	
Inability to meet deadline for submission of reports	5	13	6	24
Voluminous workload/multi-tasking	15	4	1	20
Hard-headed/uncooperative clients	4	9	4	17
Lack of manpower	15	1		16
Subordinates who are indifferent/inefficient	6	3	4	13
Poor office environment/lack of equipment	4	6	2	12
Too much paperwork	6	1		7
Rivalry/animosity among co-workers	4	2		6
Lack of financial support for a programme	4	2		6
No support from management/inadequate consultation	1	3	1	5
Re-assignment	4			4
Seminars/training at night	1	1	1	3
Low travel allowance	2			2
Vague appreciation by some judges of PD 968	1			1
Uncooperative VPAs		1		1
Interventions from politicians/known personalities			1	1

Table 1 shows that among the fifteen sources/causes of stress identified by respondents, the inability to meet deadlines for submission of reports is the modal source or cause. It is possible that the inability to meet deadlines is caused by a voluminous workload or too much paperwork. This voluminous workload may be the result of a lack of manpower.

There are respondents who complained of the poor attendance of their clients during scheduled activities. These clients do not want to comply or follow what they are told to do. There are clients who are labeled “problematic” by some respondents. There are clients who appear to be “bossy” and arrogant. They even engage in name-dropping to foster hesitance on the respondents’ resolve in making them comply. Some clients want to excuse themselves from attending the Therapeutic Community (TC) programme of the office.

Thirteen (13) respondents found “Very stressful” *Subordinates who are indifferent/inefficient*. Since these CPPOs have supervisory functions, they have to deal with their subordinates. There are subordinates who are uncooperative and who do not perform according to standards. There are also subordinates who seem to be disobedient and indifferent. Some subordinates may have misunderstandings with one another. Some appear to be disorganized because they cannot find files when these are needed. The CPPOs also see to it that a harmonious relationship exists in the workplace so that the personnel can work well, and patching up quarrels or misunderstandings can be stressful.

Lack of air-conditioned rooms and computers that are defective are sources of stress of 12 respondents. There are 6 respondents who found it stressful that they are required to implement a programme even if the agency lacks financial support. Re-assignment, considered by 4 respondents as *Very stressful*, is a source of stress since the respondent will be away from his/her family; the period of such reassignment is at most, 3 years. Aside from the emotional cost of being away from one’s family, going home on weekends may mean long travel, which can be physically tiring.

In order to maximize the attendance of the officers in residential training conducted by the agency, the training hours may extend up to 9:00 o'clock in the evening. However, three respondents found this time extension to be stressful.

Intervention from politicians appears to be a rare occurrence and what the officer can do about it is to be candid about his/her stand that his/her work is non-political. There is political neutrality in the civil service.

There may be biases, prejudices, and misconceptions of some people, including judges, towards probation work, and the best that the officer can do is to have a dialogue with them.

**C. De-stressing Activities in the Office**

How do respondents deal with work-related stress while they are in the office? Only 52 responses are shown in Table 2. Sixteen (16) respondents did not give any answers and there were 17 comments and/or answers which could not be used since these did not answer the question correctly.

Table 2. Frequency of de-stressing activities within the office

	Daily	Weekly	Twice a week	Monthly	Twice a month	Twice or four times a year	As the need arises	Total
Doing physical fitness exercises	2		1	4				7
Praying/meditating	5						1	6
Holding staff meetings/dialogues	1	1					3	5
Deep breathing	1						4	5
Practicing time management	4							4
Positive thinking	2						2	4
Sending reminders				1			2	3
Team building					2	1		3
Sharing plans with VPAs			2					2
Reprimanding the staff							2	2
Soliciting funds							2	2
Accepting reality	1							1
Bonding				1				1
Engaging in Wellness activities						1		1
Giving parties for clients						1		1
Consulting with co-workers							1	1
Delegating							1	1
Doing confrontation							1	1
Looking at the trees							1	1
Organizing parties with co-workers							1	1

Physical fitness exercises are the highest de-stressing activity of the respondents, and these may include deep breathing and wellness activities. These activities fit the programme of the government which calls for a regular fitness programmes for government personnel.

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Others find daily positive thinking to be helpful, also praying and meditating, and sharing jokes. Time management and team building are other proactive means. These activities involve modifying thought patterns to make the stressful situation bearable. The power of positive thinking is a potent force which considers problems in the workplace as challenges and opportunities for growth.

The CPPO as head of office may reprimand, confront clients, or send them reminders when needed. He/she reprimands and confronts his/her subordinates when they do not work efficiently as expected.

A policy of open communication in the office is established in the agency. Staff meetings, dialogues and consultations of the CPPO and his/her co-workers enhance teamwork because concerns in the office are shared and co-workers can contribute in problem-solving or decision-making. The CPPO can also delegate tasks to a subordinate officer whom he/she believes is capable of doing the delegated tasks. In this way, the CPPO can attend to other important office matters requiring his/her study, decision and action.

Bonding socially with staff, parties for clients and co-workers are other positive activities to spice up the work life of the employees in an office that can relieve them of stress, albeit temporarily.

Soliciting funds is in answer to the problem of lack of funds to implement the agency's de-stressing programme, although it happens only as the need arises.

Sharing plans with the volunteers (Volunteer Probation Aides) is also a de-stressing activity because the volunteers can contribute ideas on how to improve the programmes or activities for the clients. Volunteers also supervise clients and in some offices, they ease the heavy supervision caseload of an officer.

Accepting reality may be the best solution thought of when the Chief Probation and Parole Officer thinks there is no solution to a problem or stressor facing him/her.

#### **D. De-stressing Activities Outside of the Office**

CPPOs also find ways to relieve their work-related stress through varied activities outside of their offices. This means that on their own they pursue these activities to mitigate their work-related stress in order to give them a sense of balance amidst pressures in their work.

Table 3 shows the kinds of de-stressing activities and frequency that CPPOs undertake outside of the office.

The top four de-stressing activities are doing athletics/sports, bonding with loved ones, praying, gardening/farming. Lumped at fifth place are listening to music, watching television, going to the mall, joining church activities and meeting friends. These various activities may be pursued by the CPPOs in groups or singly. These show the loving and prayerful side of the CPPOs and also their family-grounded leisure activities. The activities also show that they care for their bodies as they are into athletics/sports and gardening/farming, having a massage, going to the beauty parlor, having exercise and walking. On the whole, the de-stressing activities are wholesome.

Table 3. Frequency of de-stressing activities outside of the office

De-stressing activities outside of the office	Frequency									
	Daily	Weekly	Twice a week	Monthly	Twice a month	Twice or four times a year	After office hours	As often as I want	As the need arises	Total
Doing athletics/sports	2	4	2	1					1	10
Bonding with loved ones		8							1	9
Praying	7									7
Gardening/farming		5	1						1	7
Listening to music	4									4
Watching television	4									4
“Malling”		4								4
Joining church activities		3							1	4
Meeting friends		1		2					1	4
Reading	2	1								3
Watching a movie		2		1						3
Having exercise	2									2
Doing household work	2									2
Shopping		1			1					2
Taking out of town trips		1						1		2
Having a massage				1					1	2
Daydreaming/fantasizing									2	2
Surfing the Internet	1									1
Texting a friend	1									1
Going to church		1								1
Doing Facebook							1			1
Taking care of pets							1			1
Going to a beauty parlor									1	1
Attending organization activities								1		1
Cooking and eating									1	1
Walking near the lake									1	1

**E. Suggestions and Recommendations**

After the respondents have identified work-related stressors and the degrees of stress they experienced, they offered suggestions and recommendations as shown in Table 4. Some of these suggestions and recommendations may appear valid, some may not.

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Table 4. Suggestions and Recommendations for Stress Management

Suggestion/Recommendation	Number/Frequency
Conduct seminars/trainings on how to manage stress	10
Conduct <i>Lakbay-aral</i>	6
Organize physical fitness activities	5
Organize weekly/monthly sports activities	4
Visit other places here and abroad for free	4
Give additional allowances/incentives	4
Hire additional manpower	4
Conduct teambuilding activities	4
Attend religious activities	2
Improve working areas	1
Install air conditioners	1
Improve promotion policies and procedures	1
Monitor health conditions of personnel	1
Provide sufficient funding for programmes	1
Stop re-assignment	1
Streamline functions of agency	1
Do tree planting	1
Perform yoga exercises	1
Keep communication channels open	1
Encourage laughter	1
Listen to ideas from rank and file employees	1
If possible, no seminars with activities at night	1
Uniform schedule for physical fitness in all offices and regions	1
Employees have to be taught how to focus	1

The agency has crafted its own Employee Wellness Program. Its objectives are the promotion of healthy lifestyles through regular physical activity, healthy diet and nutrition, regular physical and dental check-ups, weight control and anti-smoking campaigns. It also promotes stress management, drugs-in-the-workplace programmes, and seminars/workshops/lectures on relevant health topics. Information materials on the wellness programme have been distributed within the agency. However, the agency gives the regional directors a free hand in implementing its wellness programme based on the needs and resources of the employees in the region. Thus, it is possible that there are regions that constantly and regularly hold physical fitness activities in the workplaces, while other regions do not. It is possible that the respondents who suggested that physical fitness and sports programmes should be organized may come from regions where the CPPOs or regional directors do not see the need for such activities or consider these the least of their priorities. This could explain why there are suggestions to “conduct of seminars/trainings on how to manage stress,” “organize physical fitness activities” and “organize weekly/monthly sports activities.”

“Lakbay-aral” (study-tour) is an activity that requires funds. It gives government workers the

opportunity to travel and observe the best practices of other government services in other places of the country. For example, CPPOs in a given region may want to observe the best practices of other CPPOs in another region; hence they will travel to that particular region. Since this is an official activity, it follows that the personnel will be given travel allowances. If institutionalized, then, funds for this purpose should be included in the agency's budget.

The suggestions — improvement of working areas and installing air conditioners — are much dependent on the budget of the agency, and where the budget for operating expenses are limited, then these concerns may not be addressed immediately.

Interpersonal relationships are a factor in the promotion of *esprit de corps* or office team spirit. Seminars/trainings on interpersonal relationships need to be a continuing activity and topics should include teambuilding, effective communication, listening to employees, how to focus and humor.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

This paper identified the sources of stress and levels of stress experienced by the Chief Probation and Parole Officers in the workplace. It also identified how they coped with stress within their office and outside of their office. From their responses, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Inability to meet deadlines for submission of reports, voluminous workload/multi-tasking/too much paper work and lack of manpower seem to be interconnected with each other to form as sources of stress. It is possible that the difficulty in meeting deadlines is caused by voluminous workload which in turn is caused by lack of manpower. Overburden appears to be felt by the CPPO.
2. Work performance is dependent upon several factors. Improving the physical work area, like the provision of air-conditioners can cool a stressful situation. Human relations in an office can be improved by doing stress-reducing activities together. Capability trainings can help an employee improve his/her craft, and in this way, stress that comes with feelings of incompetence and inadequacy can be reduced.
3. The implementation of the Therapeutic Community (TC) programme of the agency appears to be taxing to CPPOs because this programme has no funding and the CPPOs have to rely on their own resources just to implement the programme. Issues in the clients' attendance in the programme are also stressful because there are clients who would not attend the programme every month due to their poor attitude, and there are those who are interested, but they cannot attend regularly due to lack of fares.
4. CPPOs need to have regular supervisory and management trainings to be able to better motivate and discipline employees and address work-relationship problems.

### IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The agency has initiated steps or actions in response to the government's call for developing a healthy workforce in terms of managing stress felt by its personnel in their daily discharge of their functions. Yet, there seems to be a lack of coherent and regular stress management programmes for its personnel, specifically for its Chief Probation and Parole Officers who are the direct providers of probation and parole services. The following recommendations are offered:

1. An in-depth study is needed to identify the sources or causes of stress faced by Chief Probation and Parole Officers;
2. Based on the results of this in-depth study, the agency must address the organizational stressors and how to cope with them;
3. The agency must come up with a coordinated and coherent stress management programme.

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To institutionalize this programme, funds should be allocated;

4. The top officials of the agency must ensure that there will be funds for the Therapeutic Community (TC) programme; otherwise, it could cause undue stress to the implementers;
5. Hiring and deployment of field probation and parole officers should be rationalized; for instance, field offices with high supervision caseloads are to be given the priority in the assignment of these additional personnel;
6. Seminars in management and supervision of subordinate personnel should be done regularly; and
7. Seminars in handling "problem clients" must be part of the agency's training to enhance the capability of CPPOs.

The right persons on the job are the organization's best asset to realize its mission and vision in the society. An organization therefore should be concerned with the physical well-being and emotional and mental health of its employees. To show this concern, a coordinated and coherent stress management programme is a must.

#### IV. APPENDIX

##### References:

- Loehr, J.E. (1997). *Stress for success: The proven programme for transforming stress into positive energy at work*. New York: Times Book.
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