

EXPLORING THE ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF DETERIORATING MENTAL HEALTH OF HEALTH WORKERS

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Abstract

The purpose of our research is to investigate the factors leading to the decline in mental health among healthcare workers and to explore the resulting consequences. By delving into these aspects, we aim to illuminate the factors that can bolster healthcare professionals' mental and emotional well-being, thereby enhancing overall healthcare delivery. The research utilized a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews and surveys as primary data collection methods. These methods were strategically implemented across various healthcare centers to ensure a diverse representation of healthcare workers. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged to share their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to their mental health and well-being in healthcare. Twelve interviews were collected from healthcare organizations to view the insights and analyze the data. Our study reveals the challenges faced by healthcare workers in their daily lives. From personal to professional, they earn a low salary despite giving 100% in their professional life; they even work overtime, which disturbs their family life as well. Hospitals should organize training and counseling for healthcare workers and provide them valuable salary packages along with paid holidays to consider the importance of the mental health of healthcare workers. That is why no one will go abroad, so we have enough healthcare workers willing to serve in our beloved country, and that is the only way to overcome the shortage of healthcare workers.

Keywords: mental health, healthcare workers, organizations.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the fast-paced and dynamic world of healthcare, the tireless efforts of doctors, nurses, and various other medical professionals stand as a cornerstone in the battle against diseases and the provision of patient care. These healthcare heroes have long been admired for their dedication and unwavering commitment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented global health crisis, has uncovered the hitherto unnoticed vulnerabilities within the healthcare system and the mental well-being of those who dedicate their lives to caring for others. (Siegrist, 2021). At the outset of the pandemic, as healthcare workers confronted the unknown, research studies began to unveil a disheartening truth. The individuals who had pledged to safeguard the well-being of patients were struggling with their own emotional and psychological well-being. The weight of their responsibilities was compounded by the pandemic's unique challenges, leading to a surge in emotional distress. This included feelings of sadness, anxiety, depression, and stress. (Duc21). The statistics are not just numbers on a page; they are a testament to the emotional toll endured by healthcare workers. During an extraordinary crisis, a staggering 22% of healthcare workers reported experiencing depression, anxiety, and stress. (Duc21) Even more alarming, 69% of doctors admitted to feeling depressed, and 13% had thoughts of self-harm (National Institute for HCM, 2021). These figures state the critical importance of addressing the mental health of healthcare workers, who have faced unparalleled challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Consider the emotional burden they bore. They worked tirelessly, often enduring extended hours with unwavering dedication to their patients, all while facing a shortage of essential protective gear. The persistent fear of contracting the virus that they were battling added another layer of anxiety. On top of these challenges, healthcare workers were bombarded with false information and rumors, exacerbating their stress and uncertainty. Tragically, many healthcare workers fell victim to the virus they were fighting on the front lines. During the initial days of the outbreak, 29% of patients in hospitals were healthcare workers, exposing the extent of their exposure and risk. (Duc21) Beyond the emotional and psychological strain, this situation exacted a physical toll on these healthcare heroes, putting their health and well-being on the line. As we progress further into the 21st century, it becomes increasingly evident that an in-depth exploration of the antecedents and consequences of deteriorating mental health among healthcare workers is an urgent and essential undertaking. The mental toll on healthcare workers is not new; past outbreaks, such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, presented similar challenges. Although services have been established to provide support to healthcare workers during times of crisis, the need for further research to determine the most effective ways to support their mental health remains paramount. The focus of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mental health of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This encompasses issues like depression, anxiety, insomnia, and stress. (Jianbo Lai, 2020) The core objective is to identify the root causes of their emotional distress and, more crucially, to determine how we can provide meaningful support to alleviate their burdens. Furthermore, this research delves into the role of trust, or the absence of it, within the healthcare workplace and how it influences the mental health of healthcare workers. (Maria J. Serrano-Ripolla, 2020). Nurses, who are grappling with staff shortages and heavy workloads, find it especially challenging to access support. The scarcity of personnel places them under considerable stress as they endeavor to meet the demands of patient care. It is crucial to recognize that different healthcare workers, such as nurses and doctors, face unique challenges, even though they operate within the same healthcare environment (Søreide, 2019) Therefore, our research endeavors to probe deeply into these distinct challenges. By scrutinizing the reasons behind the deteriorating mental health of healthcare workers, our research aims to provide insights into how they can be better supported. This, in turn, will enhance their well-being, allowing them to perform their essential roles more effectively, and thus bolstering the healthcare system from its very core. The consequences of deteriorating mental health among healthcare workers extend beyond the individual level and have profound implications for the healthcare system and society as a whole. High attrition rates, reduced quality of patient care, and increased healthcare costs are some of the far-reaching consequences (Malgrorzata Maria, 2022). Healthcare professionals often grapple with high levels of job-related stress due to long working hours, patient care complexities, and life-or-death decisions (san VanDeVelde-Coke, 2019) Research by Aiken and her colleagues demonstrated a significant association between nurse burnout and patient outcomes, highlighting the importance of addressing stress levels among healthcare workers.

Furthermore, the lack of adequate support systems and resources for healthcare workers is another antecedent of deteriorating mental health. (Mauder*, 2019) emphasized the importance of organizational and societal support for healthcare workers during times of crisis, as inadequate support exacerbates mental health issues. It is also essential to consider the economic impact on healthcare systems. Deteriorating mental health among healthcare workers can have significant economic consequences. (Lindsay H. Dewa, 2021) estimated that the cost of mental health-related work disability among healthcare professionals is substantial, with implications for healthcare system sustainability. The mental well-being of healthcare workers has garnered increased attention, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research delves into the antecedents and consequences of deteriorating mental health among healthcare workers, which is crucial for sustaining high-quality healthcare services. Addressing the challenges faced by healthcare professionals is essential for maintaining a resilient and effective healthcare system. The study aims to offer insights that will inform policies, interventions, and support systems to promote the well-being of these indispensable individuals who serve on the front lines of healthcare.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Background

Mental health among healthcare professionals is of critical concern, impacting their well-being and the quality of patient care. This review examines the antecedents and consequences of declining mental health in healthcare workers, focusing on two key theories: the Job Demands-Control-Support (JDCS) model and the Effort-Reward Imbalance model. These frameworks shed light on workplace stressors and their impact on mental well-being (Min, 2023). By critically examining and synthesizing existing literature within the context of these theoretical frameworks, this review aims to share insights into a complex interplay between work-related factors and the mental health status of health workers. Such insights are imperative for developing targeted interventions and strategies aimed

at safeguarding the mental well-being of healthcare professionals and enhancing the overall resilience of healthcare systems.

The Job Demands-Control-Support (JDCS) model, conceived by Robert Karasek in the late 1970s, emerged as a groundbreaking framework to comprehend the intricate dynamics between workplace factors and employees' psychological well-being. Karasek's pivotal 1979 publication,

"Job Demands, Job Decision Latitude, and Mental Strain: Implications for Job Redesign" (Karasek, 1979) revolutionized conventional stress theories by integrating job demands, control, and support within workplace contexts. This influential work established the foundation for the JDCS model, marking a departure from traditional stress theories by emphasizing the interconnectedness of job demands, control, and social support in shaping employees' mental well-being (Jan Alexander, 2010). The development of the JDCS model underwent significant refinement and empirical scrutiny over subsequent years, enhancing its applicability across diverse occupational settings. Researchers such as Töres Theorell, collaborating with Karasek, played pivotal roles in expanding the model's scope and relevance. Theorell's contributions emphasized the pivotal role of social support as a buffer against high job demands (Robert A. Karasek, 1979) highlighting its significance in mitigating stress-related issues among employees. Furthermore, empirical studies within various occupational contexts, notably within healthcare environments, accentuated the nuanced significance of each component—job demands, control, and support—revealing the critical role of control or decision latitude in reducing stress and burnout among healthcare professionals. The application of the JDCS model resonates deeply with the challenges faced by health workers regarding their deteriorating mental health. In the intricate tapestry of healthcare settings, health workers encounter multifaceted challenges, including high job demands, limited control over work-related decisions, and varying degrees of social support. The relentless responsibilities and emotional demands inherent in-patient care align profoundly with the core aspects delineated by the JDCS model.

The prevalence of high job demands within healthcare environments correlates with the model's premise that excessive demands significantly contribute to stress-related conditions. (Robert A. Karasek, 1979) Moreover, the pivotal role of control or decision latitude in shaping health workers' experiences echoes within this model (Theorell, 1996). underscoring the impact of autonomy in mitigating the detrimental effects of high demands on mental well-being. Additionally, the significance of social support in buffering the adverse impact of stressors aligns with the model's emphasis on supportive workplace environments. The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model, formulated by Johannes Siegrist in the 1990s, stands as a foundational framework aimed at understanding the effects of perceived imbalances between work-related efforts and the rewards received on employees' mental health (Seegrist, 1996). Siegrist's seminal work introduced this model to decipher the intricate dynamics within the workplace, emphasizing the critical interaction between the efforts invested in work and the rewards attained. This theoretical framework was articulated in Siegrist's publication titled "Effort-Reward Imbalance at Work and Health". (Siegrist J. , 1996) marking the conceptual genesis of this influential model.

The ERI model gained prominence for its comprehensive approach to evaluating workplace stressors. It goes beyond the quantifiable aspects of work efforts and rewards, considering qualitative elements as pivotal components. In this regard, "effort" encapsulates both psychological and physical components, denoting the strain associated with job demands, while "rewards" encompass not only financial aspects but also esteem, career opportunities, and job security. Siegrist's model highlights that the perception of an imbalance between efforts exerted and rewards received leads to increased stress and adverse health outcomes among employees. The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model, pioneered by Johannes Siegrist in the 1990s, was initially formulated to understand the effects of perceived imbalances between work-related efforts and the rewards received on employees' mental health. (Siegrist J. , 1996) Siegrist's seminal work introduced this model in the publication titled "Effort-Reward Imbalance at Work and Health" (Siegrist J. , 1996) marking the conceptual genesis of this influential framework.

The development of the ERI model witnessed extensive validation, refinements, and adaptations across diverse occupational domains. Subsequent researchers built upon Siegrist's groundwork, emphasizing the model's relevance in understanding mental health implications in various work settings (Li Yuan, 2021). Its application within healthcare environments, for instance, revealed its pertinence in elucidating the stressors contributing to deteriorating mental health among health workers. Further advancements and empirical studies enriched the ERI model, emphasizing its multidimensionality and applicability in assessing psychosocial stressors within workplaces. Researchers explored nuanced elements of efforts and rewards, considering qualitative and subjective aspects, thereby enhancing the model's explanatory power in understanding employees' mental well-being.

The ongoing development of the ERI model extends into contemporary research, where scholars continue to refine its components and applicability across different sectors. Studies exploring the interplay between efforts,

rewards, and health outcomes persistently evolve, aiming to provide more nuanced insights into the complex relationship between work-related factors and mental health (Natasja van, 2005). The alignment between the ERI model and the challenges faced by health workers in contemporary healthcare settings is evident. Health professionals contend with substantial efforts invested in patient care, often facing challenges in perceiving commensurate rewards for their dedication. The imbalance between the efforts exerted and the rewards received resonates profoundly with the core aspects outlined within the ERI model. This imbalance contributes significantly to stress-related conditions among health workers, affecting their mental well-being and professional satisfaction.

2.2. Critical review

The articles examined factors influencing organizational survival in hospitals over 46 years, emphasizing managerial and technical legitimacy. They found that aligning managerial practices with the institutional environment positively impacted survival chances, highlighting the need for a multidimensional approach to understanding legitimacy. (Martin Ruef, 1998). In 1999 this research explored work-related depression among Caribbean nurses, connecting factors like workload and role conflicts to stress, burnout, and depression. The study broadened existing literature by examining mental health challenges in a distinct cultural context. (V.V Baba, 1999). Findings from focus groups identified six key areas affecting engagement: workload, control, reward, fairness, community, and values. However, the study acknowledged limitations, such as a small and potentially biased sample. (Tambunan, 2009). A systematic review in 2010 explored the impact of common mental disorders (CMDs) on nurses' work functioning. The review revealed associations between CMDs and various work impairments, emphasizing the need for preventive measures in healthcare worker well-being. (Fania R. Gärtner, 2010)

Work Completed and Remaining: Between 1990-2000 and 2001-2010, research delved into organizational survival factors, work-related depression among nurses, and work engagement factors. The studies shed light on the importance of legitimacy, mental health challenges, and engagement elements in healthcare settings. Future research could focus on refining methodologies, addressing sample biases, and exploring the evolving dynamics in healthcare organizations to further advance the field. Additionally, interventions and preventive measures for mental health challenges among nurses could be a critical area for further investigation. Between 2010 and 2015, a comprehensive study delved into the profound impact of the work environment on the mental and emotional health of healthcare workers. Employing regression analysis, the research identified influential factors shaping various facets of the World Health Organization's Quality of Life. Key recommendations emerged, emphasizing the importance of fostering a supportive work atmosphere, morally rewarding staff, and providing ongoing educational opportunities.

However, this investigation had its constraints, concentrating solely on a single hospital and a limited demographic. It acknowledged the absence of certain individuals during the study and the potential lack of complete candor in responses. Moving forward, there is a compelling need for expanded research endeavors to encompass more diverse participant groups and address methodological gaps to ensure the utmost honesty in responses. Moreover, ongoing efforts should be directed toward discovering enhanced strategies for managing stress within the healthcare workplace. (Aristotelis Koinis, 2015). This comprehensive study conducted between 2015 and 2023 examined the repercussions of providing healthcare during viral epidemic outbreaks on the mental health of healthcare workers. (Samuel B Harvey, 2021). Utilizing a rapid systematic review approach, the research incorporated findings from 117 studies to identify factors associated with a detrimental impact and assess available evidence regarding interventions. The meta-analyses revealed concerning prevalence rates for mental health issues among HCWs, with acute stress disorder leading at 40%, followed by anxiety (30%), burnout (28%), depression (24%), and post-traumatic stress disorder (13%). Factors influencing these problems included:

- Sociodemographic aspects (younger age, female gender).
- Social factors (lack of support, stigmatization).
- Occupational factors (high-risk environments, specific roles, lower levels of specialized training, and job experience).

Despite the comprehensive findings, limitations exist, including the reliance on searches from only three databases and initial screening by a single reviewer, potentially introducing bias. The study identified critical risk factors as important targets for future interventions. While the research explored limited interventions, such as educational and multifaceted approaches, it emphasized the urgent need for more robust evidence regarding the impact of interventions on the mental health of HCWs. The study underscores the imperative to explore and implement effective strategies to address the mental health challenges faced by healthcare workers during viral epidemic outbreaks. (BD, Gaohua, & Zhongchun Liu, 2020).

3. RESULTS

The interview data have been analyzed with the qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviews and surveys as primary data collection methods, and nine themes emerged; we can say that our study investigated nine factors leading to the decline in mental health among healthcare workers. Table 2 shows those nine themes, classified into nine different categories. Our first category is "Work Challenges and Stressors", which includes "Shift Challenges", "Mental Strain", and "Workload Burden". Our second category is "Personal and Professional Balance", which includes "Balance and Support", "Quality Time", and "Personal Life Balance". Our third category is "Mental Health and Well-being", which includes "Emotional Impact", "Psychological Struggles", and "Counseling Support". We have also presented some relevant codes to support the theme. We have made a Structure with a complete set of mental health issues, as we can see in Figure 1, and have further described them in detail below.

Table 3.1: Categories, Themes, and Codes

Categories	Themes	Codes
Work Challenges and Stressors	Shift Challenges	Shift Timing Issues Workload, Staff Shortage, Shifts, Lack of Support
	Mental Strain	Stress, Supportive Colleagues, Effective Duty Timings
	Workload Burden	Patient expectations, workload burden, support deficiency, communication conflicts, mental strain
Personal and Professional Balance	Balance and Support	Family Support, Personal-Professional Balance
	Quality Time	Lack of Quality Family Time
	Personal Life Balance	Unbalanced life, professional priority
Mental Health and Well-being	Emotional Impact	Increased Emotions
	Psychological Struggles	Trauma
	Counseling Support	Counseling

3.1. Work challenges and stressors

Our interviews with healthcare workers revealed a prevalent issue: work challenges and stressors significantly impact their mental health. This widespread concern underscores the urgent need to address these challenges to support healthcare professionals' well-being and ensure high-quality care delivery.

3.1.1. Shift Challenges

Due to staff shortages, healthcare workers are forced to work long shifts, increasing stress levels. The extended hours exacerbate their challenges, affecting their well-being and job satisfaction. Addressing this issue is crucial for maintaining healthcare professionals' mental and physical health.

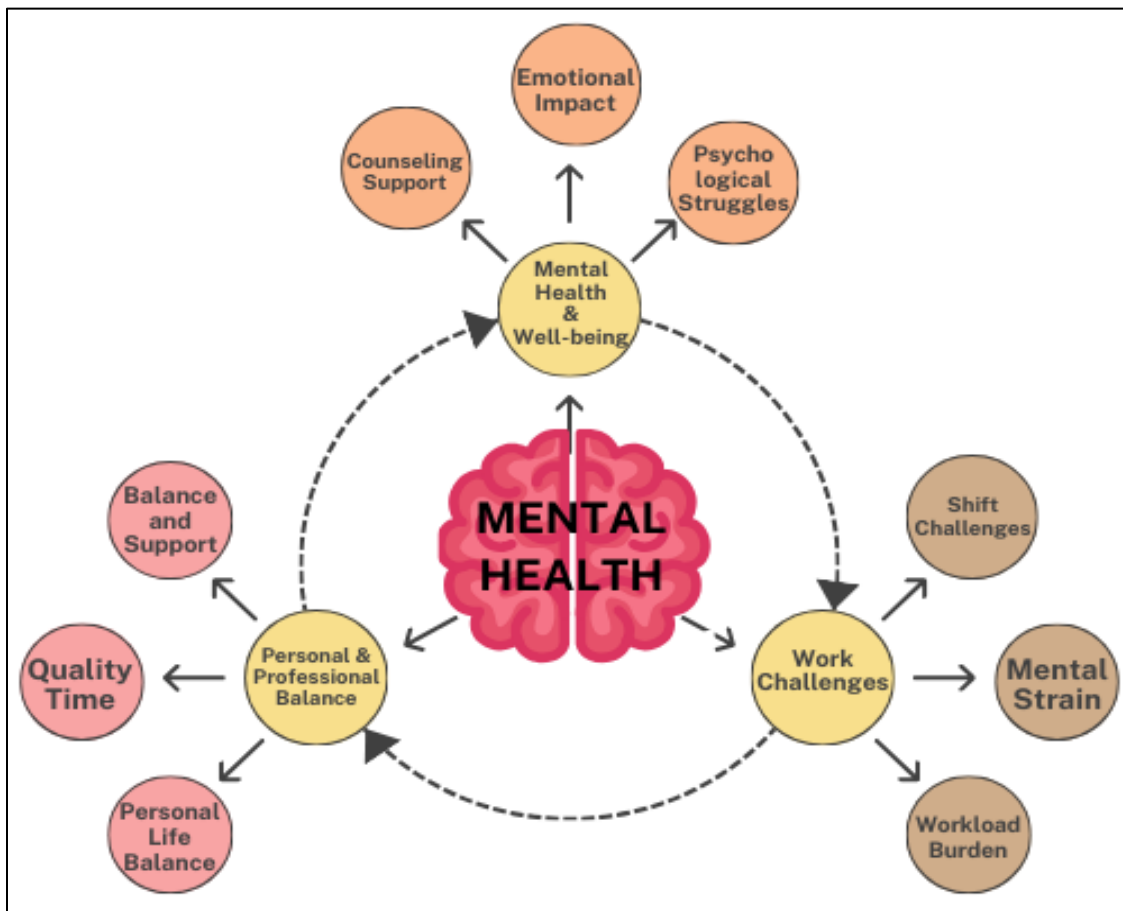
3.1.2. Mental Strain

Mental strain challenges healthcare workers by increasing stress, fatigue, and burnout, compromising patient care and workers' well-being and negatively impacting their own mental and physical health; therefore, addressing mental strain is important to ensure the mental well-being of healthcare workers and the quality of patient care.

3.1.3. Workload Burden

Workload burden, compounded by staff shortages and long hours, affects the mental health of healthcare workers, increasing stress and burnout. Communication conflicts and high patient expectations intensify pressure, impacting job satisfaction and well-being. Addressing these challenges is essential to prevent mental health issues and ensure sustainable healthcare delivery.

Figure 3.1: Our health structure explains the mental health issues, and their categories, among healthcare workers



3.2. Personal and Professional Balance

Personal and professional balance and support from family and colleagues are crucial for healthcare workers. Striking a balance between work and personal life helps prevent burnout and promotes overall well-being. Family support provides emotional reinforcement, while professional support fosters resilience and ensures optimal patient care.

3.2.1. Balance and Support

Balance and support are crucial for healthcare workers, as highlighted by interviews we conducted. Many expressed difficulties in obtaining adequate support from their families and cited challenges in finding time to spend with loved ones. The imbalance between their personal and professional lives was a common concern, with work demands encroaching on their time. This lack of equilibrium affects their overall well-being and highlights the need for better support systems and strategies to achieve a healthier work-life balance in the healthcare sector.

3.2.2. Quality Time

Healthcare workers often struggle to spend quality time with their families due to long, irregular hours and the demanding nature of their work. Emergencies and shift changes can disrupt plans, straining relationships and impacting their well-being. Prioritizing work-life balance is crucial to support healthcare workers and their families.

3.2.3. Personal Life Balance

Our interviews with healthcare workers found that many workers struggle with maintaining a balance between personal and professional life due to the overwhelming priority placed on their professional commitments. They often feel compelled to dedicate extensive hours to their work, leaving little time for personal pursuits or self-care. This imbalance takes a toll on their mental health as they lack opportunities to focus on themselves and their well-being amidst the demands of their profession.

3.3. Mental Health and Well-being

Through interviews with healthcare workers, we discovered the significant emotional impact of their profession on their mental health and well-being. They described experiencing heightened emotions due to the demanding nature of their work, ranging from compassion and empathy to stress and anxiety. Recognizing and addressing these emotions is crucial, as they directly affect healthcare workers' mental health and overall well-being. Providing support and resources to help them cope with these emotions is essential for maintaining their mental health and ensuring they can continue to provide quality care to patients.

3.3.1. Emotional Impact

During interviews with healthcare workers, it became evident that they frequently experience emotional challenges. Despite emotional disturbances, they must maintain composure and focus on their duties. This highlights the emotional resilience required in healthcare, as workers balance personal emotions and professional responsibilities to ensure optimal patient care.

3.3.2. Psychological Struggles

Healthcare workers often face a psychological struggle as they navigate traumatic experiences inherent in their duties. Despite the emotional toll, they employ coping mechanisms such as professional support networks, debriefing sessions, and self-care practices to process and manage the trauma effectively. Recognizing the importance of mental well-being, healthcare institutions increasingly prioritize providing resources and support systems to help workers cope with the psychological challenges they encounter in their roles.

3.3.3. Counseling Support

Through our interviews with healthcare workers, it became evident that they expressed a genuine need for counseling sessions to enhance motivation and cope with stress. Additionally, providing paid holidays is essential to enable relaxation and alleviate the burden of their demanding roles. Recognizing these needs is critical for promoting healthcare workers' mental well-being and resilience, ultimately contributing to the quality of patient care and overall workplace satisfaction.

4. DISCUSSION

The discussion of the research findings in light of the literature review reveals several key insights into the factors influencing healthcare workers' mental health, particularly the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, the qualitative data analysis highlighted prevalent issues such as work challenges and stressors, including difficulties with shifts, mental strain, and workload burdens. These findings resonate with the literature, emphasizing the impact of high job demands, limited control, and inadequate support on healthcare professionals' mental well-being, as elucidated by the Job Demands-Control-Support (JDCS) model (Turner, 2012). The interviews underscored the importance of addressing these challenges to mitigate stress and burnout among healthcare workers. Furthermore, the research elucidated the critical role of personal and professional balance in maintaining healthcare workers' mental health. The struggle to reconcile work commitments with personal life resonates with previous studies, highlighting the significance of work-life balance in preventing burnout and promoting overall well-being. The literature review provided theoretical frameworks such as the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model, which elucidates the detrimental effects of imbalances between work efforts and rewards on employees' mental health. This aligns with the findings

regarding the challenges faced by healthcare workers in prioritizing personal time and achieving a healthy equilibrium between work and life demands (Tsao, 2023).

Moreover, the research shed light on the emotional impact and psychological struggles experienced by healthcare workers, corroborating existing literature on the profound emotional toll on healthcare professionals. The interviews revealed heightened emotions, stress, and trauma among healthcare workers, underscoring the importance of providing adequate support and resources to address these challenges. The literature review highlighted the significance of organizational and societal support in mitigating mental health issues among healthcare workers, as emphasized by studies examining the impact of mental disorders on work functioning.

Overall, the discussion of the research findings compared with the literature review underscores the complex interplay between work-related factors and healthcare professionals' mental health. It highlights the need for comprehensive interventions and support systems to address the multifaceted challenges faced by healthcare workers, particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic. By leveraging theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, healthcare organizations can develop targeted strategies to promote the mental well-being of their workforce, ultimately enhancing the resilience and effectiveness of healthcare systems.

5. IMPLICATION

The implications of deteriorating mental health among healthcare workers extend beyond individual well-being to impact patient care quality and healthcare system sustainability. (BD, Gaohua, & Zhongchun Liu, 2020) Our findings reinforce the urgency of developing targeted interventions, organizational support systems, and policies that prioritize the mental health of healthcare professionals. Hospitals should consider implementing training programs and counseling services and providing competitive salary packages with paid holidays to alleviate healthcare workers' challenges.

As we grapple with the consequences of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, our research contributes valuable insights to inform evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and healthcare institutions. Addressing the mental health challenges experienced by healthcare professionals is not only a moral imperative but also essential for maintaining a resilient and effective healthcare system. Future research should delve deeper into the effectiveness of interventions and explore evolving dynamics in healthcare organizations to ensure continuous improvement in supporting the mental well-being of healthcare workers. By prioritizing the mental health of healthcare professionals, we can foster a healthcare environment that promotes both individual well-being and high-quality patient care.

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