

An approach to Issues of Stress Management and Burnout in the South African Defence

Palesa Mphou and Takalani Nemarumane

Department of Quality and Operations Management

University of Johannesburg

Auckland Park, 2006, Johannesburg, South Africa

palesamphou1@gmail.com , tnemarumane@uj.ac.za

Abstract

The SAD is involved in a number of operations, including; Safeguarding the Border Disaster relief and assistance, Safety and security Ridding the country of illegal weapons, drug dens, prostitution rings and other illegal activities. The aim of this study is to analyse the stress management and prevention techniques that the members of the South African Defense use and to assess if these techniques are successful. The questionnaire used in this study was focused on Biographic details and Deployment Hassles Checklist (DHC). The Biographic details cover the variables, which are considered significant in determining an individual's perception of the stressor and his resultant response to the perceived stressor. The results focused on the variables of age, rank, marital status, employment type and stress management techniques used at the military base. It was recommended that the commanding authorities should always pay attention to policies and organisational practices that may have a negative effect on the member's psychological well-being as this may have an adverse effect on their operational functioning.

Key Words:

Stress, Stress Management, Psychological Wellbeing

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

During the struggles for liberation in South Africa, black communities lived with fear of civil conflict as the power of the armed forces was approved and supported by the apartheid legislation. The height of political conflict saw many homes gutted with fire and residents forced to flee from their homes. Individuals reported cases of gross human rights abuses from the law and order structures of state, including incidents of shooting of innocent people, looting houses, crashing deliberately into taxis, intimidating the youth, harassing women, detaining individuals unjustifiably and brutalizing prisoners, Human Rights Committee, (2005).

The current democratic government has shown a commitment to and an initiative towards changing this perpetrator image of the military in the current South Africa. Integration processes of the former armed forces are such tools that have been established to create national unity and reconciliation, and marked the formation of the new SAD.

There is now an importance on military professionalism within the SAD, with significances placed on national interests, upholding the constitution, and ensuring the protection of the citizens of South Africa. The absence of non-military danger to South Africa has also resulted on the SAD shifting from a hostile force to assume a defensive posture. Its current function and role is that of peace operation, disaster relief, maintaining essential life services like search and rescue, environmental services, medical services, services corps, communication security and safety, and election support.

Adler, Vaitkus, and Martin, (2006) assert that contact to casualties is positively connected to elevate rates of stress symptomatology, there is indication that some, if not many of these military personnel to cope well with deployments Van Breda, (2008). The general argument is that soldiers can show stress resilience as they are trained and prepared for the hassles associated with military routine. Nevertheless, Aldwin (2004) cites denial and suppression of emotions as the main coping mechanisms in those who display resilience to stress. Van Breda, (2009, 2007, and 2008) presents a list of other factors associated with this stress resilience. They include emotional cycles prior to and post deployment, attitudes to deployment, availability of support networks, financial preparation and security, family structures, separation and children, and civil-military relationships.

The SAD is involved in a number of operations, including; Safeguarding the Border Disaster relief and assistance, Safety and security Ridding the country of illegal weapons, drug dens, prostitution rings and other illegal activities (Stott 2002). The study explores the manifestation of stress symptomatology in the SAD setting. Importance has been placed on describing the stress management techniques used to combat stress that manifests itself in a non-combative community-policing role of the SAD during military deployments and operations. The main focus is placed on how the officials deal with those stressors that originate from the day-to-day operation and management of the SAD military organization. Smith, (2017) states that stress is a state of psychological and physiological imbalance resulting from the disparity between situational demand and the individual's ability and motivation to meet those needs.

This study is mainly motivated lack of availability and accessibility of supportive community-policing duties have on military personnel, as this function is different to their primary training. Anglin, (2006), Defence White Paper (2006). The primary worry is that soldiers and military institutions are mostly designed, trained, and equipped to demand full destructiveness and force against an external enemy, Nathan (2004). Another motivation is that there seems to be a lack of research studies on stress management in the South African law institutions namely, the South African Police (SAP) and SAD. This has been qualified to the isolation and inaccessibility of these institutions from the broader community, journalists, and schools van de Spuy (2000), particularly post to the 2004 elections.

1.2 Problem Statement

Soldiers are exposed to a wide variety of stressors, which are exclusive to the military context. These stressors include the demand to be combat ready, frequent geographical transfers, isolation from the broader community, and a host of secondary stressors like the disruption of marital, family, and parent-child relationships, which influence negatively on the military employee's job performance, marriage, lifestyle, personality, and health in general. It is therefore necessary to investigate how the members of the defence cope with stress and which techniques are used, furthermore, to analyse the level of success of the stress management techniques used.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to analyse the stress management and prevention techniques that the members of the South African Defense use and to assess if these techniques are successful.

The Objectives of the study are:

- Investigate the family orientation of the defense officials
- Classify the ages of the defense officials
- Identify the different ranks in the Organisation
- Classify the different employment types of the officials
- Analyse the stress management techniques used by the defense officials

1.4 Research Questions

- What is your marital status?
- What is your age category?
- What is your current rank in the Organisation?
- What type of employment contract do you possess in the Organisation?
- Which stress management technique do you use to cope with stress in the workplace

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review explores the broad theoretical work on stress, including the internationally and locally conducted research on stress in wartime, civil conflict, and community policing situations. Due to the exploratory nature of this project, this study focuses on broad manifestation of stress symptomatology in community policing functions rather than relating to the various and specific stress orientated or related psychological categories. A brief overview of the conceptual entity called stress and burnout as well as provide approaches to understanding it will be presented, followed by an exploration on the nature of stress in international and South African law institutions. The recent studies on stress in the SAPS, albeit few will be used to relate to the stressors that may be pertinent in the SAD's deployment of operational military personnel to community policing function. The reason is that the finding on these SAPS studies will closely relate to the SAD's presumed stress experiences as they work alongside each other in executing their community policing function, thereby making up for the unavailable literature on stress and burnout issues in the South African military.

2.2 Stress: A conceptual review

For both laymen and professionals alike, the central problem with the concept stress is that it is understood by all when used in general context but very few when a more precise account is needed Cox ,(2002); Fletcher (2001). Norton (2007) further asserts that when people are asked to give other words for stress, they usually use such response-based words like pressure, strain or tension. These focus on the responses to and/or consequences of stress rather than the stressors themselves. Thus, despite the popularity of the term and the large amount of research conducted on it, stress continues to show itself to be an enormously complex phenomenon, with little agreement on a single definition.

2.3 Approaches to understanding stress

There are generally three basic approaches to understanding stress, namely the stimulus approach, the response approach and the interactive approach. Further developments in the general stress theory stem from critical reviews of the above three approaches. For logistical reasons, this study will focus on these three approaches, with a brief coverage of the viewpoints, which underlie other theoretical developments that emerged later.

- **Stimulus- based approach**

This approach identifies the environment stressors involved in producing the stress symptoms. Cannon's early work (2004) led to the emergence of the mediating role that life-events play in the stress-illness relation. This led to Holmes and Rahe (2007) postulating that major life events involve a need for adjustment. Thus, a lack of

adaptive resourcefulness increases the likelihood of developing a variety of physical disorders associated with stress.

- **Response based approach**

This approach mainly referring to the states of discomfort on exposure to a stressor, is credited to the work of Selye conducted in the early 1930's. Selye (2003) exposed laboratory animals to a diverse array of both physical and psychological stressors. He noted that the patterns of psychological arousal seen in the animals were largely the same. This led to the conclusion that stress is a nonspecific result of any demand made upon the body Selye, (2006). It follows that a wide variety of stressors (e.g. frustrations, conflicts, and pressures) could cause stress. Thus, cognitive, physical and emotional factors possess stress-evoking properties.

- **Interactional approach**

The interactional approach involves merging of both the stimulus and response approach to account for the observable individual variations when exposed to a particular stressor. This approach was influenced by the behaviorism and positivism paradigms of the 1950's which propose the observable cause and effect sequence in understanding behavior Everly, (2009). Its inception presented with the opportunity to account for the variations in individual responses from exposure to the same stressor. The major contribution of this approach was the recognition that stress is not an isolated phenomenon but a dynamic process, which included numerous other factors like cognitive appraisal and coping Lazarus & Folkman, (2004).

2.4 Stress moderators

Collin and de Carvelhon (2003), assert that the well-documented response to extremely adverse conditions involves psychological and neuro-endocrine reactions perceived as stress symptoms. These are generally understood as the direct effects of the stressor, adaptation to the stressor and the after-effects of the stressor. How affected persons response to the stressor depends on how these variables were perceived. These variables may include a magnitude and duration of the stressor, the level of present and future danger, proximity of the stressor, and the individuals perceived ability to deal with the stressor in minimizing or eliminating the stressors potentially negative outcome.

2.5 Stress measurement

Norton (2007) states that there are three approaches to measuring stress, physiological, self-report, and unobtrusive measures. However, a combination of these approaches could also used;

- **Physiological measures.**

This measurement approach reflects much on the bio-medical techniques used by medical practitioners and researchers, focusing on the nervous system, muscle tone and blood pressure, to name a few. Although these measures are generally objective and reliable, they prove to have some short falls. The main shortfall is that individual differences in physiological responses vary with gender, race, age, etc. also stress responses vary according to such factors as substance intake, time of day, and physical exertion. Most importantly, if participants are not familiar with the procedures used, the very experience of having physiological measures taken may influence the readings Kaplan & Sadock, (2004).

- **Self-report measures**

This is the most widely used method of measuring stress. It mainly takes the form of structured or unstructured interviews and questionnaires. Derogatis, (2002) states that this is "an extremely useful and flexible measurement modality with a rich past and a promising future" (p.271). although it possesses both strengths and weaknesses, the former seem to outweigh the latter. The main advantage of this approach is that it is economical and cost-efficient (e.g. group administered, computer scoring, minimal training for administration and useful in a broad spectrum of evaluation environments). This approach is also free from observer bias, with no distortions through reporting of apparent versions (Derogatis, 2002). The respondent will and can also accurately describe his relevant experience and behavior.

- **Unobtrusive measures**

This approach reduces the bias associated with self-report measures by reducing the participant's awareness that they are being assessed. This approach makes use of archive material, naturalistic and contrived observations, and physical traces. Although favorably indicated for illiterate and semi-literate population, strict ethical considerations should be observed at all time in this measurement approach.

2.6 Stress in wartime situations

Literature points out that military personnel who are frequently deployed with volatile, unstable and violent situations during military operations are at high risk of developing reactive stress symptoms. Military operational personnel deployed in combat areas are regularly exposed to the threat of injury, mutilation, and death. Other stressful situations are loss of comrades, the sight of death and injury, being in the crossfire and experiencing the missions as hopeless. There are physical hardships such as lack of food, water, sleep and extremes of inclement weather. Severe psychological deprivations such as lack of social support, loneliness, sexual deprivation, lack of privacy and being threatened or scorned by local population are regular occurrence (Alder et al., 2006; Bremner, Southwick, Darnell & Charney, 2006; Inbar, Solomon, Spiro, & Aviram, 2009; Stretch, Knudson & Durand, 2008).

- **Stress in civil conflict situations**

Young and Holden (2001) assert that most studies have focused predominantly on the psychological effects of exposure and involvement in warfare situation, particularly the long-term and delayed effects presenting through Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Combat Stress Reaction (CSR) during and after the Gulf and Vietnam wars Davidson, (2002); Nicholson; (2007). Whereas civil conflict and terrorist wartime activity differ from conventional war, civil conflict as a potential stressor has received relatively little empirical attention in trauma literature McDonald et al., (2008).

The main body of research conducted around civil conflict has centered on Northern Ireland and Israel. Whilst available literature on these countries does not specify the nature, intensity, and severity of stress manifested by security forces exposed to these conflict-laden environments, a number of factors suggest that maintaining law and order in these situations can be a stressful exercise Horowitz, (2004); Smooha, (2008). The civil conflict situation in Northern Ireland closely resembles that prevalent in South Africa prior to the 2004 General Elections Brewer, (2006); Esprey, (2006); Scarf, (2009), with the main difference being Northern Ireland's relatively higher economic base, and a smaller geographical territory and police community Scharf, (2009).

2.7 Stress in the Police

The lack of literature regarding to this topic of study within the SAD has warranted some considerations made to cover up for this shortfall. Van der Spuy (2000) attributes this unavailability of literature to the relative inaccessibility of the South African law institutions to journalists and scholars alike, particularly in the height of apartheid oppression. Points of consideration in the use of studies on stress in the SAPS as a reference in this study are stated.

2.8 The SAD's community Policing Function

Among other thing, community policing entails the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the decision-making processes and/or execution of safety and security needs of a community. The civil community thus becomes an important factor in the maintenance of law and order in their environments. On the other hand, the military is expected to exercise optimal professionalism and cooperation in executing their duties. Thus, healthy civil-military relations, which refer to an equal distribution of power and influence between the armed forces and the civilian authority and compliance with international law Defence White Paper, (2006), become an important factor in these community-policing operations. The apartheid legacy of civilian mistrust of the law and order institution Scharf, (1999) has a potential of presenting a negative effect on the efficient and effective accomplishment of community policing duties due to the civil resistance military personnel might receive in their operations.

2.9 Conclusion

Whilst too little stress can lead to stagnation and hamper personal growth, too much stress can sap one's energy; undermine one's personal life, resulting to a measure of ineffectiveness in job performance. Conversely, this can affect one's close associates, family, and friends and vice versa.

The stimulus approach will be used to understand the plight of this sample of SAD military operational personnel involved in community policing alongside the SAPS. Given the previous apartheid influenced civil-military relations, the possible tensions arising out of the perception of the integration processes, and previous research results indicating high stress levels within the SAPS, it is probable that members of this target population of the SAD may be experiencing high stress symptomatology in their community policing duties.

3. Materials and Methods

The questionnaire used in this study was Biographic details and Deployment Hassles Checklist (DHC). The Biographic details cover the variables, which are considered significant in determining an individual's perception of the stressor and his resultant response to the perceived stressor. The DHC is a self-report inventory, which identifies the SAD's military deployment environmental stressors. This inventory based on the stimulus approach to understanding stress and has been designed particularly for this study.

3.1 The Biographic details

The Biographic details section of the questionnaire has three parts; the personal details, military history and crisis support and coping. Personal details cover the respondents age, rank, company, platoon, the respondent's self-description, home province, marital status, and educational level. The military history explores the respondent's employment contract within the SAD, length of service in the SAD, and pre-SAD military history and service. The crisis support and coping facilitates the respondent's awareness of available social support systems, explores the respondent's social; support preference, and ascertains the use and quality of help received from available coping resources. Particular reference made with regard to the use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, with emphasis placed on the frequency of use of this substances and the quality of relief brought by them. The sample used in this study was based on the Doornkop Military base, in Johannesburg South Africa.

3.2 Data gathering and analysis

- **Securing permission for the study**

Permission for the study was sought from the command structure of the SAD. Initial contact was made with the military base regional head to assess feasibility and obtain approval for the study. The researcher had to further seek permission from the Commanding officer of the infantry unit, which facilitates the deployment activities.

- **Administration of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire will be administered in English. Administration of the question will be administrated over a four-week period to a small group of 40 respondents. Communication with the commander about the most convenient time for the research questionnaire to be administered.

- **Analysis**

The results of this study was analysed by means of descriptive statistics for the whole sample. Inferential statistics were used to examine relationships and differences according to variables of age, rank, marital status, previous military history.

4. Results

This section focuses on the variables of age, rank, marital status, employment type and stress management techniques used at the military base.

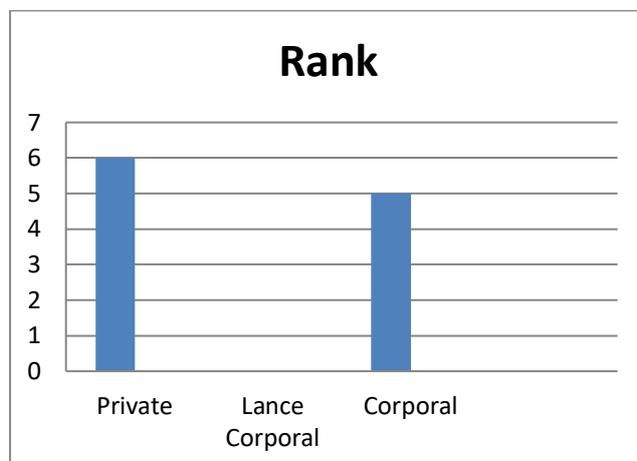


Figure 1. Rankings of interviewed officials

This graph indicates the ranks of the staff members of who were interviewed at the Doornkop base. Six of the participants were Privates and five were Corporals, and none were Lance Corporals.

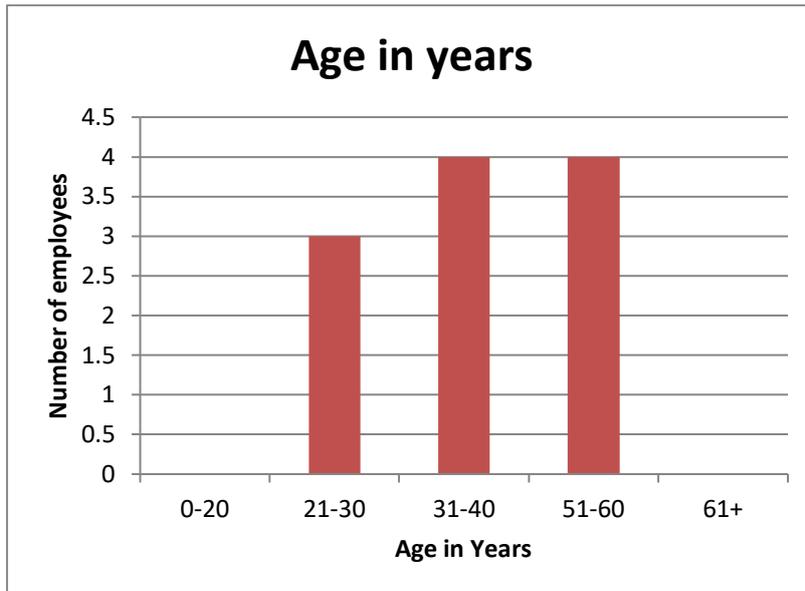


Figure 2: Age groups of the interviewees

Figure 2 indicates that the participants of the age groups 0-20 were not there as they were not the target of this study, participants between the age of 21-30 years were three, ages 31-40 were four participants and ages 51-60 were four. There were no participants of the age group of 61 years and above.

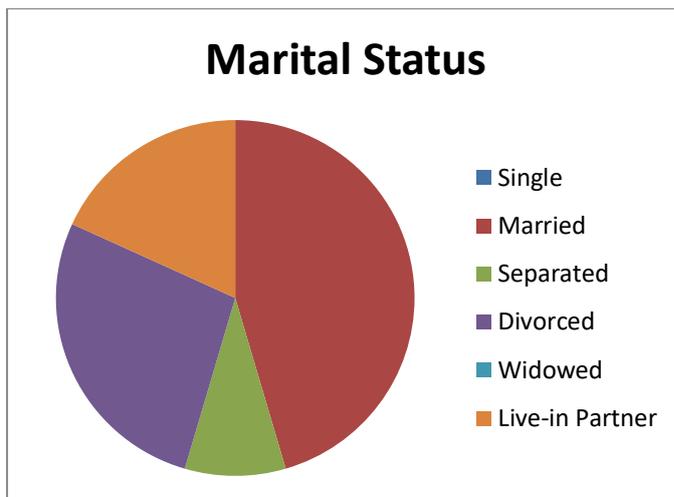


Figure 3. Marital status of the interviewed official.

As indicated in the graph, five participants are married, two are living with partners, two are separated with the partners, and three are divorced. This means that these officials have a family unit that exists outside of the work environment.

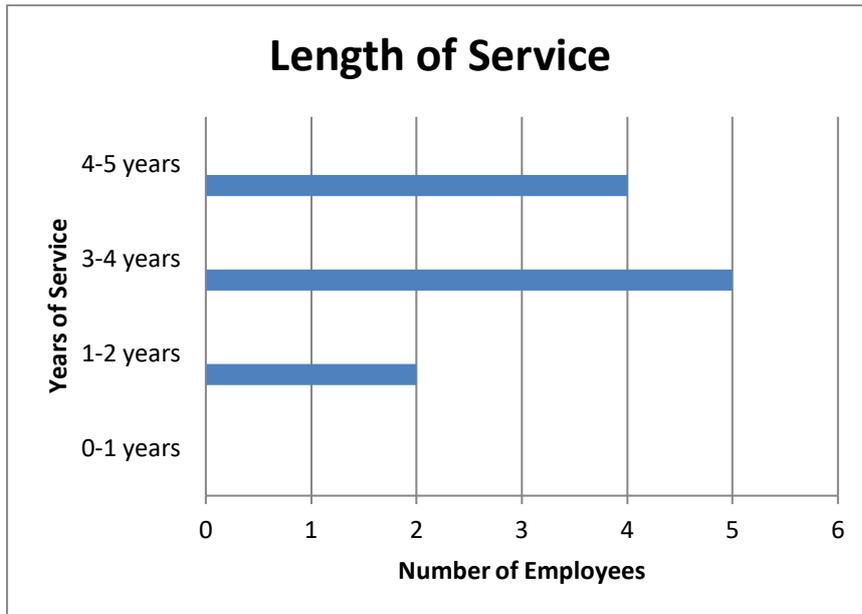


Figure 4: Length of service

In the questionnaire, none of the participants had worked for less than 1 year at the Doornkop base. Two participants had been working for 1-2 years, five had been working for 3-4 years and four had been working for 4-5 years. None of the participants had been working for more than 5 years there, because some were transferred from other military bases.

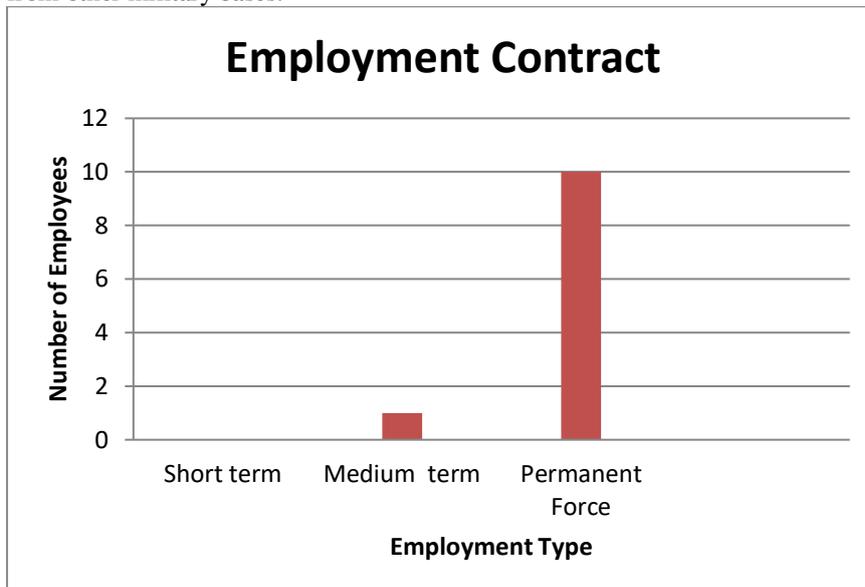


Figure 5: Employment Type

One of the participants had been working on a medium term bases, whilst the other ten participants are in the permanent force.

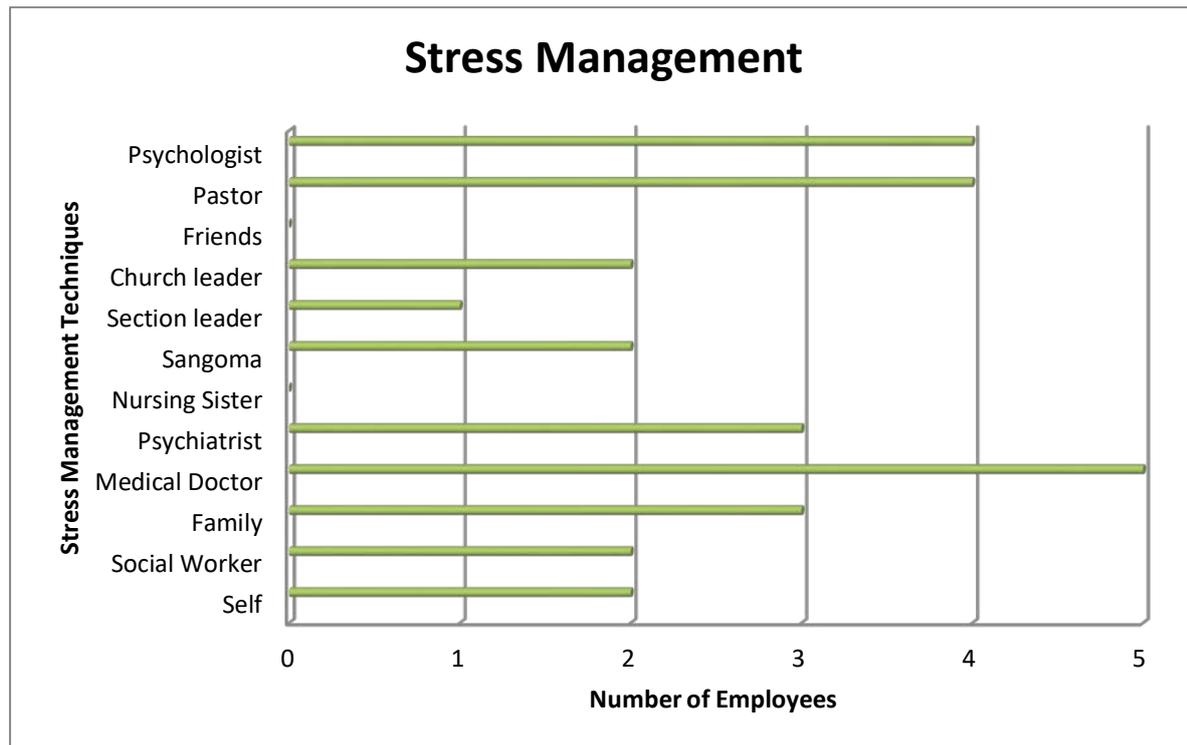


Figure 6: Stress Management Techniques

Four of the participants consulted a psychologist with regarding to handling stress, four have consulted a Pastor, two consulted church leaders, one consulted a Sangoma (Traditional Healer), three consulted a psychiatrist, five consulted a medical doctor, three consulted their family, two consulted a Social worker, and 2 have kept it to themselves.

5. Discussion and Recommendation

It is worth noting that while the inherently stressful military deployment duties cannot be altered, the policies and practices of the organisation can be. The lack of supportive and caring military climate, with indifferent supervisors and colleagues, can have a negative and long-lasting effect on soldier's morale, functional cohesion, and overall job performance.

It is recommended that the commanding authorities should always pay attention to policies and organisational practices that may have a negative effect on the member's psychological well-being as this may have an adverse effect on their operational functioning.

Military social support services, which can act as stress outlets for the military operational personnel and their families, should always be engaged in a process of reviewing their role, functional effectiveness, and relevance of their approaches to provide care and support for the operational personnel. More proactive than reactive approaches should be adopted. These approaches should attempt to be as inclusive of other service providers as possible, e.g. traditional healers, the families, spiritual services, and so forth. There should be continual attempts to explore other relevant therapeutic modalities, which are relevant to the present culturally diverse and multi- racially constituted in the SAD. Social support services providers should take the opportunity of using client consultations to informal clients of the organisational changes and the impact these may have on the individual/group as these changes are closely related to presentation of stress symptomatology. This will more effective if it occurs in line with the service provider's resolution of his or her own prejudices.

It is recommended that a similar or related study be conducted on senior or higher ranking members. The reason is that the high stress levels notes within the low ranking of this study may also be experienced by the senior and higher ranking members.

6. Conclusion

This study confirmed that stress is a problem in the sample of SAD operational personnel. Stressors inherent in operational functioning emerged as the most critical precipitant of the stress symptomatology. The former members emerged as the most affected of the groups studied. More than 5% of the total sample admitted to confiding on family and medical doctors as a way of coping with stress. Results also revealed that cultural and religious systems of support were used to deal with stress. It is thus necessary to conduct further research in the area of stress in the Defence force to assess its impact of performance and focus on defence officials.

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Biographies

Palesa Judith Mphou has completed a diploma in Public Relations and communications at the University of Johannesburg. She is further pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Management Services. She has previously completed an internship at the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation in the Media Department, and currently works in the Accounting Department at the University of Johannesburg. She is an efficient, organized and approachable individual, who prides herself in her work ethics.

Takalani M. Nemarumane is a Lecturer and Programme Manager at the University of Johannesburg. She has acquired a bachelor's degree in Management Services, a Master's degree in Operations Management, and is

currently in the final stages of her PhD in Engineering Management. Her research focus has been Social and environmental impact, and cleaner production. She has published countless research papers and book chapters throughout her 8-year career in as an academic, and also is passionate about grooming young students to becoming credible and solid researchers in their respective areas.