The role of individual factors on corona-induced hypochondriasis and job stress: A case study in workplace

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Abstract

Background: Given the importance of maintaining the mental health of workers, the present study was conducted to determine the effect of the individual factors on hypochondriasis and job stress under the corona epidemic condition in a company.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was performed on 275 workers in 2020 in one of the industries in southern Iran. To gather the data, demographic, researcher-made, standard hypochondria, and job stress questionnaires were sent electronically along with a guide and study objectives. The participants completed the questionnaires during 2 weeks and send them electronically to the research team. Finally, data were analyzed using tests of one-way ANOVA and linear regression in SPSS software version 22.

Results: The results showed that the mean score of hypochondriasis in different groups of variables, including age, work experience, use of personal protective equipment, corona experience, and attention to preventive measures was significantly different (p<0.05). Based on the results, the mean score of job stress significantly differed in different groups of variables of personal protective equipment use, corona experience, and awareness on corona (p<0.05). Moreover, based on the regression relationships, hypochondriasis could be predicted by variables of personal protective equipment, corona experience, awareness on corona, and attention to preventive measures; and job stress could be predicted by variables of awareness on corona and attention to preventive measures.

Conclusion: Regarding the importance of providing the physical and mental health of employees, the implementation of measures to reduce stress and hypochondriasis of employees, particularly in identified groups, is helpful.

Keywords: Individual factors, COVID-19, Hypochondriasis, Job stress

Introduction

In late December 2019, unusual cases were observed in patients with pneumonia in Wuhan, China, which led to the introduction of a new type of coronavirus. The World Health Organization (WHO) has named this new coronavirus as “new corona virus-2019” and the resulting disease as "corona virus disease Covid-19" (1, 2). The onset of the disease is accompanied by several symptoms, such as fever, cough, and asthma. In addition, gastrointestinal symptoms, such as diarrhea and nausea, have also been reported. Notably, it was found that the coronavirus is transmitted...
The role of Individual Factors on Corona-Induced Hypochondriasis and Job Stress

through droplets and close contact (3). The WHO and many countries’ governments have taken measures to inhibit the prevalence of Covid-19, including observance of social distance, quarantine, travel restrictions, and preventing social gatherings. In addition to physical effects, this disease has some psychological consequences at the individual, professional, and social levels, such as anxiety, nervous attack, individuals’ fear of each other, and stress (4). In this regard, stress is a phenomenon that exists during human life, and the reason for the spread of stress in human societies is the complexity of the social and personal environment as well as the multiple and simultaneous interaction between humans and their surrounding issues. In the psychological sciences, stress is defined as the feeling of psychological stress and tension. Moreover, stress may have an external source or can be caused by an inner sense of individual (5). Degrees of stress can be effective on increasing and improving people’s performance; however, high levels of stress have some consequences, such as anxiety, depression, physical and mental disorders, sleep disorders, decreased body resistance, suffering from frequent infections, decreased concentration, and decreased ability of solving problems (6). The prevalence of infectious diseases causes occurring biopsychological problems in the community. However, most of the studies that have been conducted during the Covid-19 epidemic, have only focused on the physical health of individuals, and not much information is currently available on the mental health of individuals during the Covid-19 epidemic (7). Human power is the main asset of individuals and the first and most valuable component of development in any country (8). In addition, stress can affect a person’s health by creating dysfunction and can also lead to the reduced productivity by expanding in the organization (9). According to previous studies, job stresses cause a loss in 50% to 60% of work days (10). Therefore, paying attention to work environments and examining job stressors and overcoming them are necessary to improve employee performance as well as increasing the efficiency, effectiveness, and ultimately the productivity of the organization. According to a study conducted in 2020 on workers who wanted to return to works during the Covid-19 epidemic, 1.5% stress was observed (11). However, stress varies from person to person. Also, the results showed a significant relationship between age and work experience with stress (12). Accordingly, in a study by Manshor et al who examined the sources of job stress among Malaysian managers working in multinational companies, a significant relationship was observed between age and stress (13). Moreover, Ofili in a study has acknowledged that increase in the level of education is accompanied with the increase in the support of officials, promoting the job, better understanding of the job, and improving communication, which consequently lead to the increased job confidence and satisfaction and reduced job stress (14). One of the other psychological consequences of epidemic and pandemic diseases is hypochondriasis. Accordingly, hypochondriasis is a mental disorder in which a person believes to have a serious disease despite he/she is physically healthy. Moreover, this misconception to be considered as a disease must be continued for at least 6 months. A person with hypochondriasis, despite observing no problems or illnesses in clinical and laboratory examinations, believes that he/she has a serious disease and is suspected to a physician diagnosis (15). In this regard, the prevalence rate of this disorder is reported about 5.8% in the whole society (16). Among the consequences of hypochondriasis, sense of vulnerability to disease and injury, high distress and sadness, depression, anxiety, and decreased general activity can also be mentioned (17). In the meantime, individual characteristics play important roles. In addition, age, gender, marital status, and education degree are among the possible factors affecting the incidence of this disorder. A study conducted by Fink et al also found that the prevalence of this disorder was equal among men and women (18). Moreover, the highest prevalence rate has been reported in people aged between 20 and 30 years (19). Notably, Ellingson et al have reported the highest prevalence of hypochondriasis disorder in the third decade of life (20). In a study by Barsky et al, no association was observed between hypochondriasis and communicational age (19). Also, hypochondriasis and stress caused by corona may be different among different individuals. Given the importance of maintaining mental health, especially in the difficult days of coping with the corona disease, identifying the individual factors that affect industrial environments can be helpful. Thus, the present study was conducted to determine the effect of the individual factors on hypochondriasis and job stress during the corona epidemic in a workplace. Also, the hypothesis of this study was that some individual differences can affect corona-induced hypochondriasis and job stress.

Methods

A cross-sectional study was performed in one of the industries in southern Iran in 2020. Participants were selected using a simple random sampling method based on inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria consisted of higher than 1 year of work experience; lack of active corona disease; lack of chronic diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), cardiovascular diseases, and MS (multiple sclerosis); the lack of mental disorders, the lack of use of mental medication, and the lack of addiction. The exclusion criteria included the lack of willingness to participate in the study, the lack of cooperation to complete the questionnaires, and filling out the questionnaires randomly and improperly. At first, a list of names of people was provided and 500 people were randomly chosen. Then, their medical records were studied and those who did not have the criteria to enter the study were excluded. Finally, 330 people remained in the study. The percentage of answers to the questionnaires was equal to 80%, and a total of 275 people filled out and sent the questionnaire.

Data collection

Initially, the selected people were contacted by telephone, the steps and aims of the study were described to them, and they were invited to participate in the study. Then, the questionnaires were sent to them via email or another social network software. A phone number was also
included for contacting the research team as a way to communicate about possible problems when filling out the questionnaires. The participants completed the questionnaires during 2 weeks and sent them electronically. Finally, 275 participants filled out the questionnaires completely.

**Tools**

In the present study, several questionnaires were applied to gather data, including demographic questionnaire, researcher-made questionnaire, standard hypochondria questionnaire, and job stress questionnaire.

**Demographic questionnaire**

The questionnaire included general information such as age, work history, occupation, work place, education level, and work shift status.

**Researcher-made questionnaire**

The questionnaire included general questions about corona protection, which were as follows: (1) How much do you use personal protective equipment (PPE) at work? (answer score: low = 4, moderate = 3, high = 2, and very high = 1); (2) Have you or your family experienced the corona disease? (answer score: yes = 1; no = 2); (3) How much do you know about the corona disease? (answer score: very low = 1, low = 2, moderate = 3, and high = 4), and (4) How well do you take precautions for the corona disease? (answer score: low = 1, moderate = 2, and high = 3). The answers were scored on a Likert scale. To evaluate the validity of the questionnaire, the content validity ratio (CVR) and content validity index (CVI) were calculated based on Lawshe method and Waltz and Basel method, respectively. Also, Cronbach’s coefficient alpha (α) of this questionnaire was calculated for examining its reliability. The values of CVR, CVI, and α were equal to 0.78, 0.89, and 0.92, respectively. Therefore, the validity and reliability of the questionnaire were confirmed.

**Standard hypochondria questionnaire**

The hypochondria questionnaire was developed in 1980 by Evans. The questionnaire measures hypochondria by replying to the questions based on the Likert scale. It has 36 questions and based on the obtained score people are categorized into groups of healthy (score, 0-20), borderline (21-30), mild (31-40), moderate (41-60), and severe (above 60). Khani et al evaluated the validity and reliability of the Persian version of this questionnaire with the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient reported to be 0.86 (22).

**Job stress questionnaire**

The questionnaire includes 60 questions to evaluate 6 dimensions: role workload, role incompetence, role duality, role range, responsibility, and physical environment by 10 phrase questions. Its scoring is based on the 5-point Likert scale: "never = 1", "sometimes = 2", "often = 3", "usually = 4", and "always = 5". The range of total score is between 60 and 300, and higher scores show high stress levels. General stress is categorized into 4 levels: low stress (score 50-99), low to moderate stress (100-149), moderate to severe stress (150-199), and severe stress (200-250) (23). Sharfian et al evaluated the validity and reliability of the Persian version of this questionnaire, and its Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated to be 0.83 (24).

**Data analysis**

Data were entered into SPSS software version 22. Then, the normality of the variables was investigated using the skewness and kurtosis curves. The results revealed that the model variables have a normal distribution. Thus, a Pearson test was applied to investigate the correlation between the variables. The test of one-way ANOVA was also applied to examine the significant level of the mean difference in various groups. Finally, the linear regression test was used to predict the effects of personal factors.

**Results**

The mean age and standard deviation of age of the participants were 43.26 and 9.44, respectively. Table 1 presents the statistical distribution of the other individual factors of the participants. According to the obtained information, most of the participants were over 40 years, had more than 20 years of work experience, had high school diploma and less than high school diploma education level, and work shift. The statistical distribution of the variables of hypochondriasis and job stress are shown in Table 2. The results show that the statistical distribution of the studied variables is normal. The mean prevalence of hypochondriasis and its standard deviation were 33.37 and 14.87, respectively. Also, the mean total stress score was 47.86±107.4.

The results of one-way ANOVA analysis showed that the mean score of hypochondriasis in different groups of variables of age, work experience, use of personal protective equipment, corona experience, and attention to preventive measures significantly had higher hypochondriasis scores. However, the score of this parameter did not differ significantly with respect to education level, work shift, and awareness of the corona disease. These results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

The results of one-way ANOVA analysis showed that the mean score of the job stress significantly differed in different groups of variables of personal protective equipment use, corona experience, and awareness on corona. In this regard, people with the low and moderate history of using PPE compared to those with the high history of using personal protective equipment, people with a corona experience compared to those without a corona experience, and
people with a very low level of awareness on corona compared to those with the low, moderate, and high levels of awareness significantly had higher job stress scores. However, the mean score of this parameter in different groups of variables of age, work experience, level of education, work shift, and attention to preventive measures did not differ significantly. These results are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

The correlation matrix of the studied variables is presented in Table 7. Generally, the results show that all demographic variables except education level and work shift correlated with coronary hypochondriasis. Notably, the highest correlation with this variable was related to work experience. These results also show that the variables of work experience, corona experience, awareness on corona,
and attention to preventive measures had significant correlations with job stress. Also, an experience of corona had the highest correlation with job stress. In addition, the results indicate that corona-induced hypochondriasis had a significant positive relationship with job stress.

A linear regression analysis was used to predict the scores of the variables of hypochondriasis and job stress, based on demographic characteristics, so the following equations were presented:

- Hypochondriasis: $44.10 + 3.51 \times X_1 - 3.94 \times X_2 - 2.10 \times X_3 - 2.61 \times X_4$
- Job stress: $135.84 - 5.56 \times X_3 - 7.47 \times X_4$

In these equations $X_1$ is the score of the use of PPE, $X_2$ the score of corona experience, $X_3$ the score of awareness from corona, and $X_4$ the score of attention to preventive measures. These scores were obtained by a researcher-
The role of Individual Factors on Corona-Induced Hypochondriasis and Job Stress

Table 7. The correlation matrix of the studied variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Career length</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift work</td>
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<td>0.011</td>
<td>-0.123*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of PPE</td>
<td>0.142*</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>-0.042</td>
<td>0.141'</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience of corona</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness on corona</td>
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<td>0.151</td>
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<td>0.060</td>
<td>-0.067</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attention to preventive measures</td>
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<td>0.108</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypochondriasis</td>
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<td>0.232*</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.183''</td>
<td>0.146''</td>
<td>-0.152''</td>
<td>-0.136'</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job stress</td>
<td>0.097</td>
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<td>0.009</td>
<td>-0.228''</td>
<td>-0.142</td>
<td>-0.121''</td>
<td>0.406**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The correlation matrix of the studied variables

The results also show that the score of job stress can be predicted by the score of corona-induced hypochondriasis variable, whose relationship is presented in the following:

Job stress = 63.28 + 1.307 X1

In this equation, X1 is the score of corona-induced hypochondriasis.

Discussion

The present study was aimed to determine the effect of the individual factors on hypochondriasis and job stress under the corona epidemic condition in a workplace. The data were collected using demographic, researcher-made, standard hypochondriasis, and job stress questionnaires. The workers of a company completed the questionnaires. Then, the data were analyzed in SPSS. In general, the results of the present study show that the score of hypochondriasis in different groups of variables of age, work experience, use of personal protective equipment, corona experience, and attention to preventive measures was significantly different. In this regard, people over the age of 30 years and with the work experience of more than 20 years had higher hypochondriasis scores. In explaining this finding, it can be argued that the risk of developing hypochondriasis disorder increases along with the increase of age because of the possibility of the increased depression, fear of disease, and death. Notably, in a study by Bravo et al, which was conducted on 106 old people in 2001, the results showed that depression plays a role in the incidence of hypochondriasis (25). However, according to a study by Jonathan et al, on 27 patients with hypochondriasis disorder, no significant relationship was observed between hypochondriasis and age (26). Also, in a study by Fallon et al (2012), no significant relationship was found between age and hypochondriasis disorder (27). Correspondingly, perhaps the reason for this discrepancy is the difference in the number of participants and the statistical population. In the present study, a significant relationship was observed among the hypochondriasis score and the variables of personal protective equipment use, corona experience, and attention to preventive measures. Accordingly, it was found that people with a low history of using PPE, with coronary experience, and with a low history of attention to preventive measures, had a higher hypochondriasis score. Therefore, it seems that due to the lack of vaccines and effective treatment against Covid-19 disease, by implementing some preventive measures, including using a face mask; regular handwashing; preventing contact with the infected people and maintaining a safe distance; and avoiding touching eyes, mouth, and nose with unwashed hands can prevent people from being infected by Covid-19, which subsequently reduces the rate of hypochondriasis disease (3). Based on the results of the present study, the score of hypochondriasis was not significantly different in variables of education level, work shift, and awareness about the corona disease. In line with the present study, a study conducted by Jonathan, no significant relationship was observed between the level of education and hypochondriasis (26). Regarding the obtained results, it can be inferred that the level of education under during the Covid-19 epidemic does not have an effect on people's mental health. Based on the results of the present study, job stress scores were significantly different in personal protective equipment use, corona experience, and awareness on the corona disease. In this regard, people with a low record of using PPE, a corona disease experience, and a low level of knowledge on the corona disease had higher job stress scores. Also, the implementation of individual preventive measures, such as the use of face masks, continuous handwashing, and organizational measures, such as installing the proper ventilation and observance of social distance, will reduce psychiatric symptoms (11) and can lead to the absence of Covid-19 disease.

It is suggested that the necessary trainings be put on the agenda of the industries to be aware of the corona disease and take preventive measures. In this regard, the health belief model can be used. Also, according to this model, if people see themselves as sensitive to a situation and believe that they can reduce the complications by taking some actions and taking these actions are more beneficial than not doing it, they will engage in preventive behaviors (28). According to this research results, based on the existing high stress in people who have a low history of using PPE and due to the positive effect of using these devices, it is necessary to consider and implement encourage and punishment systems to use personal protective equipment correctly and completely. However, the score of this parameter in different groups of variables of age, work experience, level of education, work shift, and attention to preventive measures did not differ significantly. Contrary to the findings of the present study, in a study by Hosseinzadeh et al, which was conducted to determine the level of stress, anx-

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Conflict of Interests

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SM. Mousavi, et al.
The role of Individual Factors on Corona-Induced Hypochondriasis and Job Stress