

STRESS AMONG STAFF AS EXPERIENCED IN THE KENYA PRISONS SERVICE

*Angus Masoro Kimega**

I. DEFINITION OF STRESS

Stress is one of the most common words used in society today and a phenomenon that each one of us will experience at some point in our lives. Stress affects people of all ages, professions and life situations. However, stress can be defined as a physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension caused by our exposure to different incidences or occurrences in our lives. When we respond positively to these incidences or occurrences we do not feel stress. While some workplace stress is normal, excessive stress can interfere with your productivity and impact your physical and emotional health. You cannot control everything in your work environment.

II. CURRENT SITUATION AND CHALLENGES

The Kenya prisons system is majorly constrained by congestion and other constraints in most of its undertakings.

A. Congestion in Prisons

With 110 prison institutions in the country, most of them have taken in a population of over twice their recommended capacities. This has come about due to the slow pace of putting up additional facilities commensurate with the country's population growth. By this we do not imply that criminality and the need for custodial institutions are by ratio to be proportional to inmate accommodation in prisons, but more could have been done in this field as is currently available. All other criminal justice agencies have expanded to cater to the ever increasing population. This can only mean a higher prison population. The general perception of the masses is that the only way an offender can be made to pay for their crime is to be locked up into confined custody. Congestion in itself stresses staff in having to manage large numbers of people in the limited facilities that exist.

B. Constraint of Efficient Equipment

In every gathering of people, the provision of basic needs can be highly demanding and varied. Transport, feeding, safety from accidents, allocation of accommodation, attending to medical and social needs are just some of matters that have to be handled as they arise. In the advancement of technology and crime, it is only fair that the prison officers have reasonable power to challenge whatever may come out before them. Physical protection equipment may both be insufficient in capacity, quantity or knowledge on how to use it in a prison crisis. A minor fire incident for example may cause panic due to insufficient firefighting equipment, or inappropriate gear for the type of fire or even the inability and careless use of an otherwise effective piece of equipment by staff. All this is coupled with the fact that the environment is limited in fire escape routes and the apparent danger to all persons is very real.

C. Poor Physiology of Inmates

Prison populations are more commonly filled with the lesser endowed of any society. These persons are most disadvantaged in general health, civic and legal information to articulate their immediate situation, education to appreciate technical challenges and self help information coming their way. Having to repeatedly and routinely explain yourself over and over again to every other client is a burden to the staff, not to mention the arrogance and ineptitude of most inmates.

*Staffing Officer, Administration, the Prisons Headquarters.

D. Insufficient Training of Staff

Though all staff after recruitment are taken through vigorous training as required for a prisons officer, this training cannot prepare them for the practical and dynamic nature of their work ahead. We are lacking in frequent refresher courses that can allow staff to relearn their work presenting their understanding of the challenges they meet. Class theory classes have never proven fully applicable in the field. The training curriculum too has to address emerging trends rather than remain rigid of long past expectations. The regulations controlling staff should be made suitable to accommodate the initiatives of the staff in certain situations.

E. Low Income and Working Environments

The remunerations awarded to most junior staff have never been perceived as sufficient comparing the circumstances they go through. They will argue on allowances. Who is at more risk of suffering harm in the case of prisoners becoming violent towards staff? Who is on the front line, as in war, when disaster strikes in a prison facility? Who has to physically get their hands dirty when whatever mess has to be cleaned up? And then how does the ratio of allowances relate to the threats faced. How do their housing and working environments for example compare with the military or corporate world.

F. Unclear Career Progression

Often when a person is enlisted as a prisons officer they do not have an alternative means of livelihood or safe exit. The officer will then likely surrender to his or her fate and will not invigorate him- or herself both on and off duty. The chances for promotion for most officers are very few. This is due to the sheer large numbers of staff against much fewer vacancies for promotion available. The enlistment of more highly educated persons with every successive recruitment reduces long-serving staff's chances of achieving the competitive grades for promotion.

G. Drug and Substance Abuse

Consumption of alcohol and cigarette smoking has been common practice for young adults. This has been a perceived milestone in gaining independence and a sign of maturity. It is born from many of our indigenous cultures where wine was shared among adults or elders. The current use of alcohol and tobacco bears heavily on abuse. The quantities taken are much higher and the effects anticipated are those for intoxication rather than relaxation. There also have been growing cases of addiction which if not well handled leaves the victim at a hopeless state and insufficient in either his or her work and family. Psychotropic drug use is illegal in Kenya and heavily punished by our laws. Victims of drug use are very weary of this fact and keep very secretive and in constant denial thus making it hard to diagnose this problem in a hope of helping them through rehabilitation.

H. Staff Health Challenges

Quite a number of staff suffer medical challenges. Major cases include HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. The stigma attached to this epidemic though highly reduced is still of concern. Unfortunately some staff will deny being affected hoping by some miracle it would go away. In their darkest of time they find they are still sick. Also, many of our men and women are not of the habit of seeking medication for what they may call minor discomforts. These may be dental or eye problems that can be solved by mere dentures or spectacles. It is viewed as a weakness to fall to illness. Some managers do still discriminate against staff or some assignments due to their state of health. This sometimes is done even if the assignment or illness does not inhibit an individual from doing that work.

I. Social and Domestic Affairs

These are mainly issues that are about relations, relationships and community expectations. Our self-esteem and confidence is built partly on the persons we associate ourselves with. Most importantly will be how social and intimate relations are founded. Healthy relations would be with persons of non-criminal or non-dubious character. We seek to associate with morally upright persons of high moral standing. If the workplace relationship is romantic, there is the concern that it may be compromising the interests of both partners in infidelity.

By our backgrounds, many of us are closely linked to family and long lists of distant relatives who call for our attention and influence how we are expected to be seen in public. We have never been the captains of our own ships. By extension the communities have an effect on us as have families.

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Sexual harassment in the workplace is an important cause of workplace stress. In the workplace, women are more likely to experience sexual harassment compared to men.

J. Fear of Sanctions.

In the hope of keeping a good record of service worth recognition and possible promotion, junior staff are in constant fear that they may be found having committed a grave offence that will make them lose a hopeful chance of advancement. This is even more apparent when their supervising officer is a harsh disciplinarian. Such a worker will always be in fear thus stressed of an unidentified situation. In extreme situations the staff will want to work to please the supervisor, even if they believe they may be doing the wrong thing.

III. IDENTIFYING THE UNDERLYING PROBLEMS

Many of these problems arise where the policies are missing or the workers do not have the information sufficiently served on them. Every worker has a right to safeguard the goals of their organization. In doing so their duties are to be well defined and met in the best possible way. Supervisors and managers on the other hand have a responsibility to keep all their workers comfortable for enhanced production.

IV. EXPLORING THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

a) Congestion has escalated in many countries' prisons. This is because by holding the belief that alternative sentencing, such as community service, fines and hosts of other interventions, is not being used as a substitute for incarceration. With this in mind prison expansion programmes are hardly carried out. As much as these acceptable and more humane methods of punishment are viable, deliberate efforts should be made to increase the inmate holding capacity in all prisons. Also important is to meet the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules on provisions for staff and inmates.

b) The proper equipping of prisons cannot be overemphasized. Though corrections staffs are handling persons commonly rejected by the public, as some would want to say, their dignity and that of staff cannot be compromised. Then begs the question as to what will happen to vast investments in facilities when we do not have a large criminal society to occupy them?

c) All our rehabilitation programmes and prison discipline should be geared to achieving a basic education and standard of life that all inmates are to comply with. It should not be left for inmates or staff to vary lifestyles for different classes of inmates. I would quickly follow to say that knowledgeable inmates should be encouraged to pursue challenging skills. This should not imply that the less endowed educationally or socially are demeaned.

d) Staff training is to be a programmed and continuous process. The training facilities should use examples from other institutions even out of their respective countries as study cases, and should share this information and programming responses appropriate with their individual circumstances.

e) We believe everyone should draw a fair wage commensurate with their duties. Besides the individual had the choice to take prison officer's duties with the remunerations it was advertised to carry. Notwithstanding the above, I consider it is time prison officers were considered as a special skill professional. They may not make large profits, or defend the nation against external aggression. Their duty is equally unique and important to be kept right so that all other activities of nation building remain on course.

f) We will always need officers at all seniority levels. The challenge here would be to have all officers contented with their effort and duties. More non-promotion appraisal and recognition should be practiced. There will not be sufficient hierarchy to move up all good performers, but a recognition scheme can be realized as vacancies for promotion are being awaited. This will keep the spirits of the workers high. It is very demoralizing to see younger staff climb the rungs of authority while some well-seasoned guards remains unnoticed just for lacking prerequisite academic papers.

g) Alcohol and drug use is a growing epidemic among the younger generation of Kenyans. What was a social drink has become a vital component of socialization. Unknowingly many victims learn of their dependencies at late stages and are skeptical about rehabilitation programmes. Addictions should be understood to be illnesses that need as much help as would a malaria patient. It will be hard though to convince law enforcement that an offence has not been committed by this patient.

h) Failed health should not be a disqualifying factor for any opportunity for staff. Needless to say that the level of health provision should be raised to include mandatory counselling and regular health reviews.

i) Nothing much can be done to control how people socialize outside of work. Guidance should, however, be kept so such interactions do not spread a sense of tension in the workplace so as to compromise the productivity of the organization. The organization can develop policies that address business interests and romantic relations. It is best not to deny that these relations will emerge, but to keep them contained so they do not hurt the organization's paramount goal.

j) Work guidelines should be clearly spelled out and explained to the workers. Both the supervisor and the supervisee should be clear on their roles and powers. When unchecked this leads to harassment mainly by a senior colleague for the his or her advantage.

V. CONCLUSION

Correctional officers' jobs around the world have been rated among the ten most stressful jobs in this world. Evidently that is in part because they are working with persons who happen to be there by a judicial process and not by their volition. With that they are not bound to be the most cooperative team to work with. I wish to encourage correctional officers to appreciate themselves for keeping to the tenets of this noble job. We wish you great luck and strength in your every undertaking.