



## EMPLOYEE STRESS MANAGEMENT CAUSED BY THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 VIRUS: THE MACEDONIAN CASE

**Abstract:** Stress is one of the most important factors that cause problems from a personal point related to the health status of employees, and from an organizational point of view related to organizational performance. It is usually a phenomenon that occurs as a result of overload in personal and professional life. Stress is present everywhere and is noticed by all people, regardless of the workplace or work experience.

As part of the paper, research will be conducted in order to identify the causes of stress in employees in small and medium enterprises and especially the impact of the Covid-19 virus. In a pandemic caused by the virus COVID-19, employees and managers face challenges in performing their duties. Employees must adapt to the new situation in terms of performance of work responsibilities but in conditions of increased risk at work.

This paper aims to point out the role of management in managing workplace stress, through timely recognition and detection of the causes of stress and reducing the impact of stress on employees. The results of the research confirm the hypothesis that the impact of the COVID-19 virus is a key factor in increasing stress in employees at work.

The results of the research are the basis for creating recommendations for the management in the implementation of appropriate activities and a stress management strategy.

### Author information:

**Marija Magdinceva-Sopova**

PhD, Associate Professor

Goce Delcev University - Stip

✉ marija.magdinceva@ugd.edu.mk

🌐 Republic of Northen Macedonia

**Aneta Stojanovska-Stefanova**

PhD, Associate Professor

Goce Delcev University - Stip

✉ aneta.stojanovska@ugd.edu.mk

🌐 Republic of Northen Macedonia

**Ognen Aleksoski**

PhD Candidate

Goce Delcev University - Stip

✉ ognen.aleksoski@gmail.com

🌐 Republic of Northen Macedonia

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### 1. Introduction

The pandemic caused by the impact of the COVID-19 that hit the world at the end of December 2019, caused significant changes and consequences in all areas of daily life and work. The impact of the virus COVID-19 completely changed the way of living and working, and consequently new working conditions were imposed on it. The daily exposure to the new working conditions causes certain stressful situations for the employees, especially for the employees in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Work, workplace provide financial security, self-confidence and status. But the workplace can also be a cause for concern and stress, especially in today's global crisis. The degree of stress an individual experiences is partly dependent on how well he or she is able

to cope with the responsibilities that come with it and imposes the work itself, and the way it bears the obligations and responsibilities and coping with the changes that occur suddenly.<sup>1</sup>

Basically, unfamiliar and unpredictable situations, unpleasant or pleasant, to which the individual must adapt can cause stress. The COVID-19 suddenly caused changes in the work of managers and employees. There isn't enterprises or working place where there isn't certain level of stress.

Occupational stress or job stress often occurs as a result of inadequate job requirements and employee capabilities.<sup>2</sup>

Usually unfamiliar and unpredictable situations, unpleasant or pleasant, are the cause of stressful situations. Stress is a daily, normal occurrence that occurs as a result of the reaction to threats and changes that occur around the individual as well as the expectations that need to be met by a particular person.<sup>3</sup>

There are many definitions in the professional literature that explain the term stress. Many definitions that explain the term stress have a negative meaning because they have a bad effect on people, but stress sometimes has a positive effect when it causes pleasant and positive feelings in people. Positive stress is a normal part of life that gives energy and motivates the individual to achieve the goal. Negative stress causes a feeling of inferiority, inability to accept challenges and situations at work and out of work such as: conflicts with other employees, personal problems, excessive demands and so on. Employees every day feel the effects of stress caused by reduce wage, reduction of duties, firing and other, but with different intensity. Handling the stress shows a line of activities which the management takes into effect in order to lower the reasons for it showing up in the organization and the employees to successfully face the inevitable stress and its mastering, in order to minimize the negative consequences for the employee and the organization.<sup>4</sup> The impact of COVID-19 causes negative employee stress that differs from other sources of stress. With the increase of stress in a period of economic and health crisis, it is of great importance to manage with stress or to deal with the negative consequences caused by stress.

As a normal, everyday occurrence, stress can't be avoided but can be controlled. Work organization, work environment and social relationships have the greatest impact on reducing sources of stress. Managers have a responsibility to take specific action to quickly and effectively identify the sources of work's stress and to implement negative stress management strategies.

## **2. The Impact of Stress in the Results of Work of Enterprises**

Stress is a phenomenon that often negatively affects the efficiency of work. Employees are expected to be effective associates responsible executives who are committed to the work. The positive impact of stress motivates employees and can initiate greater employee engagement. The skill and ability of corporate management consists in timely detection of factors that cause stress, reducing the impact of stress through the application of appropriate stress management strategies. Phenomena that negatively affect employees make stress a daily occurrence for employees. Unknown conditions such as those caused by the COVID-19 require certain adjustments by all employees. Adjustments are a source of stress.

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<sup>1</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, Research on Work – related Stress, 2000, p. 123

<sup>2</sup> Lazarus, R. S. and Folkman, S., (1986):“Cognitive theories of stress and the issue of circularity”, In M H Appley and R Trumbull (Eds),p.57

<sup>3</sup> Magdinceva Sopova, Marija and Bardarova, Snezana and Stojanovska-Stefanova, Aneta (2017) *The role of the entrepreneur in managing the professional stress of the employees*. In: Proceedings Book of First International Scientific Conference, Challenges of Tourism and business logistics in the 21st century – ISCTBL 2017, University Goce Delcev-Stip, Gevgelija, Macedonia.

<sup>4</sup> Magdinceva Sopova, Marija and Postolov, Kiril and Stojanovska-Stefanova, Aneta (2020) *Managing with Stress in Organizations*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, ISBN 978-6202669184,p.42

The effects caused by high levels of work stress in employees are manifested in the following ways: physiological problems - changes in metabolism, high blood pressure, etc., psychological problems - fear, tension, delayed performance of tasks or non-performance and behavioral problems - absence from work, work fluctuation, changes in productivity and efficiency in work.<sup>5</sup> Stress at work can cause physical and psychological problems. The following physical symptoms may occur as a result of the impact of stress: headache, muscle tension, sweating, fatigue, sleep problems.<sup>6</sup>

Prolonged stress or prolonged stress situation directly affects the health of employees which contributes to reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of the enterprise.

### **3. The Role of the Manager in Handling with Stress**

Managing stress today is becoming an extremely important task that is aimed at preserving not only individual health, but also the vitality and success of the organization.<sup>7</sup>

Human resources-employees are the most important factor for improving work efficiency and applying the rule that the right person works in the right place is the best strategy for improving the work. Effective and efficient management of enterprises imposes the need to introduce appropriate strategies for perceiving, reducing and eliminating stress as a negative phenomenon that affects the business processes in the enterprise, especially for the stress caused by the impact of the COVID-19 .

Effective management of the enterprise means formulating an appropriate business strategy. Through business strategy, managers send information to employees about what is expected of them. Shared business strategy actually means getting acquainted with the vision for the development of the enterprises. If the employees agree with the vision of the management and the company, they develop the responsibility to undertake the hard, stressful work that is necessary for creative, risky strategy development.<sup>8</sup>

In today's, stress management is a way to reduce costs, use resources effectively and efficiently, especially human resources. A work environment that is stressful for employees, whether the stress is caused by some human or material factor, causes material and human costs. Today, there are numerous examples and studies that show that people who work under stress are much more exposed to heart and other health diseases such as heart attack, asthma, migraine and other diseases. All this is a potential danger for employees, which at the same time causes an increase in costs for enterprises. This imposes the need for management to apply appropriate stress management strategies. In conditions when the employees feel good at work, have confidence in the manager and understand what is expected of them, they dedicate themselves to the work and they try to achieve good results.<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing and controlling the stress is the basis for effective operation of the enterprises because effective performance depends on the personal characteristics of the individual such as responsibility, ability to work, ability to self control, etc., and the ability to control negative feelings that occur as due to the impact of the source of stress.

Predicting future events that can cause stressful situations for employees is an obligation for the manager. The manager should have the ability to perceive the real situation in terms of perceiving and controlling stress and to influence the reduction of sources of stress in employees.

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<sup>5</sup> Zimanji dr V., (1998) ,Psychology of organization, Faculty of Economics, Subotica ,p. 170

<sup>6</sup> Rosch, P. J. (2001). The quandary of job stress compensation. Health and Stress.

<sup>7</sup> Magdinceva Sopova, Marija and Postolov, Kiril and Stojanovska-Stefanova, Aneta (2020) *Managing with Stress in Organizations*. LAP Lambert Acadmic Publishing, ISBN 978-6202669184,p.42

<sup>8</sup> D.I.Jung and B.J. Avolio, (1990)“ Opening the Black Box: An Experimental Investigation of the Mediating Effects of Trust and Value Congruence on Transformational and Transactional Leadership : 1992 Beyond “, Journal of European Industrial Training, pp.20-35

<sup>9</sup> Miceski T. Nikolovski K. (2013). *The leader as a creator and mobilizer in performing the enterprise strategy*, Goce Delchev-University, Stip, Faculty of economics, Year book, 2013, Vol. 5, p.85

Successful handling with stress involves the introduction of a preventative strategy to identify the sources of stress before specific problems arise. After recognizing the factors and sources of stress, the manager can apply a strategy to reduce the impact of stress and continuously target the critical points that initiate stress. Sources of stress at work are: physical environment, social environment, personal dispositions, work tasks, level of job satisfaction and positions in the enterprises.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Research methodology

The practical research conducted within this paper aims to indicate the impact of stress on employees with special emphasis on stress caused by the impact of virus COVID-19, as well as the role of management in recognizing and taking certain actions to reduce the impact of work stress.

The research is realized in the period from November-December 2020. The research included 150 employees in SMEs. Of the total of the 150 questionnaires submitted, 125 people showed interest and answered the questions that are an integral part of the research. From a structural point of view, the questionnaire is structured in two parts.

The first part which contains questions related to the gender of the respondents, age, type of activity in which the company operates, job and education. The question related with age is structured at intervals: up to 25 years, from 26 to 40 years, from 46 years to 50 years, from 51 years to 65 years.

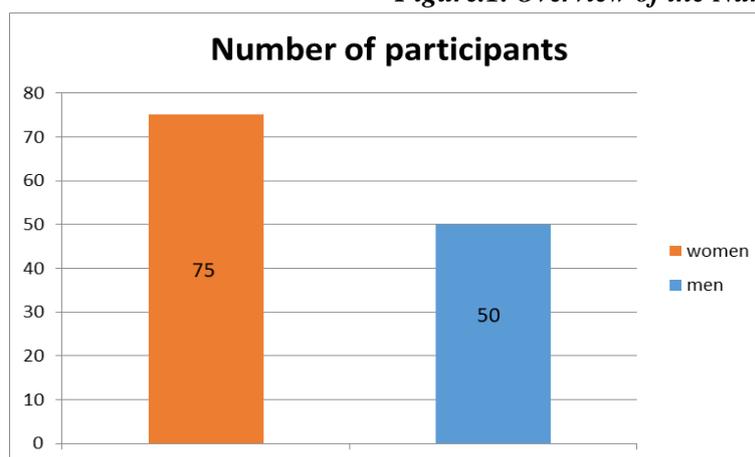
Regarding the issue related to the activity of the enterprises, are included the employees of the production enterprises (textile enterprises) service enterprises (trade enterprises, transport enterprises, construction activity and tourism-travel agencies).

The second part of the questionnaire contains ten questions related to revealing the set goals of the research - whether employees are exposed to stress, the dominant cause of stress and the actions taken to reduce stress.

#### 5. Research results

According to the results of the research and the total number of observations obtained on each question, it is concluded that the sample consists of 125 respondents. In the research 125 respondents actively participated, of which 75 are women and 50 men (Figure 1).

*Figure.1. Overview of the Number of respondents*

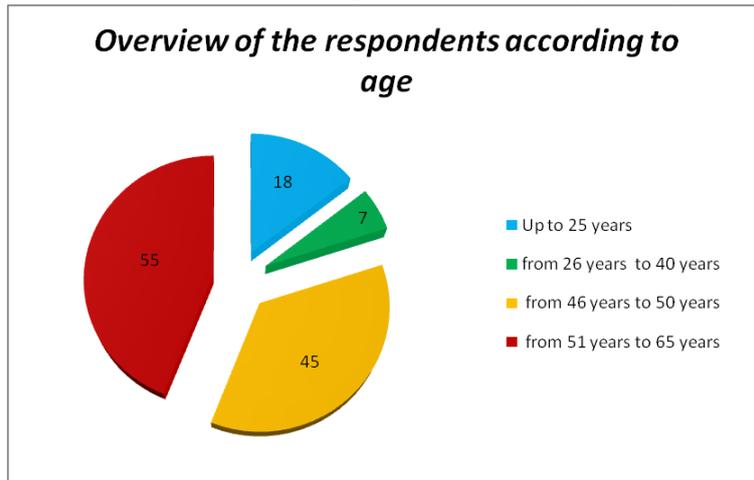


*Source: According to research*

An overview of the structure of the respondents by age is given in Figure 2.

<sup>10</sup> Lazarus, R. S. and Folkman, S., (1986):“Cognitive theories of stress and the issue of circularity ”,In M H Appley and R Trumbull Eds.,p.57

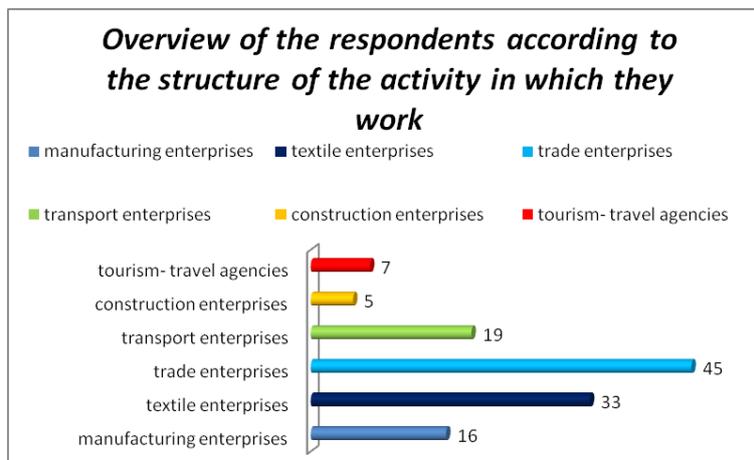
**Figure.2. Overview of the respondents according to age**



**Source: According to research**

According to the analysis of the respondents by age, it is concluded that the respondents over the age of 45 dominate, and the respondents aged 25 to 35 are the least represented. According to the analysis the structure of the activity in which they work, dominate the employees in trade (45 respondents) and the respondents from the construction activity are the least represented (Figure 3).

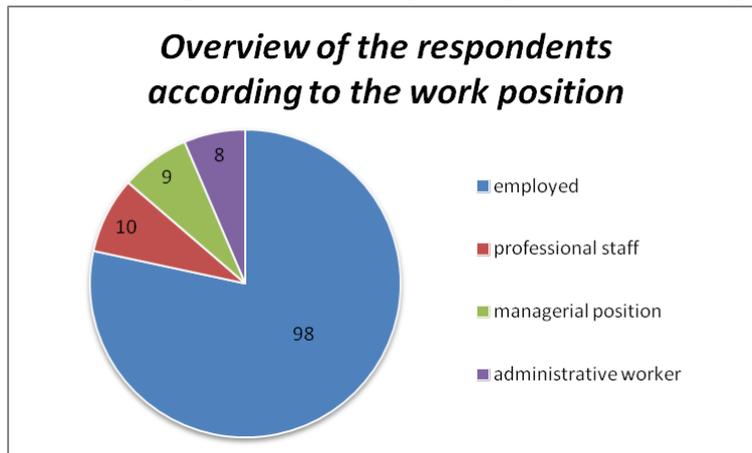
**Figure.3. Overview of the respondents according to the structure of the activity in which they work**



**Source: According to research**

Figure 4 shows the work position performed by the respondents, where the structure is as follows: employee-98 respondents, professional staff-10 respondents, managerial position-9 respondents, administrative worker-8 respondents.

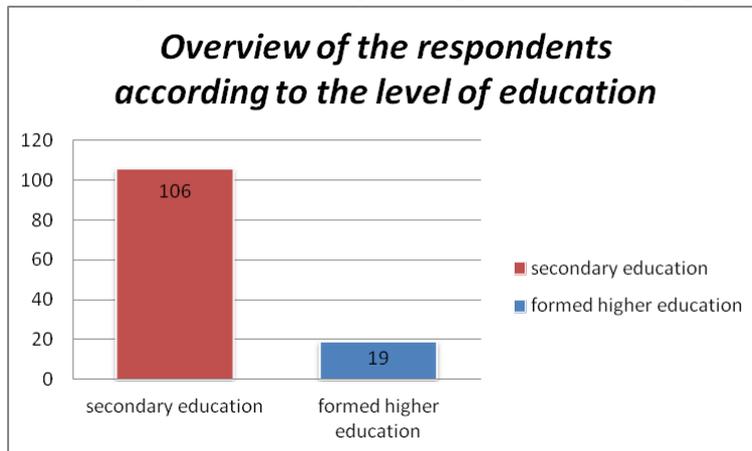
*Figure.4. Overview of the respondents according to the work position*



*Source: According to research*

From the aspect of the level of education, the research includes 106 respondents with secondary education and 19 respondents with higher education (Figure 5).

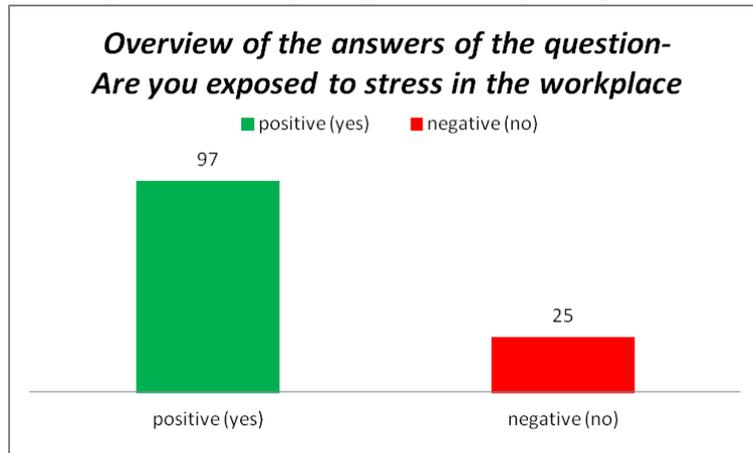
*Figure.5. Overview of the respondents according to the level of education*



*Source: According to research*

The received answers to the second part of the questionnaire are shown below. To the first question that reads- *Are you exposed to stress in the workplace ?*, most of the respondents answered in the affirmative, 97 respondents said positively and 25 respondents said negatively. An overview of the answers received is given in Figure 6.

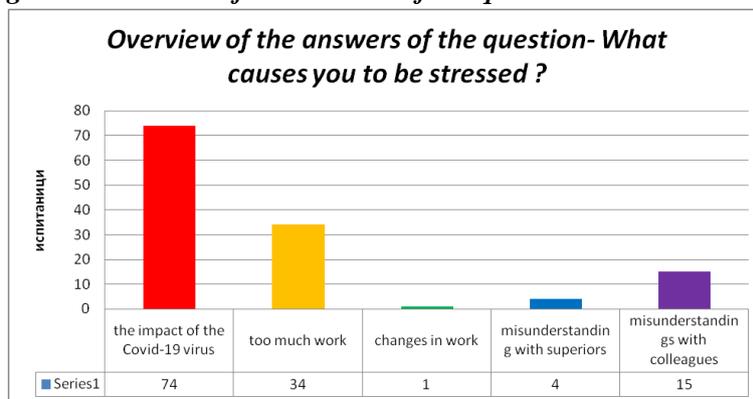
**Figure.6. Overview of the answers of the question-*Are you exposed to stress in the workplace ?***



**Source: According to research**

To the question- *What causes you to be stressed ?*, with the given possible answers: a) the impact of the COVID-19 , b) overwork, c) changes in work, d) misunderstanding with managers and e) misunderstandings with colleagues, most of respondents said that the impact of the COVID-19 causes the most stress among employees, which was reported by 74 employees, 34 employees said that changes in work cause stress, 4 employees said that misunderstanding with superiors causes stress and 15 employees said that misunderstanding causes stress to colleagues. An overview of the answers received is given in Figure 7.

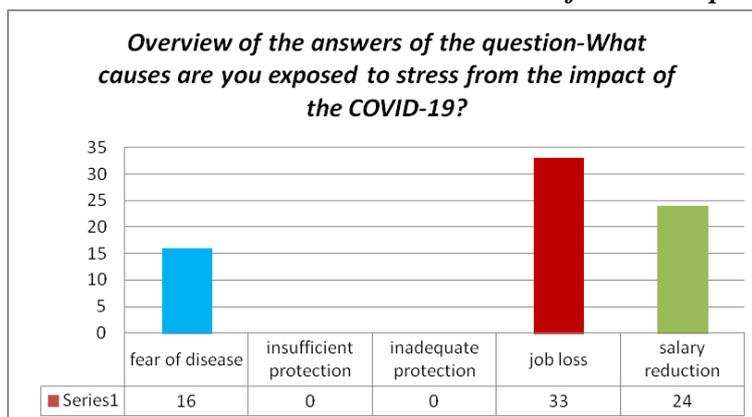
**Figure.7. Overview of the answers of the question- *What causes you to be stressed ?***



**Source: According to research**

To the third question that refers only to the respondents (74 in total, who answer that the cause of stress is the impact of the virus COVID-19), *What causes are you exposed to stress from the impact of the COVID-19?* and the given answers: a) fear of illness b) insufficient protection c) inadequate protection d) work loss e) wage reduction, the biggest cause of stress among employees for which 33 employees stated is the probability of losing the work, and 24 employees reported that the possibility of a wage reduction caused stress to them and 16 employees reported that the possibility of being ill had a negative impact and caused stress. (Figure 8)

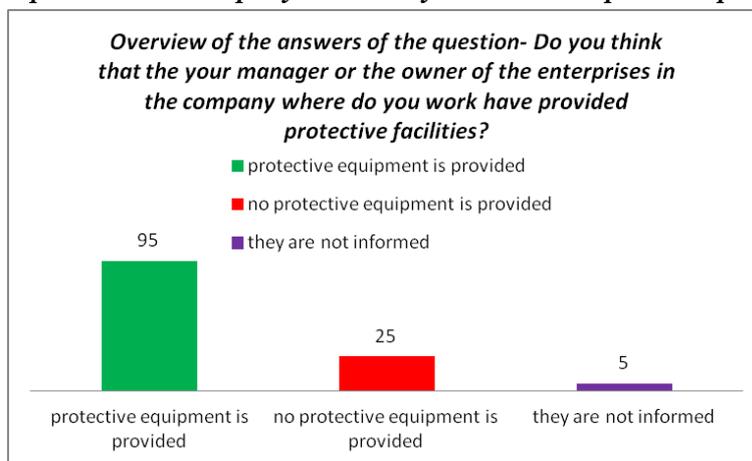
**Figure.8. Overview of the answers of the question-What causes are you exposed to stress from the impact of the COVID-19?**



**Source: According to research**

To the next question-Do you think that the your manager or the owner of the enterprises in the company where do you work have provided protective equipment?, most of the employees included in the survey or 95 respondents considered that the company provided protective equipment, 25 respondents answered that wasn't provided protective equipment and 5 respondents aren't informed about it. A graphic representation of the received answers is given in Figure 9.

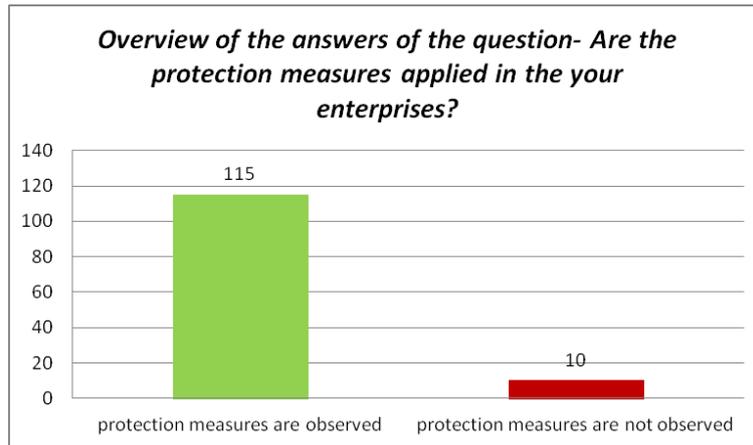
**Figure.9. Overview of the answers of the question- Do you think that the your manager of the enterprises in the company where do you work have provided protective equipment?**



**Source: According to research**

To the next question- Are the protection measures applied in the your enterprises?, the majority of the employees included in the research or 115 respondents considered that the protection measures are applied or respected in the enterprises and only 10 respondents answered negative. (Figure 10).

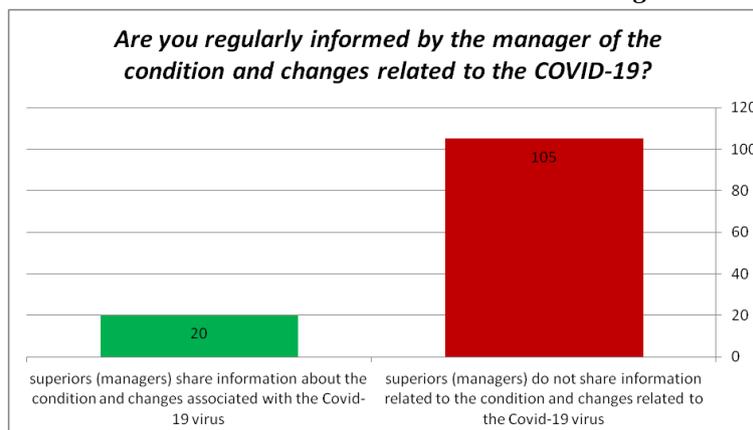
**Figure.10. Overview of the answers of the question- Are the protection measures applied in the your enterprises?**



**Source: According to research**

To the question - *Are you regularly informed by the manager of the condition and changes related to the COVID-19?*, most of the employees included in the survey or 105 respondents consider that the managers (superiors) didn't share information related to the condition and changes related to the COVID-19 and only 20 respondents said positive. ( Figure 11)

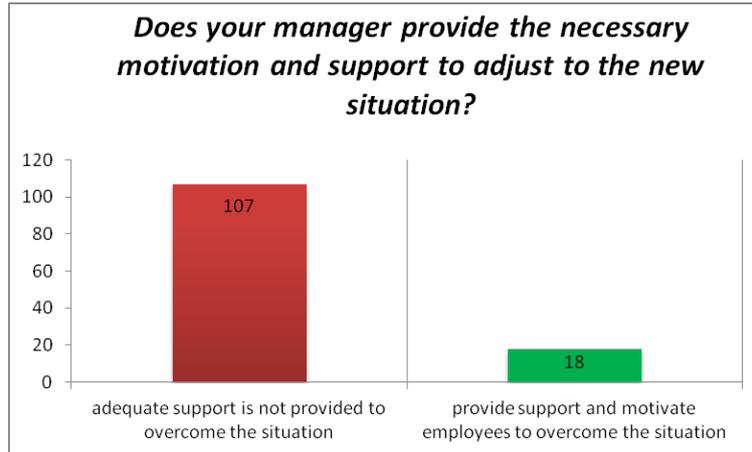
**Figure.11. Overview of the answers of the question- Are you regularly informed by the manager of the condition and changes related to the COVID-19?**



**Source: According to research**

On the next question- *Does your manager provide the necessary motivation and support to adjust to the new situation?*, most of the employees involved in the survey or 107 respondents consider that the manager or supervisor in the enterprises doesn't provide adequate support to overcome the situation. 18 respondents consider that their managers provide support and motivate employees to overcome the situation. (Figure 12)

**Figure.12. Overview of the answers of the question-Does your manager provide the necessary motivation and support to adjust to the new situation?**



**Source: According to research**

The eighth question-*Whether your manager can predict the sources of stress in the your enterprises ?*, from the majority of answers received (98) confirms that the managers can see, predict the causes-sources of stress and 27 respondents stated negatively and they believe that managers can't predict the sources of stress. (Figure 13)

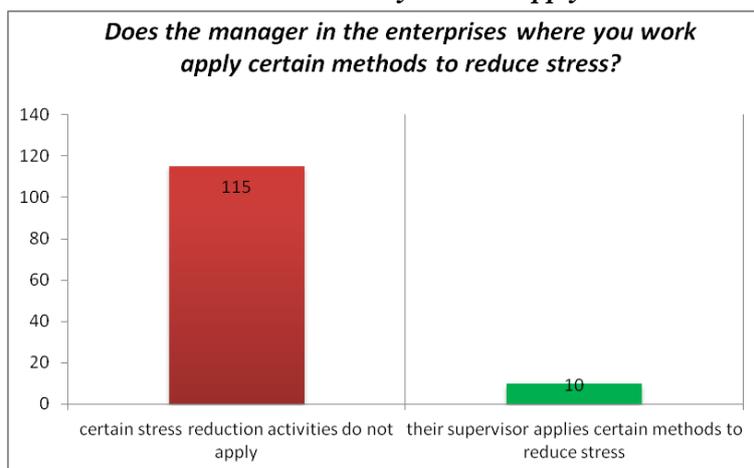
**Figure.13. Overview of the answers of the question- Whether your manager can predict the sources of stress in the your enterprises?**



**Source: According to research**

To the next question- *Does the manager in the enterprises where you work apply certain methods to reduce stress?* he majority of respondents (115 respondents) consider that certain stress reduction activities aren't applied and 10 respondents replied positively and believe that their managers applies certain methods to reduce stress. An overview of the results obtained is given in Figure 14.

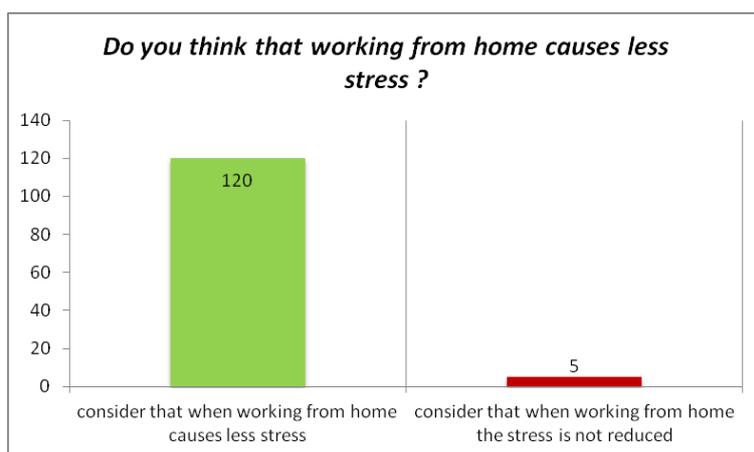
**Figure.14. Overview of the answers of the question- Does the manager in the enterprises where you work apply certain methods to reduce stress?**



**Source: According to research**

To the last question-Do you think that working from home causes less stress ?, almost all respondents or 120 respondents think that working from home causes less stress and only 5 respondents think that when working from home the stress isn't less. (Figure 15)

**Figure.15. Overview of the answers of the question- Do you think that working from home causes less stress ?**



**Source: According to research**

## 6. Conclusion

Stress is considered to be one of the most important causes of many organizational problems. Occupational stress as one of the risk factors for employee health and work efficiency is a daily and normal occurrence present in every enterprises. There isn't enterprises or work where there isn't certain level of stress. Usually stress is related to the employees in the enterprises, the organizational culture of the enterprises, the communication in the enterprises, the way of organizing the work, the way of resolving the conflict situations inside and outside the work.<sup>11</sup> However, the impact of the COVID-19 causes an increased level of stress in employees, which is a reason for a decrease in the

<sup>11</sup> Magdinceva Sopova, Marija and Bardarova, Snezana and Stojanovska-Stefanova, Aneta (2017) *The role of the entrepreneur in managing the professional stress of the employees*. In: Proceedings Book of First International Scientific Conference, Challenges of Tourism and business logistics in the 21st century – ISCTBL 2017, University Goce Delcev-Stip, Gevgelija, Macedonia.

working capacity of employees, but also causes an increased risk of deteriorating health with pronounced harmful consequences.

In order for enterprises to maintain the achieved level of development and to deal with the situation, it is necessary to devote great attention to the stress management and to ensure good communication with employees. The greatest influence with deal of the stress at work has the manager or the entrepreneur of the enterprises . The entrepreneur should know well the abilities of the employees, to know their characteristics as well as the possibility of mistakes at work. A key factor in preventing stress is the setting of clear expectations and standard and performance, as well as monitoring the performance and providing consistent feedback on how it works.<sup>12</sup>

Efficiency with stress management consists in the ability of the entrepreneur to detect and eliminate sources of stress and reduce them. The modern way of life daily increases the level of accumulated chronic stress and initiates the emergence of the newly created acute stress.

The results of the research confirm the hypothesis that the impact of the COVID-19 is a key factor in increasing stress in employees at work. According to the obtained results, it can be concluded that most of the people involved in the research consider that they are constantly exposed to stress. The main cause of stress for these employees is the impact of the COVID-19 as well as the increased workload.

Employees feel fear because of the danger of losing their work and the possibility of getting sick, which is a great uncertainty for them. The enterprises in which the respondents are employed have provided protective equipment and in these enterprises the measures for protection against the COVID-19 are observed. Respondents believe that the management of enterprise cannot predict the sources of stress at work in the workplace and doesn't apply measures to reduce stress. Because the manager has the greatest impact in providing organizational conditions for timely information to employees about all changes related to the COVID-19 and providing support to overcome the situation, it is necessary to timely apply appropriate methods to deal with the situation and to apply specific activities to identify the causes of stressful situations. The obtained results of the research are a confirmation of the set goal of the research which consists in understanding the role of management in managing with stress at work, through timely recognition and detection of the causes of stress and reducing the impact of stress on employees.

The stress caused by the impact of the COVID-19 as a negative phenomenon in the enterprises can be overcome by applying appropriate methods and techniques that are appropriate for the current situation. Practically, this means that stress reduction or stress management can be implemented through the implementation of the following activities by management: providing opportunities for work from home because work from home reduces employee stress and exposure to the COVID-19, timely informing employees about all changes related to the impact of the COVID-19, which means implementing a direct way of communication with employees and exchange of information, application of methods to reduce sources of stress and provide support to employees for overcoming the situation in order to successfully deal with sources of stress within the enterprises.

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<sup>12</sup> Magdinceva Sopova, Marija and Postolov, Kiril and Stojanovska-Stefanova, Aneta (2020) *Managing with Stress in Organizations*. LAP Lambert Acadmic Publishing, ISBN 978-6202669184,p.48

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