

A qualitative study of occupational stress management
techniques of personal assistants in Durban North

By

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I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the Bachelor of Arts Honors in Psychology degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes.

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ABSTRACT:

Stress can have a significant effect on the employee's performance, and their psychological health, including burnout, increased amount of "sick days", anxiety etc. (Volmink, 2014; Van Zyl, 2002). There is much literature on occupational stress in occupations such as engineering (Rothmann & Malan, 2004), and the educational sector (Botwe, Kenneth, Masih, 2017), yet the work of personal assistants has not been sufficiently investigated.

The research problem is that there are many ways of dealing with stress, such as relaxation, and exercise (Fokeng, 2018). However, not knowing how to destress can lead to problematic outcomes which important to study as personal assistant can be overlooked. This study considers the South African context, which has not been explored in most literature.

Three participants were approached and semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to share their personal lived about their stressors, stress management techniques, and reasons why those techniques work best for them.

This research is underpinned by Lazarus and Folkman's theory, and through the concepts such as stressor, and stress management, and it has been found that there might not be an exact way personal assistants manage their stress, but rather manage their stress, according to their personality.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction:	5
1.1. Background:	5
1.2. Rationale:	5
1.3. Problem statement:	6
1.4. Research goal and Questions:	6
1.5. Research Objectives:	6
2. Literature review:	7
2.1. Theoretical foundation:	7
2.2. Critical review of literature:	8
2.2.1. Theme 1: Occupational Stress	8
2.2.2. Theme 2: Work Stressors	10
2.2.3. Theme 3: Effects of stress:	13
2.2.4. Theme 4: Stress management:	15
2.3. Conceptualisation:	18
3. Methodology:	18
3.1. Research Paradigm:	18
3.2. Design/ conceptual approach:	19
3.3. Population:	20
3.4. Sampling:	21
3.5. Data collection methods	23
3.6. Application of data collection methods:	24
3.7. Data analysis methods	27
3.8. Application of data analysis methods:	28
4. Findings and Interpretation of Findings:	29
4.1. Trustworthiness:	29
4.1.1. Credibility:	29
4.1.2. Transferability:	29
4.1.3. Dependability:	29
4.1.4. Confirmability:	30
4.2. Presentation of Findings:	30
4.3. Interpretation of Findings:	32
4.4. Findings in context:	33
5. Conclusion:	34
5.1. Research questions addressed:	34
5.2. Ethical considerations and implications:	36

5.3. Limitations:	37
5.4. Implications of findings for future practices:	37
5.5. Final conclusion:	37
APPENDIX A: Final research report summary document table.....	39
APPENDIX B: Gatekeeper Letter	40
APPENDIX C: Ethical clearance letter.....	42
APPENDIX D: Ethics checklist.....	44
APPENDIX E: Informed consent.....	45
APPENDIX F: Consent form for audio or video recording	48
APPENDIX G: Interview schedule.....	49
APPENDIX H: Originality report.....	51
References:	52

1. Introduction:

1.1. Background:

Occupational stress has a major effect on a large proportion of the population in the working world. According to the American Psychological Associations (APA) work stressors include low salary, excessive workload, work that isn't challenging, conflicting demands or unclear performance expectation. It has also been found that work stressors also include job insecurity, working hours, workload, and even managerial styles (Van Zyl, 2002; Volmink, 2014). Stress can have a significant effect on the employee's performance as well as their psychological health (Volmink, 2014). These effects include burnout, decrease in productivity, increased amount of "sick days", anxiety etc. (Volmink, 2014; Van Zyl, 2002). It is, therefore, important to be able to manage one's stress and know what technique works for an individual in order to prevent the effects mentioned above. This research focuses on personal assistants in the workplace and their personal experiences of work stressors, their stress management techniques, and reasons why they feel their technique works best for them.

1.2. Rationale:

Recent literature has pointed out that occupational stress can lead to burnout or even mental disorders when not managed properly (Amoaka et al., 2017; Sahoo, 2016). These effects of stress can have a major impact on a personal assistant, as well as the company they are working for as the company may experience high staff turnover and recruitment costs, high absenteeism and presenteeism levels, and reduced productivity levels (Sahoo, 2016). There is much literature on occupational stress in occupations such as engineering (Rothmann & Malan, 2004), the educational sector (Botwe, Kenneth, Masih, 2017), textile managers (Vadivu, 2017), and post office workers (Thabane, 2015). However literature has largely overlooked the work of personal assistants. All jobs can be stressful and some jobs are more stressful than others, however, all stress should be investigated. Personally I believe that personal assistants should not be overlooked because they also work in a stressful environment which includes support work for their managers and ensure everything is done exactly how they need it, which can be very stressful (Milner, 2015). Therefore, it is important

to gain an understanding of personal assistant's work stressors, stress interventions, and reasons they feel it is the best fit for them.

1.3. Problem statement:

This study researches which stress interventions personal assistants take on in order to help manage their stress and how they feel it helps them to do so. There are many ways of dealing with stress, however, they may not work for everyone, and not knowing how to destress can lead to problematic outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, burnout and a decrease in productivity in the workplace. This was important to study due to the fact that personal assistant can be overlooked because they are support staff, and as discussed in the review of previous literature, there can be many psychological and physical effects from stress.

1.4. Research goal and Questions:

The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding about personal assistant's work stressors, their personal stress interventions, as well as the reasons they feel their interventions work best for them.

Research questions:

- **How do personal assistants In Durban North manage their work stress?**
 - What are the main stressors of a personal assistant?
 - What techniques/ strategies do personal assistants use to destress from work?
 - Why do they feel their chosen technique works best for them?

1.5. Research Objectives:

- To assess the ways in which personal assistant manage their work stress
 - To determine the main stressors of a personal assistant.
 - To determine what techniques/ strategies personal assistants use to destress from work.
 - To reveal the reasons they feel their chosen technique works best for them.

2. Literature review:

2.1. Theoretical foundation:

Lazarus and Folkman (1980) suggested there are two types of coping responses emotion focused and problem focused:

Emotion-focused coping is the regulation of stressful and negative emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980; Folkman *et al.*, 1986; Folkman, 2010), and usually comes into place once the harm has already been done (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980). Higher levels of emotion-focused coping are generated when situations have to be accepted, and in which the person has to hold back from acting. Folkman *et al.* (1986), Folkman (1997) and Folkman (2010) state that emotion-focused coping includes seeking social support, escape-avoidance, self-control, self-esteem, distancing, and accepting responsibility.

Problem-focused coping is used for managing or altering the person-environment relationship that is the source of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980), is used to deal with the problem that is causing the distress (Folkman *et al.*, 1986; Folkman, 2010), and is goal-directed (Folkman, 1997). It usually comes into place to deal with upcoming harm (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980). Higher levels of problem-focused coping are generated when something constructive can be done and when more information is needed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980).

Strategies that can be used around this coping can be seeking information, getting help, inhibiting action, and taking direct action, decision making, planning, and resolving conflicts in order to solve or manage the problems that create distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980; Folkman, 1997; Folkman, 2010). Folkman *et al* (1986) adds that aggressive interpersonal efforts to alter the situation, and rational and deliberate efforts to problem solve can also be strategies in this type of coping. With reference to this research study, it has been found that in work contexts, problem-focused coping is more favourable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980).

The coping process involves both problem- and emotion-focused coping, and it has been found that in almost every stressful encounter, both forms of coping were used (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980). Lazarus (2006) states that problem- and emotion-based coping should not be used independently as in most stressful situations they

complement each other.

This is relevant to this study because it looks into more specific stress management techniques, and applies it to the workplace in certain areas, as mentioned above. This theory will also assist the researcher find which type of coping is mostly used among personal assistants, and may help in finding out why their techniques fit best for them in their situation. This theory will be further used in the analysis of the findings.

2.2. Critical review of literature:

2.2.1. *Theme 1: Occupational Stress*

Occupational stress has been termed as organisational stress, workplace stress, and job stress, which all stems from a broader phenomenon- stress (Narban, Narban & Singh, 2016). Stress occurs during all individual's lifespans, everyone experiences stress throughout their history, and throughout human history (Shahsavarani, Abadi & Kalkhoran, 2015). The focus of this research is occupational stress and stress management techniques; therefore, it is important to know what is meant by stress, and occupational stress.

Stress can be defined as a complex psychological construct that people experience daily (Quick *et al.*, 1997, as cited in Narban *et al.*, 2016). It is an adaptive response to an external situation that results in physical, psychological, and behavioural variations (Narban, *et al.*, 2016). Nordqvist (2015, as cited in Botwe, Kenneth & Mashi, 2017) simplifies stress in saying it is anything that poses a challenge or a threat to our well-being and states that it is inevitable and states that stress affects an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviour towards work and their relationships with people and their health.

Occupational stress can be defined as a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to negative and harmful aspects of work content, work organisation, and work environment and originates when workers feel an imbalance between their work demands and their capabilities and/or resources to meet these demands (Narban *et al.*, 2016; Mirela & Midalina-Adriana, n.d).

Employees' response to stress may be positive or negative, depending on the demands placed on them, the amount of control they have over the situation, the support they have, as well as the individual response of the employee (Narban *et al.*,

2016). These types of organisational stress are eustress and distress (Mirela & Midalina-Adriana, n.d.). In terms of this research, distress is important as this is the type of occupational stress that will need stress management techniques.

Distress is a negative stress and occurs when something affects one's routine for a short period of time (Mirela & Midalina-Adriana, n.d.). This can result in biological, psychological, and social problems, and do serious harm to people (Tucker *et al.*, 2008, as cited in Shahsavarani *et al.*, 2015), which relates to the research problem by showing the potential problems that can come about if stress is not managed properly. This study is attempting to avoid these potential harms by ensuring the effective use of stress interventions.

Botwe *et al.* (2017) argue that there is a third type of stress- hyper-stress. This is when a person is pushed beyond what one can handle and can occur when constant heavy financial difficulties, work both at home and office, and continuous tension (Botwe *et al.*, 2017). This is an important concept to consider as when an employee enters this type of stress, it is then known that the stress management technique is not working for the employee, and a new technique must be used to help manage the stress. This type of stress is what this research is wanting to avoid for personal assistants.

Job stress results from the interaction between the worker and the work conditions (Narban *et al.*, 2017). Individual differences such as an employee's personality and their coping skills can help predict whether certain job conditions will result in stress (Narban *et al.*, 2017). These individual differences can help in the consideration of the personal assistant's occupational stress as an individual. Quick and Henderson (2016) state that these individual differences can be an employee's vulnerability to occupational stress, or the protection against the risks associated with this stress.

In terms of vulnerability, there are three individual differences that can increase vulnerability, namely lower socioeconomic status, Type A behaviour, and social isolation or loneliness (Alder *et al.*, 1993; Wright, 1998; Lynch, 2000, as cited in Quick & Henderson, 2016). In terms of protection, personality hardiness, characterized by commitment, control, and challenge, which provides protection as a stress-resistance variable (Maddi, 2002, as cited in Quick & Henderson, 2016).

With reference to this study, which is located in South Africa, the country is known to

have many people living under the lower socioeconomic status level, therefore, this is an important factor to look at when researching possible vulnerabilities as this can contribute to an employee's stress levels.

Botwe, Kenneth and Masih's (2017) research focused on the educational sector using quantitative research. Mirela and Madalina (n.d.) use a quantitative approach and look at organisational stress and its impact on work performance. Shahsavarani *et al.* (2015) and Narban *et al.* (2017) use secondary sources for their analysis of their research, with use of academic and scientific research. All these studies brings about a gap in the literature as they are all quantitative in nature, and none of the focus is on personal assistants. This research will be using a quantitative approach in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of occupational stress.

2.2.2. Theme 2: Work Stressors

Now that organisational stress is understood, the causes need to be examined because in order to help manage stress, an employee needs to be able to determine the aspects that are causing their stress in their work life.

In terms of this research, it is important to know what a stressor and workplace stressor is because an employee needs to know what is making them stressed in order to find an effective stress management technique to use. A stressor can be defined as an event or set of conditions that cause a stress response (Hashmi, 2015). A workplace stressor can be defined as the sources of stress in the work environment (Landsbergis *et al.*, 2017).

Causes of stress can be divided into two categories, namely internal and external causes (Panigrahi, 2017). Internal causes involve the individual's mindset, their way of thinking which originate within the individual and lead to stress and are based upon the perception of the individual (Panigrahi, 2017). This review is going to focus on external causes of work stress as this research is focusing on the employees as an individual.

Cooper and Marschall (1976, as cited in Bankowska, 2016) distinguished five groups of job stressors related to this research, namely:

(1) Factors related to work (Cooper & Marschall, 1976, as cited in Bankowska,

2016):

Hashmi (2015) states that when looking at working conditions, one cannot ignore the importance of individual differences. Scientific evidence suggests that certain working conditions are stressful to most people and a greater emphasis on working conditions need to be looked at as the key source of job stress, and a primary prevention strategy needs to be put in place, such as job redesign (Hashmi, 2015).

Panigrahi (2017) states that working hours refers to working very odd hours which may lead to many physiological problems which may lead to stress during work. Hashmi (2015) states that a significant number of Americans work very long hours, estimating 26% of men and more than 11% of women work 50 or more hours a week in 2000. These statistics are dated, however, these statistics are significant to show the importance of working hours and the effects they may have. It is also not based in South Africa, therefore, there needs to be more research done into this topic in South Africa. Much like Hashmi's (2015) study, research on stress is mainly carried out in the North, while not much attention has been paid to South Africa in the literature, which identifies a gap in the literature in relation to the context.

When looking at work load, there are two aspects that can be looked at, overload and underload (Panigrahi, 2017, Hashmi, 2015). Panigrahi (2017) describes over load as performing a large amount of work in a short time frame. He goes to explain that these high expectations may lead to stress of the employee (Panigrahi, 2017).

Underload refers to a small amount of work and too much time to do it which leads to the employee questioning his/her work capacity and feels stressed (Panigrahi, 2017). Katz and Kahn (n.d., as cited in Hashmi, 2015) adds that underload is work that fails to use the employee's skills and abilities.

As discussed in the research problem, American Psychological Association (APA) include excessive workload and workload that is not challenging as work stressors, and Van Zyl (2002) and Volmink (2014) include working hours as work stressors.

(2) Factors related to a performed role (Cooper & Marschall, 1976, as cited in Bankowska, 2016):

An employee's position or status in the workplace can also affect levels of stress (Hashmi, 2015). This stress can affect employees of all categories, however, Hashmi (2015) states that less powerful employees are more likely to suffer from stress than powerful workers. Panigrahi (2017) explains that this is because when the employee has very little to no control, he/she may lose interest in their work which lead to stress because the employee may find it difficult to meet the expectations of their superiors.

(3) Relationships at work (Cooper & Marschall, 1976, as cited in Bankowska, 2016):

According to Keenan and Newton (1985, as cited in Hashmi, 2015) interpersonal conflict among work colleagues and bullying in the workplace has been shown to be one of the most frequently noted stressors for employees. According to Colligan, Colligan and Higgins (2006, as cited in Hashmi, 2015) this can be divided into five categories, namely, (1) threat to professional status, (2) threat to personal status, (3) isolation, (4) excess work, and (5) destabilization. This effect can create a hostile work environment for employees that can then affect their work ethic and contribution to the organisation (Rhodes et al., 2010, as cited in Hashmi, 2015).

(4) Factors associated with professional development (Cooper & Marschall, 1976, as cited in Bankowska, 2016):

Job insecurity refers to the fear of losing one's job, which leads to chronic stress and causes reduced work quality (Panigraphi, 2017). Mbidoaka (2017) states that an employee may feel their job is not secure due to the fact that computer and communications revolutions have made companies more efficient and more productive. This has resulted in higher expectations and faster completion of work which, in turn, puts more pressure and stress on employees (Mbidoaka, 2017). In reference to the research problem Van Zyl (2002) and Volmink (2014) include job insecurity as work stressors. In the South African context, job insecurity can be seen as a major stressor as the unemployment rate is high and the economy is in junk status, which is a major concern to employee's job security.

Mbidoaka's (2017) research was focused on strategies to reduce effects of organisational stress in health care workplaces in America, which brings about a gap in the literature to focus on personal assistants.

(5) Factors connected with the organisational structure and atmosphere in the organisation (Cooper & Marschall, 1976, as cited in Bankowska, 2016):

Managerial styles may also contribute to the stress of less powerful employees (Panigrahi, 2017). For example, managers with autocratic managerial styles give their employees very little freedom in planning and decision making. Therefore, an employee may feel stressed due to the lack of control over their work and very high restrictions (Panigrahi, 2017). Van Zyl (2002) and Volmink (2014) agree with managerial styles as work stressors, as discussed in the research problem.

2.2.3. Theme 3: Effects of stress:

Organisational stress can have a major impact on employees and the organisation. Organisational stress on individuals include physical effects, behavioural effects, intellectual effects, and psychological effects which will be discussed below (Amoaka et al., 2017; Sahoo, 2016; Singh, n.d.). These effects are important to consider as if an employee is experiencing these effects, they know that either their stress management technique is not working for them, or they need to begin looking for stress management techniques.

All these effects are relevant to this study as it relates to the research problem, where Volmink (2014) and Van Zyl (2002) state that effects of organisational stress include burnout, decrease in productivity, increased "sick days", anxiety, and others. These aspects will be discussed further below.

Physical effects include increased heart rate and blood pressure (Sahoo, 2016; Amoaka et al., 2017). Amoaka et al. (2017) includes that from these effects wear and tear on the body can become noticeable and problematic. The effects of this can include migraine headaches, insomnia, cardiovascular disease (Sahoo, 2016; Amoaka et al., 2017; Singh, n.d.), back pains, hypertension, diabetes, cancer (Amoaka et al., 2017), and ulcer problems (Singh, n.d.)

Intellectual effects include loss of concentration, lack of motivation, poor decision-making, difficulty with thought process, and loss of memory (Sahoo, 2016). Singh (n.d.) adds with reference to decision making, stress can make this process tricky and confusing for an individual and even tend to make incorrect decisions in stressful situations.

Behavioural effects include substance abuse (such as alcohol), inappropriate display of behaviour, unpunctuality, segregation, and decreased libido (Sahoo, 2016). Mark (2012, as cited in Amoaka et al., 2017) adds that eating more or less, smoking, use of alcohol and/or drugs, rapid speech, nervous fidgeting can also be seen as behavioural effects on an employee. When looking at the effect of the employee's behaviour on the organisation, these effects could lead to absenteeism, hopping from job to job, and even deterioration of the employee's performance (Mark, 2012, as cited in Amoaka et al., 2017). Absenteeism will be discussed in more detail later.

Psychological effects include anxiety, irritability, depression, anger, nervousness, boredom, and aggressiveness (Sahoo, 2016; Amoaka et al., 2017). Singh (n.d.) includes that low self-esteem can also be an effect of stress. Mentioned above that workload, whether it is underload or overload, is a cause of stress and can lead to an employee feeling like a failure. From this cause of stress, the employee can attribute his/her failures onto himself/herself, which can lead to lower self-esteem (Singh, n.d.).

Amoaka et al. (2017) states that these psychological effects of stress can lead to burnout. Barling, Kelloway and Frone (2005, as cited by Thabane, 2015) defines burnout as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. It is characterised by an array of physical and attitudinal symptoms, primarily exhaustion, and is accompanied by distress, a sense of reduced effectiveness, decreased motivation and the development of dysfunctional personal and societal attitudes and behaviours at work (Thabane, 2015).

Landsbergis et al. (2017) mentions that burnout has three dimensions, namely:

- Emotional exhaustion (a sense of being depleted and over-extended)
- Depersonalisation (detachment or withdrawal from others)
- Diminished personal accomplishment

Effects of work stress on organisations include high staff turnover and recruitment costs, high absenteeism and Presenteeism levels, and reduced productivity levels (Sahoo, 2016).

High staff turnover and recruitment costs refer to stressed employees that do not enjoy

their working environment (Sahoo, 2016). Some employees are able to confide in their employers to help reduce their stress while others do not (Sahoo, 2016). This results in the employee having no other option to leave the organisation and remove themselves from the stressful environment (Sahoo, 2016). Unfortunately, many organisations do not attempt to reveal the reasons for an employee's resignation and, therefore, are unable to reveal their own issues within the organisation regarding stress (Sahoo, 2016).

High absenteeism refers to employees that are stressed that tend to take more time off due to illness, or are unable to cope with going into work and attempt to escape the stressful work environment by remaining at home where they feel safe (Sahoo, 2016). Presenteeism relates to employees who come into work, however, they are unable to contribute much (Sahoo, 2016). In other words, they are physically present but not psychologically present (Sahoo, 2016).

Reduced productivity levels often occur when stress is prolonged and chronic exhaustion comes about, which makes it difficult for the employee to work at their highest level (Sahoo, 2016). Chronic exhaustion leads to a decrease in motivation and concentration, which leads to higher risks of mistakes (Sahoo, 2016). It also takes longer for the employee to complete their work, and the quality of their work can decrease (Sahoo, 2016).

Looking at the research on this subject, Thabane (2015), Singh (n.d.) and Sahoo (2016) all used a quantitative approach, and Amoaka *et al.* (2017) used a mixed methods approach. This points to a gap in the literature by using qualitative approach to help gain more of an in-depth understanding into this subject. Thabane (2015) investigated stress experienced by post office workers in South Africa, which helps the researcher gain some context into the focus of South Africa, however, the focus was on postal workers, as already mentioned. Singh (n.d.) looked at impact of stress on employee performance, much like Mirela and Madalina (n.d.), as mentioned in theme 1. Yet the focus here was on employee performance, whereas this research positions its focus on the employees themselves.

2.2.4. Theme 4: Stress management:

Stress management can be defined as a series of actions and measures which are implemented in order to reduce organisational stress and the effects it has on an

individual (Florea, 2016).

There are two ways in which stress can be managed, namely the individual approach and the organisational approach (Fonkeng, 2018). However, for this research, only the individual approach is relevant as it is looking at stress management techniques in personal assistants. The research problem argues that stress management techniques need to be studied in order to reduce the effects of stress discussed above, as the effects can have many dangerous risks to an employee. The individual approach allows an individual to better adapt to stress (Florea, 2016).

When looking at the individual approach, Jain and Batra (2015) state that stress management can be done in two ways, namely taking care of yourself, and organising and prioritising.

Stress Management by taking care of yourself:

Social support includes seeking a friend's or families emotional support in times of trouble (Sharma, 2015). This support can be in terms of advice on how to cope with stress, how to prevent stress, gaining emotional support, and encouragement (Nekoranec & Kmosena, 2015). Opening up to someone can be a big sigh of relief for an employee, and can go a long way to reduce stress and gain a more positive outlook on life (Fonkeng, 2018). This might not be a way out for every person, as some people find accepting support as a sign of weakness, however, sharing feelings can bring down stress levels a lot of the time (Jain & Batra, 2015).

Relaxation helps one go into a state of deep relaxation where the employee feels physically relaxed and detached from the stressful situation one can find oneself in (Fonkeng, 2018). Relaxation can reduce one's blood pressure, heart rate, and other effects of stress (Fonkeng, 2018).

Sharma (2015) suggests that going on holidays regularly, going to a quiet place, and taking short, regular breaks throughout the day can help one relax. Yoga can also help with relaxation (Sharma, 2015). Yoga involves a set of exercises and body movements alongside deep breathing and concentration of mind, which helps to reduce stress (Sharma, 2015). Yoga also involves meditation by concentrating to clear one's mind of stressful situations and disturbing thoughts, sitting in a comfortable and relaxed

position, closing one's eyes (Sharma, 2015).

Fonkeng (2018) suggests exercise such as walking, jogging, dancing, squash, and playing tennis. He states that when one is engaged in exercising, it can be difficult to focus on their job stress. Sharma (2015) states that exercise leads to fewer health risks, such as heart attacks, less tension and stress, and helps the individual gain more confidence. Nekoranec & Kmosena (2015) states that exercise decreases physiological reactions to work-related stress, induce relaxation, and gets rid of the energy that is created by stressful situations.

Stress management by organising and prioritising:

Role management is when an employee actively works to avoid work overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity (Sharma, 2015). This includes asking one's boss for clarifications with regards to work, learning to say "no" to work, and many others (Sharma, 2015).

Time management refers to an employee who manages the use of the time available to him/her, they must control their use of time (Sharma, 2015). An employee must do this by using their time effectively and not waste time on other unimportant things (Sharma, 2015). This involves an appropriate attitude towards and a feeling of importance (Sharma, 2015).

'Don't over-commit' refers to employees being realistic in their abilities before committing themselves to anything at work (Jain & Batra, 2015). If some tasks cannot be eliminated, the employee could rather prioritised these tasks (Jain & Batra, 2015). The employee will be able to rather to some tasks later on and rather do the work which needs their attention at present (Jain & Batra, 2015).

Delegation of responsibility refers to being able to let other employees take care of the work when the workload becomes impossible (Jain & Batra, 2015). Sometimes the employees desire to control or oversee every little step can bring about unnecessary stress to their work life (Jain & Batra, 2015). These desires are often what is wanted by the employee, but is not always needed (Jain & Batra, 2015).

Perusing the research done by the authors mentioned in this theme, Jain and Batra

(2015) and Fokeng (2018) both used a quantitative approach, which shows a gap in the literature for the researcher to use a qualitative approach to help gain a more in-depth understanding of stress management techniques and why they work for individuals. They also generated the study in different countries- Jain and Batra (2015) focused on India, and Fokeng (2018) focused on Cameroon in Central Africa. This illuminates a gap in the literature, which fails to focus on South Africa, and more specifically, personal assistants in Durban North.

2.3. Conceptualisation:

The key concepts for this research were stress, occupational stress, stressors, workplace stressors, and stress management. These concepts were discussed in detail in the review of previous literature. These concepts were important in order to understand the research questions and objectives.

3. Methodology:

3.1. Research Paradigm:

The paradigm that was used in this research was Interpretivism. Interpretivists aim to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and social phenomena (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014). This paradigm is based on the idea that people and objects are fundamentally different, and, therefore, cannot be studied in the same way (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014).

Interpretivism was the most appropriate for this study because this study was looking for an in-depth understanding of personal assistant's work stressors, stress management techniques and understand why they feel their technique works best for them.

Positivism will not allow the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the knowledge required, due to its quantitative analysis which will elicit a very broad and superficial understanding of this research with the use of numerical values, rather than rich descriptive data that is needed to answer the research questions (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). In saying this, Interpretivism was the best paradigm to use for this study as it enhances the depth of the study and explores a subjective view of their lived experiences with regards to stress management techniques.

The ontological position of this research study was that individuals have and use different ways to help them destress from their work. An individual's reality of using one stress management technique may be different to another individual's reality of using the same technique. Therefore, their reality is subjective. For example, if one individual uses meditation as a stress management technique and it works best for them, however, a different individual may have tried to use meditation, however, it ends up making them more anxious as they are not able to relax and clear their head when trying to meditate.

The epistemological position of this research was that the subjective experiences of the participant's work stressors, stress management techniques and how they describe how it works best for them with an in-depth understanding of this knowledge. To help bring about the participant's experiences of stress, the researcher encouraged the participant to elaborate on their answers to help the researcher gain the most in-depth experiences the researcher can from the participant. The researcher also ensured the participant was comfortable to share their experiences and was not judged when revealing their experiences to the researcher. This encouraged the participant to give the researcher any answer they truly believes, rather than the information the participant thinks the researcher wants.

The axiological position of this research is uniqueness and subjectivity is valued. In terms of the participant, the researcher valued their subjective and unique experiences and knowledge about their stress management techniques.

3.2. Design/ conceptual approach:

The conceptual approach for this research would be qualitative. This was because this study seeks subjective knowledge from the participants about their stress management techniques to destress from work. No numbers will be used to interpret the data, this research is rather looking for in-depth knowledge about their work stressors, the techniques and the reason's the participants feel their techniques work best for them. It is about the participant's experiences and feelings. The data needed to answer the research questions can't be generated with a quantitative approach as what is being studied (personal experiences) cannot be quantified or measured.

This research aimed to explore the topic deductively. This was because the researcher will move from exploring broad and general aspects (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014) of stress management techniques used by personal assistants found in literature and the theoretical framework, Lazarus and Folkman's (1980) coping theory, to the specific stress management techniques used by personal assistant found in the interview. Lazarus and Folkman's (1980) theory also helped guide the researcher with the interpretation of the results from each of the participants by looking at emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping and which coping strategy the participants were mostly using.

Descriptive research is used to describe a situation, or problems systematically (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014), therefore, this research was descriptive as it hinges on the personal assistants' experiences of work stressors, stress management techniques used and reasons the participants feel their technique works best for them. This helped the researcher answer the research questions by gaining deeper understanding and description of personal assistant's experiences of their work stressors, stress management techniques, and reasons behind their techniques being the best fit for them by gaining a description of the participant's experiences. This descriptive research goes hand in hand with the research approach of phenomenology.

The research approach for this research was phenomenology. This was because this research is about understanding personal assistants work stressors, stress management techniques used to destress from their work life by also acknowledging their experiences by stating their reasons why they feel their technique works for them. This research used a cross sectional design because the researcher will be doing only one interview with each participant, therefore, the researcher only collected data once. This research was wanting to create an overall picture of the stress management techniques of personal assistants at one point in time.

3.3. Population:

A population can be defined as the total group of people from whom information is required (Wiid & Diggins, 2013, as cited in du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.* (2014) states that it is important that all the people in the population should share at least one specific characteristic that is related to the

research question. Population parameters refer to the shared characteristics and the number of people that are in a specific population (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014).

Therefore, for this research the population refers to personal assistants, whereas the target population was all personal assistants in Durban North, South Africa of any gender, ethnic groups, and educational background, between the ages of 30-50.

The population parameters, or the key characteristics, for this research was a personal assistant who resides in Durban North, and has more than 10 years' experience as a personal assistant, and is between 30-50 years old. This is because the research found Durban North personal assistants to be easily accessible, and they needed to have lots of experience in order for the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of their work stressors, stress management techniques, and why they feel their techniques work best for them. Personal assistants were chosen as the researcher believed that their occupation has been overlooked and wanted to gain a new perspective of their occupational stressors. The age group of the participants was chosen due to the fact that the researcher wanted experienced personal assistants that had been working in the occupation for more than 8 years.

3.4. Sampling:

Showkat and Parveen (2017) states that sampling is the method of selecting a representative subgroup of the population, and sampling makes research more economical and accurate. They also state that the sampling method actually determines the generalisability of the findings, and should be representative of the whole population. (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). When sampling, it is not possible to research the entire population due to time constraints, as well as, relevant to this study, there is no list of personal assistants for the researcher to sample from (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014).

There are two types of sampling, namely probability sampling, and non-probability sampling. However, for the purpose of this research, the focus will be on non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling is used when it is almost impossible to determine who the entire population is, or when there is a difficulty accessing the entire population (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). In this sampling method, the researcher carefully selects the sample from the accessible population and through individuals

who can recommend other participants (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). When selecting the sample, the researcher uses their own judgement, meaning that the participants are not randomly selected from a list (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the researcher used non-randomised methods to draw the sample (Showkat & Parveen, 2017), as it was impossible to gain access to the entire population that fit into this sample within this specific time frame given (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Showkat & Parveen (2017) states that the findings established through non-probability sampling methods lack generalisability, and may not be extended to individuals beyond the sample in the study. This sample was not generalizable to the entire population (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014) as the focus is set on personal assistants in Durban North, South Africa.

Non-probability sampling has many different methods, namely accidental sampling, convenience sampling, purposive sampling, quota sampling, snowball sampling, and volunteer sampling (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Snowball sampling is used when participants provide suggestions of others who match the population parameters of the study, who may be able to participate (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Volunteer sampling is used when a sample is put together from people who volunteer to participate in the study (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014).

The unit of analysis for this study was individuals who work as personal assistants. The sample of this research included a small set of people who met the criteria for the population, more specifically, three participants who work as personal assistants, and live in Durban North between the ages of 30 and 50, who participated in this research study. The three participants were specifically required to live in the Durban North area as the participants were selected from a Facebook group called Durban North Residents, thus, only specific to the Durban North personal assistants. The researcher also gained participants through acquaintances who live in Durban North. Durban North was also chosen due to the sample being easily accessible in the area.

Three participants were chosen to participate in this study as it is qualitative in nature and the researcher had to transcribe, as well as analyse the data for each interview, which took a long time, roughly three days for all three interviews, but also allow the researcher to gain rich data that will be sufficient for this research. Sandelowski (1996, as cited in Vasileiou, 2018) states that sample sizes in qualitative research tends to

be small to help support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is essential to the study.

In order to access the sample, the researcher used volunteer sampling, as well as snowball sampling. For volunteer sampling the researcher posted on the Facebook group Durban North Residents for participants to volunteer to participate in the study. However, the researcher found it difficult for participants willing to participate on Facebook, and only ended up recruiting one participant, which is where snowball sampling became preferable. Snowball sampling was helpful as the researcher asked acquaintances and family if they may know someone who fits the criteria for this research, or knows someone who knows someone (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the researcher found the other two participants through an acquaintance, and a family member. These methods of sampling were used as it was seen as a way to easily access the population and was most appropriate for this study.

3.5. Data collection methods

This research is qualitative in nature, meaning that it is interested in subjective knowledge, and is seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of human experience, and meanings that are associated in a particular phenomenon (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014), and in terms of this research, it aimed to explore a deeper understanding about personal assistant's work stressors, their personal stress interventions, as well as the reasons they feel their interventions work best for them.

An interview can be defined as a conversation in which the interviewer asks the participant questions to collect data and to learn about their beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours about a specific phenomenon (Maree, 2020). The aim is to see the world through the eyes of the participant, and to obtain rich descriptive data that will help the researcher understand the participant's construction of knowledge and social reality (Maree, 2020).

With all data collection methods, there are advantages and disadvantages (Maree, 2020). The advantages of interviews are that they are able to uncover information that is not always accessible using other techniques such as questionnaires, or observations (Blaxter *et al.*, 2006, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014), the interviewer is able to rephrase or simplify questions that are not understood by the participant,

allowing more accurate data to be received (Dörnyei, 2007, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014), the recordings of the interview allows the data to be reviewed several times (Berg, 2007, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014), as well as allow the researcher to have more accuracy of the interview, rather than having to take notes at the time, which can be disrupted (Hermanowicz, 2002, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014), and, lastly, interviews are more cost-effective (Neuman, 2007, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014). The disadvantages of interviews are that they can be seen as deceptively difficult (Hermanowicz, 2002, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014), the participant's answers can be shaped by the questions asked in the interview (Hammersley & Gomm, 2008, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014), participants may only reveal what they are willing to about their opinions and perceptions of events (Alshengeeti, 2014), and, lastly, they have been described as time-consuming in that they need to be transcribed and coded (Robson, 2002, as cited in Alshengeeti, 2014).

A semi-structured interview, was most appropriate for this research as this research is looking for individual answers, opinions, reasoning as well as personal lived experiences from the participants, rather than using textual data, observations, or focus-groups, as these methods does not give the research the information that is required to answer the research question (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Interviews are usually face-to-face, which was initially planned, however, due to COVID-19, the interviews changed to online WhatsApp calls. The questions in the interview were structured in themes in terms of the research questions. Each theme allowed the researcher to gain sufficient data on each research question, and had around between three and five questions per theme.

Before each interview the participants were ensured anonymity and confidentiality by ensuring no individual could hear the interview taking place, as well as keeping the recordings and transcriptions on a password protected memory stick. All interviews were ethical as ethical clearance from the Independent Institute of Education, and ensured all consent forms were signed before the interviews took place.

3.6. Application of data collection methods:

When using Facebook to recruit participants, the researcher had to firstly contact the group administrators, who were considered gatekeepers, to ask for permission to post on their Facebook page. Therefore, the researcher firstly private messaged the

administrator and gave an overview of the research and asked if they were comfortable and would allow this to be posted on their Facebook page, and if so, they were asked for their email address for more information if they wanted, and to give the Gatekeeper's letter in order to gain permission. Once permission was given, the researcher then posted on the Facebook group. In the post the researcher gave an overview of the research topic and asked if anyone was willing to participate, and if so, they could private message the researcher their email address on Facebook messenger. Once this was done, the researcher then sent the participant an email explaining the research more in depth as well as attaching the informed consent form and the consent to audio record. The researcher then set up a date and time with the participant that suited them best.

When using snowball sampling as a recruitment method, the researcher was talking to an acquaintance and came across the topic of this research, and was able to provide the researcher with one additional participant that participated in this study. The last participant was recruited through a family member where the researcher asked if she knew of any individual that fit the criteria. The researcher then asked for the contact details from the acquaintance and family member, and for the acquaintance and family member to make sure the participants were willing for the researcher to get into contact with them, which they both agreed to. The researcher then contacted the participant's on WhatsApp, which was easier for the participants rather than e-mail. After explaining the research purpose, the participant's both willingly agreed, and the researcher then asked for their e-mail addresses for the purpose of the informed consent to participate, and the consent to audio record. Once the researcher had the forms signed, the researcher then set up a date and time for the interviews.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview to collect data. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic going on in South Africa, the researcher was not able to do the interviews face-to-face and rather used Skype calls, as well as WhatsApp video calls, which were able to be recorded for transcribing purposes (Maree, 2020). The interview was recorded after the participant's had signed a consent to participate, as well as the consent for audio recording. Each interview was around 30 minutes.

A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher gain an insight on certain themes with the use of predetermined questions, and the participant is given freedom in their

answers (Maree, 2020). Probing and clarification questions were used for the data that is being collected by the participant (Maree, 2020). These types of questions were useful when the participant is going off topic as it allows the researcher to adjust the focus (Maree, 2020), as well as to gain more insight into the differing themes if the researcher was unsure of any answers, or if the participant was giving very short answers and the researcher needed more information for an in-depth understanding.

This interview consisted of multiple open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed the researcher to explore the topics in depth, which is what Interpretivism looks for (Fox, 2006; Weller et al., 2018). This research aims to explore an in-depth understanding of personal assistant's stress management techniques and understand why they feel their technique works best for them. By using open-ended questions, the researcher was able to gather the data required to gain a better understanding of the topic, and allow the participant and the researcher to discuss some topics in more detail (Fox, 2006).

Open-ended questions may produce short answers, lists, or lengthy narratives (Weller et al., 2018). When participants provided a brief response, the researcher was able to use cues or prompts to encourage the participant to elaborate on their thought processes (Fox, 2006). The researcher used open-ended questions to help prompt the participant. Fox (2006) states that by using open-ended questions, it can be found difficult to establish consistency, and the researcher must refrain from influencing the respondent in any way and ensure the researcher maintains a neutral manner.

Before each interview the researcher prepared for the interview by reading over the questions and becoming familiar with the questions so that during the interview it felt more like a general conversation than a formal interview. This was done to get more authentic responses from each participant and for them to feel more comfortable.

In the beginning of the interview, the researcher re-introduced herself, explained the aim of the research again for each participant, and ensured anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher then confirmed with each participant if they were still comfortable with participating in the interview, as well as confirming they were comfortable with recording the interview. After the confirmation was given, the researcher then started the interview by asking the predetermined questions, as well

as other questions that came up during the course of the interview. Some of the participants were very short with their answers, so the researcher used probing questions, and asked for elaboration of their answers, which brought about more in-depth answers.

Notes were taken during the interview as it is helpful to assist in asking additional questions when needed, as well as reviewing the answers with the participants in the conclusion process (Maree, 2020). During the semi-structured interview with each participant, it was easy for the researcher to revert back and ask additional questions when needed, with the use of the notes. The researcher found that when and if the participants digressed from the topic, the notes made it easier to fall back into the interview. For the concluding discussion of the interview, the researcher confirmed certain answers, and asked a few more questions regarding the answers. Once the researcher had all questions answered, the researcher thanked the participants, and asked if they had any questions for the researcher.

At the end of each interview, the researcher used the recordings to transcribe the interview. This was done soon after the interview was finished because the information will still be fresh in the researcher's mind to make the transcribing process easier.

3.7. Data analysis methods

Maree (2020) described qualitative data analysis as an ongoing and iterative process, which implies that data collection, analysis, and reporting are intertwined. There are various data analysis methods in qualitative data analysis, such as content analysis, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and phenomenological analysis (Maree, 2020). These methods will be discussed in more detail below.

Phenomenological data analysis seen as the most appropriate data analysis method because this research is seeking the lived experiences of the participants (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Each individual views and experiences life in different ways, and the research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of individual experiences of their work stressors, their stress management techniques, which is why the researcher has chosen this data analysis method.

Specifically, this research used transcendental phenomenology. This focuses less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002). In terms of this research, the focus is on the description of the participant's work stressors, stress management techniques, and why they feel their techniques work best for them. Creswell (2002) states that Moustakas focuses on a concept from Husserl- epoche which means that the researcher must set aside their lived experiences in order to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination. Moustakas (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002) defines transcendental as "everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time."

3.8. Application of data analysis methods:

Based on the chosen analysis method discussed above, the researcher conducted analysis of the data in the following way:

- Using the interview transcripts the researcher reviewed the data and highlighted significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided the researcher with an understanding of how the participants experienced their stress management techniques and how they found it improves their stress levels (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002).
- Next, the researcher developed clusters of meanings from these significant statements into themes (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002). These themes helped the researcher in writing a description of what the participants have experienced, which is called textural description (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002). These themes also helped the researcher to write a description of the context or setting that influences how the participant experienced the phenomenon in terms of this research study, which is called structural description (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002).
- With the information acquired from the textural and structural descriptions, the researcher was then able to write a combined description that presents the essence of the phenomenon, which is called the invariant structure (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002). This focused on the common experiences of

the participants, and is descriptive in nature (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2002).

4. Findings and Interpretation of Findings:

4.1. Trustworthiness:

4.1.1. *Credibility:*

This was ensured through the accuracy in which the researcher interpreted the data received from the participants (du Plooy- Cilliers, *et al.*, 2014). In order to ensure the accuracy of the data the researcher ensured the participants fit within the sampling criteria, with the use of semi-structured interviews that asked questions from different perspectives to ensure the participants true answers were given, used probing strategies, such as clarification probing, to make sure the researcher has understood what the participant meant by particular answers. The researcher also sent the transcript of the interview to the participants for them to look over what has been said in the interview and to ensure that what was said was correct, and if there were any errors, the researcher was able to correct them. The use of volunteer sampling also helped with credibility as the participants were more willing to be a part of the interview as it was their choice.

4.1.2. *Transferability:*

The findings were not generalisable to a greater context as this research focused on personal assistants living in Durban North, South Africa, however, it is generalisable to personal assistants in the Durban North area. This study was built on a number of other studies that were critically looked at by the researcher (Shenton, 2004). This study may also contribute to the findings of Lazarus and Folkman's (1980) theory as they have discussed their theory in the context of work environment.

4.1.3. *Dependability:*

The researcher sent the transcript of the interview to the participants for him/her to look over what has been said in the interview and to ensure that what was said was correct, and if there are any errors, the researcher was then able to correct them. The researcher has also explained the research design and the research plan in great detail which will make it easier for future researchers to repeat this study (Shenton, 2004).

4.1.4. Confirmability:

In order to ensure confirmability, the researcher ensured what is recorded and transcribed is the same and uses the exact words and the transcriptions lead the researcher to the analysis of the findings. The researcher confirmed everything from the recordings and the transcriptions with the participants and keep the recordings and transcriptions safe in a password protected memory stick. The researcher cannot remove their own bias so the researcher used ongoing reflective commentary in the analysis of findings to help mitigate the bias from the researcher (Shenton, 2004). The researcher has also explained the limitations of the study and admitted the researcher's beliefs and assumptions which may help with the confirmability of this research.

4.2. Presentation of Findings:

This research had a 75% response rate due to the fact that one participant had to drop out due to personal reasons. All three participants fit in with the sample's characteristics, and in order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, the researcher will number the participants, Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3.

THEME	SUBTHEME
1. Main Stressors	1.1 Excessive workload

During the analysis of the researcher's transcripts, it was found that 'Excessive workload' can be considered a subtheme due to all three participants explaining that timelines, multi-tasking, and the calendar for their boss needs to be perfect. Perfectionism is key for a personal assistant. This can be found where Participant 3 explains: *"Making sure their calendar is perfect"*, and Participant 2 states: *"When you don't have enough time in the day."* These statements show that there can be, at times, too much pressure on their workload, and perfectionism can be time consuming.

THEME	SUBTHEME
2. Stress management techniques	2.1 Stress management techniques at the workplace.

	2.2 Stress management techniques outside of the workplace.
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Many techniques arose from all three participants for stress management at the workplace, such as isolation, social support from co-workers, taking a walk around to clear their minds, and positivity. Participant 2 talks about isolation as: *"I'll shut the door just to keep the people at bay so that I can get on and do my work without having even more interruptions"*, and Participant 1 shared that she takes a walk around the building, and talks to co-workers in order to take *"a time out and to take a break from the monotony of the work I was doing at the time that was putting the pressure on me"*

A variety of techniques arose from the participants for stress management outside of the workplace, such as exercise, relaxation, animals, and social support. It can be said that exercise and social support can be intertwined, as Participant 2 explains *"I run with a few other people... you just have that motivation where you're chatting while you're running and you just totally out of that environment... you're thinking about other things."*

THEME	SUBTHEME
3. Reasons it works best for them	3.1 Personality 3.2 Clears the mind

Personality as a theme arose from Participant 1 and Participant 2. Participant 1 expresses that she is a very outdoors person, nature lover, and people's person, hence she loves spending time with her horses, and dog, and spending time with friends. She states: *"Personally I think it is because I am a social butterfly and nature lover so those techniques obviously suited my personality."* Participant 2's stress management technique outside of the workplace is exercise, and it can be said that her personality fits this technique as she states: *"I'm the type of person that needs to be busy constantly"* and in saying this, her exercise fits her personality to be always busy, and not have relaxation as a technique as this goes against who she is as a person.

In doing the above discussed stress management techniques, both at the workplace and outside the workplace, clearing the mind arose. Stress can be overwhelming and it is important not to dwell on such stress, and all three participants agreed that clearing the mind is effective to help relieve some of their stressors, and their stress management techniques allowed them to do so.

4.3. Interpretation of Findings:

All occupations have many stressors, however, this research set out to find the main stressors of a personal assistant, in which excessive workload was found. Many stressors were identified by the three participants, which were timelines, perfection in terms of the boss' calendar, as well as typing and spelling, multitasking, and lack of time. These stressors put a great deal of pressure, as Participant 3 states: *"Most directors have very stressful days... so their diaries need to be perfect, allowing them to also do work that is needed."* This shows how personal assistants have to be perfectionists in order to successfully do their jobs, and if they make a mistake, there is a domino effect that can affect their boss, as well as the reputation of the company, depending on the mistake.

Stress management techniques vary from individual to individual, there is no set technique that personal assistant's use. The differing techniques can even be intertwined and used together, just like Participant 2 does, where she uses exercise and social support at the same time. It is important to note that only one stress management techniques do not work, and one must have multiple in order to effectively manage stress, as can be seen in the presentation of findings, and that stress management techniques can be very useful for one individual, but not another.

When looking at the reasons why the participant's techniques work best for them, personality was a major theme. Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 explained in their own ways that it is due to their personality, and enjoying their stress management technique that makes it an effective technique. Each participant's techniques fitted perfectly with them as an individual, which is why it was so effective for them in managing their stress. Clearing their mind also made their techniques fit best for them in order to prepare for the next working day. This was seen across all participants, and was important to all three of them, and Participant 1 states: *"If you cannot do anything about a situation at that time, there is nothing that can be done about it, so clear your*

mind, relax, and pick it up in the morning."

4.4. Findings in context:

The theory chosen for this research is Lazarus and Folkman's emotion-focused and problem-focused coping theory. The researcher found that personal assistants use emotion-focused coping strategies, rather than problem-focused coping. It can be seen as all the participants showed social support as a stress management technique, either in the workplace (Participant 1 and Participant 3), and outside of the workplace (Participant 1 and Participant 2). Participant 1 states: "*being with my friends helps me to destress*" which she does at both work and outside of work. Participant 2 goes running with a group of friends and socialises while running.

Participant 1 also uses emotion-focused coping by accepting responsibility, in which she was made fun of due to her dyslexia, and states: "*I just kept quiet and apologise for my error... I wouldn't use it as an excuse.*" Therefore, she would accept her responsibility for making spelling mistakes, and not make excuses. She would also double check her work and read over them to ensure that any mistakes have been fixed.

This is a finding that opposes Lazarus and Folkman's theory, as they state that in work contexts, problem-focused coping is more favourable (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), whereas this research has found that emotion-focused coping is found to be more favourable in terms of personal assistants.

In terms of the literature review, four themes were discussed, namely occupational stress, work stressors, effects of stress, and stress management. However, in terms of the research objectives work stressors, and stress management were considered the most important. The researcher also found that the effects of stress theme was considered irrelevant due to the fact that all three participants agreed that their stress as a personal assistant was helpful and motivating, therefore, not effects were identified.

In terms of work stressors, many were identified in the literature review, however, only two from the literature review arose: work overload, and bad relationships at work. Panigrahi (2017) describes over load as performing a large amount of work in a short time frame. He goes to explain that these high expectations may lead to stress of the

employee (Panigrahi, 2017). This is confirmed by Participant 2 that states: "*when you don't have enough time in the day.*" This statement shows that personal assistants have excessive workload and can sometimes struggle to do everything that is needed in the time frame.

Participant 1, at one point in her workplace, had bad relationships at work, which was suggested as a work stressor by Hashmi (2015). She was bullied for being dyslexic, however, she did not let it bother her, and instead used it as a motivating factor in order to work hard. As we can see, work stressors can be seen as positive, and not only negative.

All three participants used stress management by taking care of yourself, as proposed by Jain and Batra (2015) in which social support, exercise, and breaks were used. In terms of social support Participant 1 used this both at work, and outside of work, and Participant 2 and Participant 3 used this outside of work.

A finding that was not included in the literature review was the use of animals to destress, in which Participant 1 did so and states: "*there's just such a calming about horses... deep down inside they are very healing.*" This can be considered a new finding due to the fact that it was not shown in the literature.

5. Conclusion:

5.1. Research questions addressed:

The main research question was "How do personal assistants manage their work stressors?" In order to answer this question, the researcher devised three sub-questions, which will be discussed below.

By analysing the findings and interpretation of the collected data, one can answer the research questions, which is discussed below.

What are the main stressors of a personal assistant?

This question was asked in order to determine what stressors personal assistants go through, and this question helped lead on to ask the next sub-question, which will be discussed below. This research found that among the three participants interviewed, timelines, multitasking, excessive workload, not enough time in the day, perfect organisational skills, and dyslexia were the main stressors. It can be seen, however,

that these stressors pushed the participants to be better, and motivated them, having a positive effect on them. However, due to the fact that this research only interviewed three participants, the researcher cannot state that the above listed stressors of personal assistants are the only stressors that personal assistants will ever experience due to the fact that each job as a personal assistant is different, and each experience is different, depending on the working environment, the personal assistant's boss, co-workers, strengths and weaknesses, and many other personal factors that each individual may experience.

What techniques/ strategies do personal assistants use to destress from work?

This was the main question that the researcher was looking into to help determine the main research question. Various types of techniques were found among the three participants, each of them had different ways of managing their stress with different techniques. Techniques discussed were animals, exercise, spending time with friends, and relaxation. Due to the variety of answers, there is no exact answer that can be given to state what specific techniques are used by personal assistants, they differ according to the individual. This is the reason the last sub-question was asked. However, it could broadly be said that all opted for a change of environment.

Why do they feel their chosen technique works best for them?

This question was looking into their personal experiences and their opinions around their chosen stress management techniques, and to gain a more in-depth understanding around their stress management techniques and how they help them manage their stress.

The main reason the researcher found that the personal assistants stress management techniques work best for them is personality. Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 explained their personality fit in best with their chosen stress management techniques, they used the aspect of who they are as a person and what they enjoy doing in order to destress from a workday. For example, Participant 1 describes herself as a social butterfly in which at home she is social with her friends and family, as well as her animals, and at work she is social with her work colleagues.

These findings show that there are multiple ways to manage stress and the main reason why they work for an individual is that it fits their personality. Therefore, there

might not be one exact way personal assistants manage their stress, but rather manage their stress based on their preferences to relax.

5.2. Ethical considerations and implications:

The ethical considerations the researcher took into consideration were:

1) Obtaining permission for research: Before conducting the interviews and gathering data, the research was required to get ethical clearance from the Independent Institute of Education (see appendix C)

2) Informed consent: Each participant signed a consent form given by the researcher. The researcher explained what the research study was about, what was required of the participant, for this research 30-45 minute interview was required, as well as a recording of the interview, an explanation of how the results were used, and inform the participant of all the rights of the participant, such as their choice to do the study, the right to withdraw from the study, and the right to remain anonymous and to keep what is said during the interview confidential. A consent to participate will have to be signed by the participant (see appendix E), as well as a consent for audio recording will also have to be signed by the participant (see appendix F).

3) Anonymity: The researcher explained to the participants how anonymity will be ensured. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms during the interpretation and analysis of the findings, as well as the transcription of the interview.

Anonymity cannot be 100% promised as the researcher will know who the participants are, however, the researcher ensured the identity of the participants remain anonymous by not revealing their identities to anyone, including family, friends, the supervisor, or research lecturers, only the researcher and participant will know who participated in the research.

4) Confidentiality: This was ensured through the form of writing where the researcher explained how the information was kept confidential. In terms of the interview transcript and recordings, the researcher kept the recordings and transcripts of the interview under a password protected memory stick that only the researcher was able to access. The memory stick was kept in a secret box in the researcher's room, without the knowledge of it being there by anyone.

However, confidentiality cannot always be ensured, as the researcher needs to analyse the data that was discussed during the interview, however, the researcher ensured that no identifiable information about the participant will be disclosed and will protect the identity of the participants using pseudonyms. The fact that confidentiality cannot be ensured, the researcher promised participants they will ensure confidentiality to the best of their ability.

5.3. Limitations:

Due to COVID-19, the interviews were done on an online platform, in which the researcher could not fully assess the participant's full body language, as well as not meeting face-to-face in a neutral environment. For example, Participant 3's interview was done while she was at the office, in an empty room. This could have interfered with some of the answer's that were given as she was at work. However, Participant 1 and 3's interview was done outside of the work environment while they were at home, which helps to somewhat neutralise the environment in which the interview was done.

Another limitation could be that only three interviews were conducted, not allowing the findings to be generalisable, as well as finding willing participants who have the time to do the interview. This study had a 75% response rate, with one participant falling out. The fact that the researcher is still relatively new to the research process can also be considered a limitation.

5.4. Implications of findings for future practices:

As found in the interpretation of data, it was found that personality was the main reason that the participant's stress management techniques works best for them. Therefore, it may be pertinent in future to investigate the personality types or traits personal assistants may have and assess their stress management techniques. It may also be helpful to broaden the scope for this research by gathering data from a larger sample, or conducting multiple interviews and assessing whether their answers are different depending on their stress levels at work.

5.5. Final conclusion:

This research sought an in depth understanding of personal assistants lived experiences of their main stressors in the workplace, their stress management

techniques, and the reasons why they feel it works best for them. . While the scale of the study was small, it is indicative that personal assistants endure stress at work and that their stress management techniques are dependent on their individual agency personalities.

TITLE: A qualitative study of occupational stress management techniques of personal assistants in Durban North

Research Purpose/ Objective	Primary Research Question	Research Rationale	Seminal Authors /Sources	Lit Review Conceptual Framework	Paradigm	Approach	Data collection Method (s)	Ethics	Key findings	Recommend ations
To gain a deeper understanding about personal assistant's work stressors, their stress interventions, and the reasons they feel their interventions work best for them	How do personal assistants manage their work stress?	Literature has largely overlooked the work of personal assistants, which should not be as they also work in a stressful environment which includes support work for their managers and ensure everything is done exactly how they need it (Milner, 2015).	Thabane (2015), Volmink (2014), Tetrick and Winslow (2015), Quick and Henderson (2016), and Grawitch, Ballard and Erb (2014).	<u>Theme 1:</u> Occupational stress <u>Theme 2:</u> Causes of stress <u>Theme 3:</u> Effects of stress <u>Theme 4:</u> Stress management	Interpretivism is the most appropriate for this study. The ontological position of this research study is that individuals have and use different ways to help them destress from their work. The epistemological position of this research is that the subjective experiences of the participant's work stressors, stress management techniques and how they describe how it works best for them with an in-depth understanding of this knowledge. The axiological position of this research is uniqueness and subjectivity is valued.	Qualitative. This is because this research is looking for subjective knowledge from the participants about their stress management techniques to destress from work.	A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. The interview was set up over email and the researcher set up a specific time and date that is easiest for the participant.	Obtaining permission for research, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality	There are multiple ways to manage stress and the main reason why they work for an individual is that it fits their personality. Therefore, there might not be an exact way personal assistants manage their stress, but rather manage their stress on their preferences to relax.	Analyse the personality types or traits personal assistants mainly have and assess their stress management techniques with regards to their personality types or traits. It may also be helpful to broaden the scope for this research by gathering data from a larger sample, or conducting multiple interviews and assessing whether their answers are different depending on their stress levels at work.
Research Problem	Secondary Questions/ Objectives	Key Concepts	Key Theories	Population		A personal assistant who resides in Durban North, and has more than 10 years' experience as a personal assistant, and is between 30-50 years old.	Data Analysis (s)	Limitations	Key contribution	
There are many ways of dealing with stress, however, they may not work for everyone, and not knowing how to destress can lead to problematic outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, burnout and a decrease in productivity in the workplace.	What are the main stressors of a personal assistant? What techniques/ strategies do personal assistants use to destress from work? Why do they feel their chosen technique works best for them?	Occupational stress, stress, stressor, workplace stressor, burnout, and stress management.	Lazarus and Folkman's problem-based coping and emotion based coping theory as a key theory (1980).	Sampling		The data analysis method this research used was phenomenological data analysis. This was because this research is looking for the lived experiences of the participants.	The interviews were done on an online platform, only three interviews were conducted, and researcher is still relatively new to the research process.	This research built on the understanding of occupational stress in a personal assistant's perspective in terms of work stressors, stress interventions, and the reasons they feel their intervention works best for them.		
				Non-probability sampling will be used. Sampling methods used will be volunteer and snowball sampling. Sample size will be three participants.						

APPENDIX B: Gatekeeper Letter



Gatekeepers letter/ Request to conduct research

Dear Roxanne Pillay,

I am writing to ask your permission to conduct research on your Facebook group, Durban North Residents.

My name is Tayla Creed, a Bachelor of Arts Honours in Psychology student at Varsity College a brand of the Independent Institute of Education (IIE). The research I wish to conduct for my Honours Project titled "A qualitative study of occupational stress management techniques of personal assistants in Durban North"

The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding to personal assistant's work stressors, stress interventions, and why they feel their intervention works best for them. The project consists of interviews with personal assistants around the topic of work stressors, stress interventions, and why they feel their intervention is the best fit for them. The nature of your firm's participation will be to allow the researcher to post on your Facebook group to ask your members who work as personal assistants to privately contact me on Facebook messenger if they volunteer to help me with my research project.

Yours sincerely

Student: Tayla Creed signature

Supervisor: Dr. Quraisha Dawood signature

My contact details are as follows:

Tayla Creed

The contact details of my supervisor/navigator/lecturer are as follows:

Quraisha Dawood



Gatekeepers Approval

Consent form to conduct research at my company	
I,	
Representative of	
My capacity:	
Give my permission thatmay conduct research at my company. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I reserve the right to withdraw this permission at any time. I also understand that research reports are available in the library and IIE Repository unless I indicate below that I would not	
Select below:	
• I request that my company's identity be kept confidential.	
• My company can be identified in the study	
• The study may never be available on the repository.	
• The study may be made available on the repository.	
• The study may be made available on the repository after months.	
Signature	Date

APPENDIX C: Ethical clearance letter



20 July 2020

Student name: Tayla Creed

Student number: 16001791

Campus: Varsity College Durban North

Re: Approval of HPS1 Proposal and Ethics Clearance

HONOURS/PGDIP ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus research panel, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee.

Your research proposal posed no significant ethical concerns and your supporting documents and instruments are in order to proceed. We hereby provide you with permission to proceed with your research.

In the event of you deciding to change your research methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethical clearance letter will be issued.

We wish you all the best with your research!

GENERAL CONDITIONS TO BE FULFILLED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted.

Please note: The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample.

Permission is granted subject to the following conditions:

1. The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if the study is not anonymous.
2. The researcher(s) may only use the data collected for research purposes and in no other way.
3. Photographs of human subjects may only be taken if relevant to the research, informed consent was obtained, and even with informed consent, the photographs may not be published on any online platforms.
4. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
5. No names or identifying information of participants may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.
6. Please make it clear that the information will not be used punitively in any way and participants may in no way be counselled/advised based on this.

Supervisor: Dr Quraisha Dawood

Campus Postgraduate Coordinator (CPC): Dr Razia Khan

Honours co-ordinator: Tracey Haselau

APPENDIX D: Ethics checklist



HONOURS RESE, RESM and RMET ETHICS CHECKLIST

Dear student

Please complete this checklist and include this in your proposals as an appendix:

Student name: Tayla Creed

Title of the research: A qualitative study of occupational stress management techniques of personal assistants in Durban North

	Yes	No	Comment:supervisor/ navigator/lecturer
Are you using human subjects in your research?	X		
I intend to use human subjects - I understand that I will not conduct research with human subjects under the age of 18 and other vulnerable groups. - I understand I can only proceed once I receive an ethical clearance letter.			
Interviews/ Focus groups An example of the <i>written consent form</i> I intend to use is attached.	X		
I will record the interview/focus groups and the sample of the letter where I ask for permission to do so is attached.	X		
I plan to use an interview schedule: The example of my research instrument is attached.	X		
I plan to use a questionnaire: The example of my research instrument is attached.		X	
I plan to use a gate-keepers letter: The example of my letter is attached.	X		
I plan to do research on an IIE site/with IIE students/staff/artefacts and I filled in the application for permission to do so. The application is attached. I understand I can only proceed once I receive IIE Approval for this.		X	

APPENDIX E: Informed consent

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants
To whom it may concern,
My name is Tayla Jamie Creed and I am a student at Varsity College. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Quraisha Dawood about gaining a deeper understanding about personal assistant's work stressors, stress interventions, which interventions may be more common and why they feel their intervention works best for them. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of personal assistant's work stressors, stress interventions personal assistants use, and why they feel their intervention works best for them.
I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.
What will I be doing if I participate in your study?
I would like to invite you to participate in this research because I would like to gain a deeper understanding of your work stressors, stress interventions, and reasons why you feel these interventions work best for you. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to do a 30 to 45 minute interview with each participant, and when the transcribing process is done, the researcher would like to email a copy of the transcription to the participant to make sure what was said in the interview and what was transcribed by the researcher is a true reflection of what was said and meant by the participant.
You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.
Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?
Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your work stressors, stress interventions, and why you feel these interventions work best for you. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.
Do I have to participate in the study?
• Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary; • If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so; • Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at Varsity College, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my Bachelor of Arts Honours in Psychology. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

Tayla Creed

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

Quraisha Dawood

Consent form for participants					
I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by Tayla Jamie Creed about personal assistant's work stressors, stress interventions, which interventions may be more common and why they feel their intervention works best for them. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that: • I agree to be interviewed for this research. • My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private. • My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research. • I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview. • I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected. <table border="1"><tr><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Signature</td><td>Date</td></tr></table>				Signature	Date
Signature	Date				

APPENDIX F: Consent form for audio or video recording

Consent form for participants	
I, _____, agree to allow Tayla Jamie Creed to audio record my interviews as part of the research about gaining a deeper understanding about personal assistant's work stressors, stress interventions, which interventions may be more common and why they feel their intervention works best for them. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that: • My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private. • The recordings will be stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. • Only the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and possibly a transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings.	
Signature	Date

APPENDIX G: Interview schedule

Opening:

- Introducing myself to the participants.
- Explaining the purpose of this research, how I will ensure anonymity and confidentiality (if the boss or company name comes up, they will also get pseudonyms).
- Ensuring the participant still wants to participate in this research.
- Ask if they have any further questions regarding the topic of this research.

Body:

MAIN STRESSORS:

- Do you enjoy your job as a personal assistant? What do you enjoy about your job?
- Is it a very stressful working environment? How?
- Do you feel the stress from your work as a personal assistant is helpful and motivating, or negative and demotivating? And why?
- If both, then in what context is the stress negative and demotivating? Why do you think this is? What factors does this stress affect?
- What do you personally feel is the most stressful part of your job as a personal assistant and why? Explain these further. Examples

STRESS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES:

- What do you do in order to relax after a long and stressful day at work? Elaborate on how you do this?
- What technique do you use to calm yourself down when feeling overwhelmed at work? Elaborate on how you do this
- How do you feel these relaxation techniques help you destress?
- Do you make sure that when you are feeling overwhelmed and overstressed that you use different stress management techniques than when you are less stressed?

WHY IT WORKS BEST FOR THEM:

- In your opinion, why do you think these stress management techniques personally work best for you to relax after a stressful day at work?
- Why do you think the stress management technique helps you to calm down at work after feeling overwhelmed and overstressed?

- Do you think your stress management techniques help, you as an individual, prepare for the next working day?

Closing:

- If not sure about any answers, ask for clarification
- Go over the main points of the interview
- Ask if they have any further questions
- Thank you

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