International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

The Effect of Plant-Based Therapy on Psychological Well-Being and Stress Among Health Care Workers in Pasay City

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Abstract

Healthcare workers are routinely exposed to high levels of occupational stress that negatively affect psychological functioning and service delivery. This study evaluated the effectiveness of plant-based therapy in improving psychological well-being and reducing stress among healthcare workers in the Philippines. A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design was employed involving 60 healthcare workers, with 30 assigned to an experimental group and 30 to a control group. The experimental group participated in a 4–6-week plant-based therapy intervention involving both active plant care and passive exposure to indoor greenery, while the control group continued routine work conditions. Data were gathered using the 15-item Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i, short version) and analyzed using mean, paired samples t-test, and independent samples t-test. Results showed that both groups had comparable baseline levels of psychological well-being and stress, classified as "Effective Functioning." Following the intervention, the experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in psychological well-being ($p < .001$) and stress reduction ($p < .001$) with large effect sizes. The control group showed no significant changes. Post-test comparisons revealed a significant difference in stress levels between groups ($p = .002$), favoring the experimental group, while no significant difference was observed in psychological well-being. Findings indicate that plant-based therapy is an effective, low-cost, and sustainable intervention for reducing stress among healthcare workers, with potential benefits for enhancing psychological well-being. Integrating nature-based approaches into workplace wellness programs may support mental health promotion in healthcare settings.

Keywords: Plant-based Therapy, Healthcare Workers, Stress Reduction, Psychological Well-being

1. Introduction

Healthcare workers constitute the backbone of healthcare systems, yet they remain among the occupational groups most vulnerable to chronic work-related stress. The demanding nature of healthcare practice—characterized by extended working hours, high patient loads, emotionally intensive interactions, and sustained exposure to critical situations—places substantial psychological and physiological strain on healthcare professionals. Prolonged exposure to these occupational stressors has been associated with burnout, fatigue, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, depression, absenteeism, and reduced job satisfaction, ultimately affecting both workforce stability and the quality of patient care (Liu et al., 2023; Sime et al., 2022; Mohan & Lone, 2023). As healthcare systems continue to rely on resilient and emotionally capable

professionals, addressing the mental well-being of healthcare workers has become an increasingly urgent public health and organizational concern.

Psychological well-being plays a central role in how healthcare workers adapt to occupational stress and maintain optimal functioning in high-pressure environments. Individuals with stronger psychological well-being demonstrate greater emotional resilience, improved coping capacity, higher work engagement, and better overall functioning despite workplace demands (Jan-Emmanuel, 2023; Krekel et al., 2023). Conversely, diminished psychological well-being contributes to emotional fatigue, compromised work performance, and heightened susceptibility to occupational burnout (Wright & Cropanzano, 2021). In healthcare settings, where professional performance directly influences patient outcomes, promoting psychological well-being is not only beneficial for workers themselves but also essential to sustaining quality healthcare delivery.

Recent attention has increasingly focused on workplace interventions that are practical, sustainable, and psychologically restorative. Among these, plant-based therapy has emerged as a promising approach for reducing stress and improving psychological well-being. Plant-based therapy refers to structured or passive interactions with plants and nature-related elements, including visual exposure to indoor greenery, direct engagement in plant care, and participation in gardening-related activities. Existing literature consistently suggests that interaction with natural environments produces restorative psychological effects, including reduced stress, improved mood, enhanced emotional regulation, and greater overall well-being (Schutte & Malouff, 2023; Bratman et al., 2021; Ambrose et al., 2022). Both passive exposure, such as viewing plants in indoor environments, and active engagement, such as gardening and plant maintenance, have demonstrated therapeutic benefits in reducing anxiety and promoting emotional recovery.

The relevance of plant-based therapy is particularly significant in healthcare environments, where occupational stress is both persistent and multidimensional. Studies indicate that incorporating natural elements into workplace settings may facilitate emotional restoration, lessen cognitive fatigue, reduce burnout risk, and create a more supportive environment for mental recovery (Nirmala & N, 2022; Kumar & Chitra, 2024; Browning et al., 2024). Through relatively simple and accessible environmental modifications, healthcare institutions may be able to promote healthier working conditions while strengthening the psychological capacity of their workforce.

Within the Philippine healthcare context, the need for effective stress-management interventions is especially pressing. Filipino healthcare workers continue to face considerable workplace pressures, including understaffing, long duty hours, high patient volumes, and emotionally demanding clinical responsibilities (Cordero et al., 2022). Previous studies have documented heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among healthcare professionals in the country, emphasizing the need for contextually appropriate mental health interventions (Tan & Yu, 2020). Despite increasing recognition of the therapeutic value of nature-based approaches, empirical research examining the effectiveness of plant-based therapy among Filipino healthcare workers remains limited.

This study addresses that gap by examining the effectiveness of plant-based therapy in reducing stress and enhancing psychological well-being among healthcare workers in the Philippines. Specifically, it investigates both active plant interaction, such as plant care and gardening, and passive plant exposure, such as visual interaction with indoor greenery, as potential interventions for psychological restoration. By generating empirical evidence within a local healthcare context, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on workplace mental health interventions and provide practical insights for

developing sustainable wellness strategies in healthcare settings.

1.1 Background of the Study

The mental well-being of healthcare workers has become an increasingly important area of research because of the direct relationship between occupational stress, psychological functioning, and quality of healthcare delivery. Healthcare professionals operate in environments marked by constant urgency, emotional labor, and physically demanding workloads. These workplace conditions often create chronic stress responses that adversely affect both mental health and professional functioning. Research has shown that prolonged occupational stress among healthcare workers contributes to burnout, emotional exhaustion, mental fatigue, anxiety, depression, decreased productivity, and compromised patient care outcomes (Liu et al., 2023; Sime et al., 2022). These realities underscore the importance of identifying interventions that address not only occupational stress but also the broader psychological well-being of healthcare professionals.

One intervention increasingly recognized for its restorative potential is plant-based therapy. Rooted in nature-based therapeutic practice, plant-based therapy involves both active and passive interaction with plants to promote emotional and psychological recovery. Active engagement includes gardening, nurturing plants, and participating in horticultural activities, while passive interaction includes exposure to indoor greenery, viewing natural elements, and working in environments enriched with plant life. Research indicates that both forms of engagement produce beneficial outcomes, including reduced anxiety, improved mood, enhanced mindfulness, and better emotional regulation (Ambrose et al., 2022; Beukeboom et al., 2023).

The theoretical basis for plant-based therapy is strongly supported by Stress Recovery Theory (SRT), developed by Ulrich, which posits that exposure to natural environments facilitates stress reduction and emotional restoration. According to SRT, natural elements reduce physiological stress responses while simultaneously promoting calmness, positive emotional states, and cognitive recovery. This restorative process is particularly relevant in high-stress occupational settings such as healthcare, where workers experience continuous psychological and emotional demands. Recent literature supports this perspective, demonstrating that indoor plants, green spaces, and horticultural engagement contribute significantly to lower perceived stress, improved mood, and enhanced subjective well-being (Han et al., 2022; Largo-Wight et al., 2024).

In healthcare environments, the application of plant-based therapy offers distinct practical advantages. Unlike highly structured psychological interventions that may require extensive training or financial investment, plant-based therapy is relatively accessible, cost-effective, and sustainable. Incorporating greenery into workplaces, establishing therapeutic gardens, or encouraging simple plant-care activities may create restorative spaces that support emotional recovery and stress management among healthcare workers. Moreover, access to green spaces has been associated with reduced cognitive fatigue and improved emotional resilience—both essential for professionals who regularly engage in high-stakes decision-making and emotionally intensive care work (Green et al., 2023; Browning et al., 2024).

Within the Philippine setting, the relevance of this intervention is heightened by the significant workplace stress experienced by healthcare workers. Local literature identifies long shifts, staffing shortages, heavy patient loads, and emotionally demanding care responsibilities as major contributors to occupational stress (Cordero et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, limited empirical studies have explored plant-based therapy as a workplace mental health intervention in Filipino healthcare settings. This gap presents an opportunity to examine whether nature-based therapeutic practices can provide meaningful psychological

benefits within the local healthcare environment.

Given the increasing need for practical and sustainable mental health interventions, this study investigates the role of plant-based therapy in reducing stress and improving psychological well-being among healthcare workers in the Philippines. Through this investigation, the study seeks to establish evidence that may guide healthcare institutions in developing workplace wellness programs that promote both professional functioning and psychological health.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of plant-based therapy in improving psychological well-being and reducing stress among healthcare workers in the Philippines. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the level of psychological well-being and stress of the experimental group before the intervention (pre-test) and the control group before the intervention (pre-test)?
- What is the level of psychological well-being and stress of the experimental group after the intervention (post-test) and the control group after the intervention (post-test)?
- Is there a significant difference in the psychological well-being and stress levels of the experimental group between pre-test and post-test?
- Is there a significant difference in the psychological well-being and stress levels of the control group between pre-test and post-test?
- Is there a significant difference in the post-test psychological well-being and stress levels between the experimental group and the control group?
- Based on the findings, what evidence-based action plan may be proposed to improve psychological well-being and reduce stress among healthcare workers?

2. Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design to determine the effectiveness of plant-based therapy in improving psychological well-being and reducing stress among healthcare workers in the Philippines. A total of 60 healthcare workers from a selected healthcare institution were purposively selected based on the following criteria: being on active duty, having at least one year of work experience, and willingness to participate. Participants were assigned into two groups: an experimental group (n = 30), which received the plant-based therapy intervention, and a control group (n = 30), which continued with their usual work routine without intervention.

The intervention lasted for four to six weeks and involved both active exposure (e.g., caring for small potted plants) and passive exposure (e.g., visual access to plants in the workplace). Data were collected using the 15-item Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), short version, administered during both the pre-test and post-test phases to assess participants' psychological well-being and stress levels.

Data collection followed a structured process, beginning with participant selection and pre-test administration, followed by implementation of the intervention for the experimental group, and concluding with post-test administration for both groups. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and protection from harm.

For data analysis, the mean was used to describe participants' psychological well-being and stress levels, while the paired samples t-test determined significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores within groups. An independent samples t-test was used to compare post-test outcomes between the experimental and control groups to evaluate the effectiveness of plant-based therapy.

3. Results

Table 1 Baseline Psychological Well-Being and Stress Levels

Variables	Experimental Group Mean (SD)	Interpretation	Control Group Mean (SD)	Interpretation
Psychological Well-Being	92.0 (14.0)	Effective Functioning	90.7 (16.5)	Effective Functioning
Stress Management Level	94.8 (11.6)	Effective Functioning	90.7 (16.5)	Effective Functioning

Legend: 115–130 = Enhanced Skills; 85–114 = Effective Functioning; 65–84 = Area for Enrichment

Before the implementation of plant-based therapy, both the experimental and control groups demonstrated comparable levels of psychological well-being and stress. The experimental group recorded mean scores of 92.0 (SD = 14.0) for psychological well-being and 94.8 (SD = 11.6) for stress, while the control group obtained mean scores of 90.7 (SD = 16.5) and 89.5 (SD = 15.5), respectively. All scores were interpreted as Effective Functioning, indicating that participants in both groups initially exhibited moderate levels of psychological well-being and manageable stress. These findings suggest relatively equivalent baseline psychological conditions between groups prior to the intervention.

Table 2 Post-Intervention Psychological Well-Being and Stress Levels

Variables	Experimental Group Mean (SD)	Interpretation	Control Group Mean (SD)	Interpretation
Psychological Well-Being	98.2 (14.5)	Effective Functioning	91.6 (16.4)	Effective Functioning
Stress Management Level	101.2 (11.6)	Effective Functioning	89.9 (15.1)	Effective Functioning

Legend: 115–130 = Enhanced Skills; 85–114 = Effective Functioning; 65–84 = Area for Enrichment

After the implementation of plant-based therapy, the experimental group showed improvement in both psychological well-being and stress. Mean psychological well-being increased to 98.2 (SD = 14.5), while stress improved to 101.2 (SD = 11.6), both remaining within the Effective Functioning category but reflecting positive movement toward enhanced functioning. In contrast, the control group exhibited only minimal changes, with psychological well-being at 91.6 (SD = 16.4) and stress at 89.9 (SD = 15.1), suggesting relatively stable psychological functioning in the absence of intervention.

Table 3 Test of Significant Difference in Experimental Group Between Pre-test and Post-test

Variables	t-value	p-value	Decision	Effect Size
Psychological Well-Being	-7.11	<.001	Significant	-1.299
Stress Management Level	-5.31	<.001	Significant	-0.969

Statistical analysis revealed significant differences in the psychological well-being and stress levels of the experimental group before and after exposure to plant-based therapy. Psychological well-being showed a statistically significant improvement ($t = -7.11$, $p < .001$) with a large effect size ($d = -1.299$). Likewise, stress significantly improved ($t = -5.31$, $p < .001$) with a moderate-to-large effect size ($d = -0.969$). These findings indicate that plant-based therapy had a meaningful positive effect on the psychological functioning of healthcare workers.

Table 4 Test of Significant Difference in Control Group Between Pre-test and Post-test

Variables	t-value	p-value	Decision	Effect Size
Psychological Well-Being	-1.907	.066	Not Significant	-0.348
Stress Management Level	-0.858	.398	Not Significant	-0.348

No statistically significant differences were found in the control group's psychological well-being and stress levels between pre-test and post-test. Psychological well-being showed $t = -1.907$, $p = .066$, while stress yielded $t = -0.858$, $p = .398$. These results indicate that without intervention, participants' psychological condition remained relatively unchanged throughout the study period.

Table 5 Post-test Comparison Between Experimental and Control Groups

Variables	t-value	p-value	Decision	Effect Size
Psychological Well-Being	-1.65	.104	Not Significant	-0.426
Stress Management Level	-3.25	.002	Significant	-0.840

Comparison of post-test scores between groups revealed no statistically significant difference in psychological well-being ($t = -1.65$, $p = .104$). However, a significant difference was observed in stress levels ($t = -3.25$, $p = .002$) with a moderate-to-large effect size ($d = -0.840$), indicating that plant-based therapy was particularly effective in reducing stress among healthcare workers.

4. Discussion

Both the experimental and control groups were found to be in the "Effective Functioning" range for psychological well-being and stress prior to the intervention. This indicates that participants were not experiencing severe psychological distress but also had not reached optimal mental functioning. The similarity of baseline scores between groups suggests that the two groups were comparable at the start of the study, strengthening the validity of the experimental design. This finding supports the idea that healthcare workers often experience moderate stress levels due to work demands, but still maintain functional psychological well-being, consistent with earlier findings in occupational health research.

After the intervention, the experimental group showed significant improvements in both psychological

well-being and stress levels. Statistical results confirmed highly significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores for psychological well-being ($p < .001$) and stress ($p < .001$), with large effect sizes. This indicates that plant-based therapy had a strong positive impact, particularly in reducing stress levels and improving emotional regulation among participants.

These findings align with the study of Lee et al. (2022), which reported that exposure to natural environments and plant-based interventions significantly improves mood and reduces stress in workplace settings. Similarly, Jones et al. (2023) emphasized that nature-based workplace interventions contribute to psychological restoration and emotional balance, especially in high-stress professions such as healthcare. The results also support Roberts and Thompson (2022), who found that therapeutic exposure to natural elements enhances stress management and emotional well-being over time.

In contrast, the control group showed no significant changes in psychological well-being and stress levels between pre-test and post-test. This stability suggests that without intervention, psychological states among healthcare workers tend to remain relatively constant over short periods. This supports the findings of Hernandez and Smith (2021), who reported that non-intervention groups typically exhibit minimal psychological change over time. Lee et al. (2021) further noted that baseline stress levels in healthcare professionals tend to persist unless targeted interventions are introduced.

When comparing post-test results, no significant difference was found in psychological well-being between the two groups. However, a significant difference was observed in stress levels, with the experimental group showing lower stress compared to the control group. This suggests that plant-based therapy is particularly effective in stress reduction rather than producing immediate changes in overall psychological well-being.

This result is consistent with Jones et al. (2023), who found that nature-based interventions tend to produce stronger effects on stress reduction than on broader psychological constructs such as overall well-being. Similarly, Lee et al. (2022) noted that improvements in psychological well-being may require longer exposure or combined interventions such as counseling or mindfulness-based programs.

Overall, the results demonstrate that plant-based therapy is an effective, low-cost, and sustainable intervention for reducing stress among healthcare workers. While its impact on general psychological well-being may be moderate in the short term, its strong effect on stress reduction highlights its value as a complementary workplace wellness strategy. The findings support the integration of natural elements into healthcare environments as part of broader mental health promotion programs. In summary, plant-based therapy contributes significantly to stress reduction and has the potential to enhance psychological functioning when sustained over time or combined with other interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of plant-based therapy in improving psychological well-being and reducing stress among healthcare workers using a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design. Both the experimental and control groups initially demonstrated moderate levels of psychological well-being and stress, categorized as Effective Functioning, indicating comparable baseline conditions prior to the intervention.

After the implementation of plant-based therapy, the experimental group showed significant improvements in both psychological well-being and stress levels, while remaining within the Effective Functioning range. In contrast, the control group exhibited no significant changes across the same period, confirming the stability of psychological conditions in the absence of intervention. These results suggest

that the observed improvements in the experimental group can be attributed to the plant-based therapy intervention.

Further analysis revealed a significant difference in stress levels between the experimental and control groups, with the experimental group demonstrating lower stress post-intervention. However, no significant difference was found in psychological well-being between groups. This indicates that plant-based therapy is particularly effective in stress reduction, although its impact on broader psychological well-being may require longer exposure or complementary interventions to produce more substantial effects.

Overall, the findings support the conclusion that plant-based therapy is an effective, low-cost, and sustainable intervention for reducing stress among healthcare workers, with additional potential benefits for psychological functioning when integrated into broader wellness programs. The proposed Project "P.O.T" (Plants for Optimal Therapy) further strengthens this implication by offering a practical and scalable framework for integrating nature-based interventions into healthcare settings.

6. Recommendations

Plant-based therapy is recommended as a practical, low-cost, and sustainable intervention for reducing stress among healthcare workers, with evidence showing its strongest effect on stress management and moderate influence on psychological well-being. Future research should expand the scope by including additional variables such as job satisfaction, coping strategies, burnout levels, and workplace environmental conditions to better explain psychological outcomes. It is also recommended to increase the sample size and include participants from different professions to strengthen generalizability. Extending the intervention period to 8–12 weeks and enhancing plant interaction through increased frequency of care, variety of plant types, and participant selection may further improve therapeutic effects. To enhance overall psychological well-being, plant-based therapy may be combined with other interventions such as mindfulness practices, physical activity programs, and peer support systems. Future studies should also include follow-up assessments to determine long-term effects and incorporate physiological measures of stress such as cortisol levels for more objective evaluation. The use of more specific and validated instruments like the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), or Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) is likewise recommended for more precise measurement. Finally, healthcare institutions are encouraged to adopt structured plant-based wellness programs with continuous monitoring, feedback mechanisms, and consideration of workplace environmental factors such as lighting and space design to maximize effectiveness and sustainability.

7. Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to express sincere gratitude to Almighty God for His guidance, wisdom, and strength throughout this academic journey, without which the completion of this study would not have been possible. Deep appreciation is extended to Dr. Lourdes P. Jusay, PhD, IP, RPsy, RPm, for her exceptional guidance, insightful feedback, and continuous encouragement, as well as to the members of the thesis panel—Dr. Susana C. Bautista, LPT, EdD, Chairperson, Dr. Marilou C. Urbina, DBA, LPT, Dr. Diosmar O. Fernandez, LPT, PhD, and Dr. Yupangco—for their valuable critiques, scholarly insights, and constructive suggestions that significantly enhanced the rigor and quality of this research. Special recognition is also given to Dr. Ferdinand C. Somido, Dean of the Graduate School of the University of Perpetual Help System Laguna, for his leadership and support in ensuring that the study met academic standards for the Master of Science in Psychology, Major in Developmental Psychology. The researcher

is likewise grateful to the healthcare workers who participated in the study for their time, willingness, and meaningful contributions, as well as to Mr. John Rommel Macalindong, MSP, RPm, CHRA, for his expertise in statistical analysis and invaluable assistance in ensuring the reliability of the data. Appreciation is also extended to Ms. Andrhea Rosales, CHRA, for her continuous support and collaboration throughout the research process. Finally, heartfelt gratitude is given to family, friends, and colleagues for their unwavering love, encouragement, and emotional support, which served as a constant source of strength and motivation throughout this endeavor.

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