

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Background: An alarming situation of socioeconomic crisis and acute psychological distress has occurred globally due to the rapid emergence and spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). In public mental health terms, the main psychological impact to date is elevated rates of stress or anxiety. But as new measures and impacts are introduced – especially quarantine and its effects on people's usual activities, routines or livelihoods – levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour are also expected to rise. In addition to all the strategic measures employed to contain the disease, added tactics are required to handle the related mental health issues. **Methods:** Previously published articles regarding

the relation of mental health with the COVID-19 outbreak and other previous global pandemics have been collected and reviewed. **Observations:** There has been a profound increase in the pandemic associated mental health issues with the increasing number of cases reported worldwide. The implementation of strict quarantine measures has kept a large number of people in isolation, thus paving way to psychological stress, symptoms of mental illness and suicidal thoughts. It is necessary to develop strategies for reducing psychological distress and promoting healthy behaviours to deal with the current distress situation.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Coronavirus, mental health, stress, anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning its first incidence as a series of unexplained cases of pneumonia in the city of Wuhan, China, the COVID19 pandemic (as officially designated by WHO) has affected more than 216 countries in the World infecting over 20674000 people and claiming more than 749790 lives globally (data as of August 12, 2020). To curb and contain the spread of this highly contagious disease most part of the world are under complete or partial lockdowns. The implementation of strict quarantine measures has kept a large number people in isolation, thus paving way to psychological stress, symptoms of mental illness and suicidal thoughts.

COVID-19 has resulted in a widespread change in the lifestyle of people in the past few months. Since its outbreak, the virus has been affecting people physically, financially and emotionally as well. While the physical and financial impacts find a voice by many, the emotional side somewhere remains less expressed but no doubt it is of great relevance and needs to be analyzed. Due to a sudden change in the entire world as a result of the pandemic, the social lives of people were disrupted.

Psychiatrists suggest that there is a universal presence of anxiety due to the pandemic which is more critical among the susceptible population groups including individuals with pre-existing psychiatric conditions, those with psychosocial issues, those dealing with poverty and unemployment and also in those residing in high disease prevalent areas. Cases of heightened mental stress has also been reported among frontline health workers as well as other department persons directly involved in pandemic management.

This work is aimed at reviewing the current literatures available regarding the COVID-19 impact on mental health by covering various aspects in the current scenario.

Psychological impact on general population

The COVID 19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of the general population. Therefore it is necessary to closely examine and evaluate the mental state of individuals during the pandemic. Some causes of anxiety can be rapid disease transmission, high mortality rate and concern about future.^[1]

Some recent studies^[2] have shown that COVID19 affects mental health and produce outcomes like anxiety, depression and post traumatic stress symptoms.

Recent researches suggest that people who are kept in isolation or quarantine experience higher levels of anger, stress and anxiety compared to others^[3] and those with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 are 2-3 times more likely to report mental health problems than uninfected.^[4] Few media reports of suicide have been reported globally due to fear of infection, social stigma, isolation induced emotional imbalances.^[5]

According to WHO reports, anxiety increases in individuals who are constantly following the pandemic updates which can sometimes even be fabricated or rumour reports. So it is important to check on the credibility of source of information as well as to avoid negative news and also to develop healthy behaviours to overcome psychological stress.^[2,6]

A recent study^[7] conducted in India during April 2020, explains the level of psychological stress among different sections of Indian population during the lockdown period. The important findings from the above mentioned study were that both males and females were almost equally stressed about the current situation. Also it was evident from the study that the more stressed groups were those who did not have or were unable to get enough supply of daily essentials. Students, teachers, researchers and health professionals reported more mental stress compared to other corporate job employees. This can be due to closure of universities and colleges resulting in uncertainty about future.

Based on a systematic review and Meta analysis study^[8] conducted on July 2020, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health is as explained in fig (1)

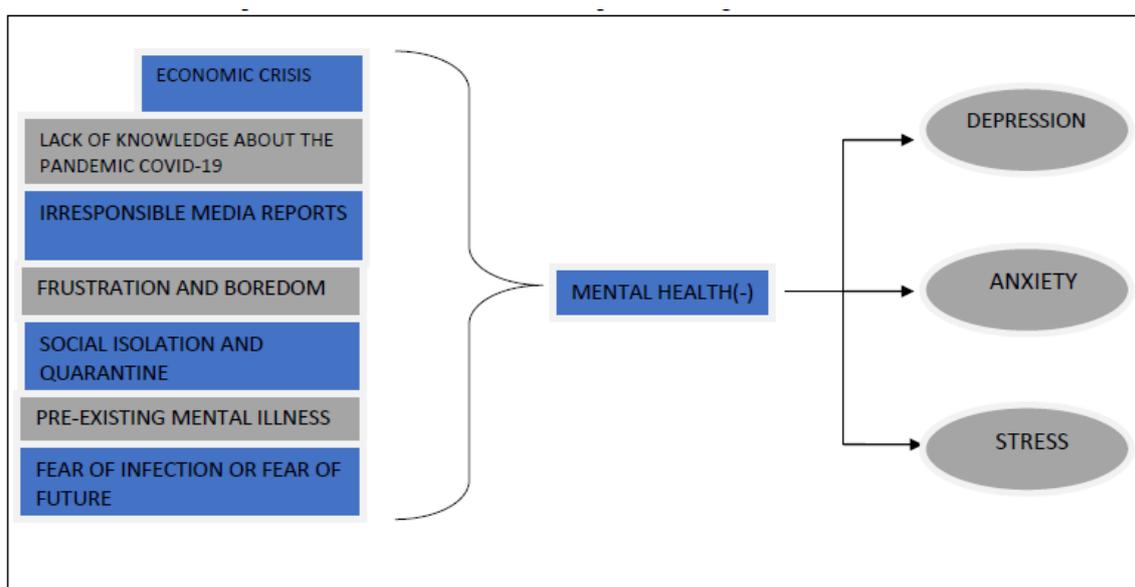


Figure 1: Factors affecting mental health.

Usually older people are at more risk of COVID-19 infection as well as mortality rate are higher among them. But some studies^[9] showed lower level of psychological impact in the higher age groups compared to those in the age group of 21-40years. This may be due to anxiety over future challenges and consequences associated.

It is necessary to develop strategies for reducing psychological distress and promoting healthy behaviours to deal with the current distress situation. An article^[10] suggests that providing psychological first aid and counselling are quite essential during an epidemic. It helps in reducing the psychological distress and promotes adaptive coping strategies to deal with the situation.

Psychological impact on health care workers

Health care workers are in the frontline of fighting the COVID-19 outbreak and thus are exposed to high risk of infections, long working hours, fatigue, psychological stress, social stigma and physical or psychological violence.^[11] Lack of adequate personal protective equipments, workload and feeling of insecurity can all contribute to high mental distress among the healthcare workers.

A survey conducted in China^[12] revealed high prevalence of mental stress symptoms among health workers treating patients with COVID-19. More than 70% in the total 1257 respondents in the survey reported psychological distress. In a similar survey conducted in India,^[13] the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms are in line with finding from China but prevalence of high level stress is comparatively low.

High stress conditions among healthcare workers are particularly reported among those working in high risk areas (OPD, inpatient and ICU). A study from Wuhan, China,^[14] reports that around 87.5% of health workers working in high risk areas developed COVID-19. Such exposure to infection can result in fear of self infection or fear of being a contagion of disease to their family members and loved ones and further results in high mental stress.

Social distancing is considered as a major preventive measure for containing the disease outbreak. Thus the health care workers are mandated to maintain distance from their family members and colleagues which deprive them of lack of social and mental support and can add up to emotional stressing out.^[13]

In a study conducted during the SARS outbreak^[14] among healthcare workers, it showed that nurses are more likely to develop more mental stress compared to physicians when committing themselves for providing good quality nursing care for patients infected.

Adapting helpful coping strategies like ensuring proper rest during work or between shifts, eating healthy and balanced diet, engaging in physical activities and staying well connected to loved ones through digital platforms can ensure good mental health and reduces over stress. WHO has recommended various guidelines and de-stressing strategies to overcome psychological stress during this long run.^[6]

Psychological impact on the elderly

Older people and also those with underlying health conditions have been identified as more vulnerable to COVID-19, and to be told that you are very vulnerable, can be extremely frightening and very fear-inducing. The psychological impacts for these populations can include anxiety and feeling stressed or angry. Its impacts can be particularly difficult for older people who may be experiencing cognitive decline or dementia. And some older people may already be socially isolated and experiencing loneliness which can worsen mental health.

Psychological impact on students

Due to the rapid and uncontrolled spread of Coronavirus and lockdown, being the only existing option to slowdown the spread, all the educational institutions were also shut down. This disrupted the normal academic calendar of the students, thus leading to increased mental stress. Even though many educational institutions have shifted to online platforms, sudden change of students to these methods from the normal teaching techniques can be stressful. A survey^[15] conducted by young minds reported that among 2036 respondents, 80% students agreed that the pandemic had affected their mental health .

This heightened mental stress may result in decreased interest in studies, increased pressure for independent learning and increased school and university dropouts. Thus in this context there is an increased need to maintain the mental equilibrium of the students. The educational institutions can establish a mental health cell with the help of a psychologist to provide necessary help to the students. Providing regular counselling sessions, continuous monitoring and adapting various coping strategies can contribute to improve the mental health of the students.^[16,17]

Impact of covid-19 on global suicide rates

Suicide may never be due to a single factor. It can be a result of number of factors like social isolation, hopelessness, stigma and burdensomeness due to economic stresses like job loss or debts.^[18,19] The media has reported several cases of suicide which is believed to be linked to the impact COVID-19 is having on individuals.^[20]

The COVID-19 pandemic may increase suicide rates during or after the crisis. Mental health outcomes like anxiety, stress and suicidal behaviours are likely to exacerbate for a long time and can even extent farther than the actual crisis period.^[21]

During the 1918-20 crisis of a similar pandemic Spanish flu caused by the H1N1 virus, about 500million people were infected and more than 50 million lost their lives.^[22] The pandemic was associated with an increase in suicide rates due to decreased social interaction and fear caused by the epidemic.^[23] This situation is similar to that of the current COVID-19 crisis.

Also during the 2003 SARS outbreak in Hong Kong, there was a significant increase in suicide especially among the elderly. This can be due to fear of getting infected, being a burden to family, social isolation and associated psychological stress.^[24]

Those with psychiatric symptoms may experience worsening of symptoms especially depression, anxiety, stress (all associated with increased suicide tendency).^[25]

The exact impact of the current pandemic on suicide rate is currently unknown and there are a lot of measures that the governments as well as the societies can undertake to decrease the impact.^[20] Those people who require special attention needs to be screened and counselled. Some measures that can be undertaken are mentioned in the fig. 2.^[26]

Financial stress	Government should provide financial safety nets (e.g.: food, housing, loans etc...)
Access to essential items	Government should make sure adequate and timely supply of essential items
Isolation, loneliness	Society should provide emotional support to those living alone Friends and family should keep in regular touch through digital platforms
Irresponsible media reports	Media reports should be moderate and in line with specific guidelines
Domestic violence	Government and respective regulatory agencies should ensure that adequate support is provided to those facing domestic violence
Individuals with suicide tendency	Provide mental health services and individual attention Increase crisis help lines Community mental health teams Government should maintain adequate means for intervention
Pre-existing mental illness	Provide adequate and timely psychological support Ensuring adequate medication supply Engaging in healthy lifestyle habits

Figure 2: Measures to be undertaken to reduce suicide risk during pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Implementation of community based strategies to support psychologically stressed individual is essential during the COVID-19 crisis. Coping with stress and developing a positive attitude to situations is the healthy way to overcome stress related mental outcomes. This can help individuals to think clearly and react to urgent needs of the family as well as society.

The long term mental health impact of COVID-19 thus requires collaborative effort from psychiatrists as well as the whole healthcare system for its management. This paves way for the need of more systematic and longitudinal evaluation of psychological necessities of population that can help the government and associated authorities to formulate time bound mental health interventions for helping affected individuals.

Conflict of interest

The author (s) declared no conflict of interest with respect to the authorship, research or publication of the article.

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