Covid-19: a mental health crisis

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To assess the various mental health issues during the Covid 19 and its impact on the public health.

Introduction: The world has been confronted by the epidemics like Asian flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola, etc but the current pandemic of COVID-19 is of a gigantic proportion, it has halted an entire humanity and brought the world to a standstill. The mathematical exponential growth of the viral illness is creating panic and nations are reeling under its impact.

Discussion: Emergencies like these affect the health, safety, and well-being at an individual and the community level like causing fear, uncertainty, insecurity, loneliness, and stigma. Studies in disaster management have shown that public health along with mental health suffers for many days following the situation. The psychological effects of the pandemic can be understood keeping in mind the problems which predated the pandemic and the ones

that are a consequence of the latter. Fear as a result of the facts and those based on a barrage of information/misinformation circulating in the media especially on social media platform. The public at large may also experience boredom, disappointment, and irritability under the isolation measures. A real threat of job losses, pay cuts, layoffs, economic hardships, slowdown of growth as a consequence of the pandemic can lead to a spiral of dejection, sadness, and distress. Anxiety; loneliness; difficulty in concentrating, low motivation and a state of distraction and alertness can lead to a negative emotional spiral, desperation, panic and fear. Lockdown restructuring of day-to-day activities and realignment. Specific health issues are related to special populations and sub sections of the populations. Simple steps to mitigate the crisis have to be undertaken. Steps of disaster management have to be implemented.

Conclusion: Pandemics like COVID have significant impact on individuals, families and countries. Individuals have to deal with consequences of infection and also measures adopted to contain the infection like quarantines, social distancing and lockdowns.

Keywords: COVID-19, Corona Warriors, Lockdown, Pandemic, Quarantine, Social Distancing, Stigma.

INTRODUCTION

Pandemics like plague outbreaks have been known to mankind, cholera and Spanish Flu pandemics have caused large scale harm to mankind in the early part of the twentieth century [1].

It is not that there were no pandemics earlier. The world has been confronted by the epidemics like Asian flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola [2, 3] etc., but the current pandemic of COVID-19 is of a gigantic proportion; it has halted an entire humanity and brought the world to a standstill [3]. The mathematical exponential growth of the viral illness is creating panic and nations are reeling under its impact [3, 4]. Currently, all of us are experiencing emotions, thoughts and situations we have never experienced before [5, 6].

At the time of the current article (mid of September) we are the second highest in the world in terms of cases and nearly a thousand odd deaths every day [7]. The case load compounded with an ailing health infrastructure has amounted to a crisis waiting like a time bomb [7]. Emergencies like these affect the health, safety, and well-being at an individual and the community level like causing fear, uncertainty, insecurity, loneliness, and stigma [5, 6]. Compounding to the distress are factors like economic loss, unemployment, school closures, inadequate resources for the needy, ailing individuals, poor health infrastructure, lack of funds, response to distribution of essential items [7]. These situations translate into a range of emotional reactions leading to psychiatric conditions and unhealthy indulgences like substance use [8]. People also start showing aggression towards public health instructions like home confinement, quarantine and other limitations in the movement. Studies in disaster management have shown that public health along with mental health suffers for many days following the situation [9, 10]. This finding is certain to be seen in the current Covid-19 pandemic.

RANGE OF EFFECTS

The psychological effects of the pandemic can be understood keeping in mind the problems which predated the pandemic and the ones that are a consequence of the latter [5, 6]. Social isolation, lockdown, quarantine are terms hitherto unknown to common man [9]. Psychological response to the diagnosis and the general public's responses to positive or suspected cases of COVID-19 infection are realities confronting the society [8, 9]. As a result the foremost response to the present scenario has been one of fear and a sense of impending doom [11, 12]. Fear as a result of the facts and those based on a barrage of information/misinformation circulating in the media especially on social media platform. Confronted with a multitude of questions like, What? What not? How? Why? When? are giving rise to worry, fear, existential crisis and despair [11]. Based on individual responses multiple problems can arise. This can lead to those who are the "worried well"; those who develop unpleasant psychological symptoms compounded with maladaptive behavior leading to marked stress; group of individual who decompensate and develop a mental disorder and lastly those who are already suffering with severe mental illness (SMI) [10].

The "**worried well**" are those group of people who develop fear of contracting the illness and overly conscious and alert so that they misinterpret every fever or cough as a COVID-19 infection and hence insisting to being tested despite there being reassured and advised on the presence of strict guidelines for testing. Hoarding medications, masks, soaps, disinfectants, sanitizers etc. People without any psychiatric morbidity start indulging in normal behaviors of cleaning and develop a compulsion for the same, making it difficult to differentiate the "normal" from "abnormal" [5, 10]. The public at large may also experience boredom, disappointment, and irritability under the isolation measures [11]. Then there are real threats of job losses, pay cuts, layoffs, economic hardships, slowdown of growth as a consequence of the pandemic [13]. These endless issues lead to a spiral of dejection, sadness, and distress [11]. In contrast to the above group there is another group who has a false sense of masochism and is completely uncaring, and feeling of being invincible, hence they do not follow any advisory or precautions. This attitude can impose danger to self and others [10].

Unpleasant psychological symptoms like

Anxiety; loneliness; difficulty in concentrating, low motivation and a state of distraction and alertness; negative emotional spirals; desperation; panic and fear; financial strain; apprehension about future and cases may suffer from anxiety due to uncertainty about their health status and develop obsessive-compulsive symptoms, such as repeated temperature check, hand washing and sterilization [10-12]. This group of individuals may require short or long term pharmacological or behavioral interventions in the form of anti depressants, anxiolytics and counseling services [12]. With time some may get rid of the symptoms but some may require long term management by medicines or psychological support [8, 10].

Those suffering with SMI

Patients with severe mental illness (SMI) are majorly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak [10]. As a result of government hospital shutting down, traffic restrictions and isolation measures, outpatients with SMI and epilepsy are facing difficulties to receive maintenance treatment [11], and may thus end up with symptom relapse and behaviors like aggression, agitation, irritability, self- harm and exacerbation of the mental ailment [10]. The preventive

measures undertaken to mitigate Covid 19 may lead to a decreased physical wellbeing leading to an increase in negative feelings, frustration and suicidality [12]. Families who have lost a loved one or having ill patients may suffer from bereavement, burnout, and prolonged grief [12]. For persons with substance use disorders a sudden cessation of substances may lead to seizures, delirium, agitation, and even suicide [10, 11]. Quarantine can exacerbate the pre existing illness due to reasons like; stopping ongoing psychotropic medications for reasons such as non-availability, drug interactions and non-availability or in accessibility of mental health care providers, emergence of new symptoms [9]. Some psychiatric symptoms are commonly associated with the use of chloroquine, steroids, and antiretroviral [8]. Other reaction to the present situation can be an "End-of-life crisis" i.e. thoughts of whether one has lived a full life, impending fear of death, concern of family's well being, reaction to one's death, guilt may haunt the person; [11, 12]. "Acute stress reaction and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" [11, 12] hospital quarantine can act as a stressor and a traumatic event leading to an acute stress disorder. These subjects can later become vulnerable to develop PTSD [5, 6].

Responses to social distancing and lockdown

The social distancing and lockdown have caused large scale restructuring of day-to-day activities and realignment of home chores, enmeshment of family members due to lockdown and work from home, on the opposite side long separations from the family due to restrictions in travel [14]. Social distancing is important but its sequelae physical distancing may lead interpersonal strain [14]. Other effects as a result to lockdown are financial stress domestic abuse and child abuses as the victim is locked with the perpetrator and is unable to escape from the situation [15]. Uncertainty and a loss of control over time may lead to frustration, emotional swings. When the contagion takes up the narrative, one need to keep the entire picture in perspective and there is a need to address the crucial mental health component [8, 11].

Stigma

A look at the news headlines gives several instances of ill treatment of "corona warriors" by the society members, landlords, and various other sections of people leading to people not disclosing symptoms and not seeking appropriate medical help [15, 16]. Fear of quarantine

i.e. separation of people who have been exposed to a contagious disease to assess whether a person falls sick, thereby reducing the risk of spreading infection [14, 15]. Various misinformation and rumors give sinister ramifications to a procedure like "Isolation", wherein a person diagnosed to have a contagious disease is separated from the general population to avoid transmission of the disease to healthy people [16, 17].

Focus on special population

It is important to consider the effect of the pandemic on children, the elderly, pregnant women and most importantly the "corona warriors" [17]. The term incorporates the health care providers (doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff), the police personnel, the sanitation workers etc. We will focus on the needs of each section separately.

Children are vulnerable as they are unable to understand the gravity of the situation in its entirety, moreover the concerns and worries of adults are quickly transmitted to them making them anxious and fearful [8, 11]. Another aspect is the lack of play, socialization, distractions; hence the children easily become bored, angry and frustrated. They become engrossed in social media and online entertainment which can make them socially isolated and less communicative [11, 12]. Children with special needs may need more attention and need looking after which can lead to burn out in careers [12]. Parents and care givers need to know innovative means in order to keep the children engaged and giving them opportunities to learn new skills at home, as well as encourage children to participate in family chores and self help activities [17]. A welcome step is that more and more schools are offering online classes and assignments to keep the children busy and also to give them a structure in their daily activities [7, 14]. This is an unusual and complex time for all and there are no easy and simple answers; however some simple and commonsense strategies may help [17].

Elderly as a group are vulnerable because of feelings of isolation, neglect, financial constraints, lack of mobility and preexisting medical needs added to the reports of their age group vulnerability to covid-19 [18]. All the factors can contribute to them being worried their health. Lack of a proper support system and care may lead them to become anxious and upset causing depressive symptoms [10, 11]. In some cases negative thoughts about the

future, helplessness, hopelessness and suicidal feelings may also occur. Most of the older adults have pre existing subsyndromal issues like anxiety and depressive symptoms which can worsen in the existing stressful [11]. Older adults need reassurance and supportive counseling to allay their concerns and fear. May affect persons of all ages, but the mortality risk is highest in the elderly [18]. They should be provided with appropriate and realistic information about issues. Guidance about maintaining a routine, relaxation exercises, Yogic meditation, proper diet, cognitive stimulation during being home bound through home-based activities is essential [16-18].

Pregnant females can have a multitude of concerns, from worries ranging from ante natal checkups, appropriate immunization, risks to the unborn child, about the contagion and the future health of self and the unborn child [8, 19]. Gender dynamics need attention as times like this can amplify an abusive relationship and increase intimate partner violence [15]. As the movement is restricted, persons who are in abusive relationships face challenges since they are holed up with their perpetrators and may find it difficult to avail timely help .UN WOMEN have reported rates of increased violence against women and children more so girls in these times [15].

Corona Warriors, [7, 20] all the professionals on the forefront of the war against the virus are being called by the above name. Health professionals are leading from the front as they have the duty of providing care to the infected patients and also have to face the wrath of people who are misinformed and illiterate [21]. They may experience fear of severe disease consequences and being infected [8, 9]. Consequently, they may experience loneliness, denial, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and despair, which may lower their morale. Further, strict quarantine and mandatory contact tracing policy by governmental authorities have lead to societal rejection, financial loss, discrimination, and stigmatization [11, 22, 23]. Frontline health professionals in high case load areas have excessive workload and feel isolated [11] and hence highly vulnerable to experience physical exhaustion, emotional disturbances, dejection and insomnia [8, 9]. A recent study involving 1,563 health professionals found that more than half (50.7%) of the participants reported depressive symptoms, 44.7% anxiety, and 36.1% sleep disturbance [21-23]. Suicide risk of Frontline health workers experiencing burnouts, health anxiety, pre-existing mental health &

addiction issues are likely to heighten. It is of utmost importance to ensure early mental health assessment and interventions if the early 'warning signs' are encountered [22, 23]. The burnout is going to be seen much more, it is characterized by the triad of emotional exhaustion, emotional numbness (loss of one's empathy, caring, and compassion), and a decreased sense of accomplishment [22]. This new illness presents the workers with an uncertain battle the details of which are unknown. Many police and government officials, sanitation workers, delivery staffs are working round the clock to ease the situation and ensure a proper working of the machinery [23]. Added to the above issues is the problem of substandard protective gear (PPE), lack of sanitizers and training , this is making the corona warriors dejected and they feel cheated on being sent to 'war without adequate ammunition'. Hospitals do not have adequate funds to cater to all the needs [24, 25].

SPECIFIC ISSUES IN PANDEMICS

1. Life and death decisions faced with an overwhelming deluge of case, the treating personnel are confronted with ethical issues of whom to save and whom to delegate to other resources. In the European countries the situation was difficult for the treating personnel [23]. Situations like these can become draining and lead to burn out. Ignoring other serious illnesses like cancer, cardiovascular problems, renal illnesses, liver problems and infective diseases like AIDS and TB can also lead to problems for the family and the patients [26]. Providing tele-consultation can be an alternative, however these situations are not adequately tackled. Telemedicine may help those who have access to the adequate resources; a comprehensive guideline for the practice of telemedicine has been created and made available at the website of the MoHFW, GOI [27]. In a country like ours where Internet access is a luxury many poor subjects will have to go without treatment.

Added to the above situation is an abysmal health care system in India with less than 850,000 beds in government hospitals across the country, and less than 40,000 ventilators in government and private sector hospitals (25).

2. Humanitarian crisis: The country has never witnessed a bigger humanitarian crisis than the present one. Some experts believe that the 1962 and 1971 wars also did not pose such a crisis as the present one [28]. Lockdown and massive migrations, laborers on the move due

to lack of jobs [28, 29], loss of jobs, food shortage and lack of health care facilities to seriously ill patients, family's being stuck in foreign lands and students suffering from uncertainty [29]. The worst section to be affected by this crisis is the daily wage earner. The lockdown means no wages, and no food [29] . Most of these workers are migrant workers who faced with a bleak future had to undertake thousands of kilometers of journey back home on foot [28]. With no food and water and no place to stay they are the most hit [29]. An estimate puts the numbers of these laborers at a staggering 44 million [29, 30]. These workers feel trapped in areas with borders of cities and states sealed. There are instances of poor food, lack of facilities in shelter homes and the camps which have been provided by the government [30]. Despite directives from the state that the workers be provided shelter without rent and be paid full wages [29], little seems to materialize in reality. About 660,000 laborers are estimated to be sheltered in 21,600 camps that have been temporarily set up [30], akin to a simmering disaster waiting to explode [31].

3. The Logistics: As a result of the unannounced lockdown there is large scale disruption to the transport and the supply chain [32]. Farmers are wary of being unable to sell their products, inability to harvest a ready crop [33]. Perishable products like vegetables, fruits and milk are being dumped at the point of production and are getting destroyed [33]. There is a massive disparity between the supply and demand and a possibility of extreme in the form of food riots has been doubted [32]. Even the finances of the central and the state government are highly affected with the stock market taking a beating, resources drying up (31) .Many companies are forcing layoffs, pay cuts and sanctioning unpaid leave for the staff [13]. Estimated 136 million workers have become financially unstable [31].

4. The Police force: Long hours of duty, enforcing lockdown, punishing the violators, distributing relief materials are some of the many jobs undertaken by the police personnel [34]. Their own anxieties notwithstanding; they have to play the role of hard disciplinarian and soft Samaritan simultaneously [34, 35]. They have had to face flak for their attacks on emergency delivery men, medical professionals, people out to buy essentials like food or medicines, resulting in injury and hospitalization [34].

3. Education: Schools and colleges are indefinitely closed with uncertainty looming over the

future [36]. The board and entrance examinations and various competitive examinations for higher education are postponed indefinitely [36]. Some sources are of the opinion that students may lose an entire academic year. Students are stuck in coaching institutes like Kota in Rajasthan and facing difficulties due to lack of resources and travel restrictions [14, 16]. Feelings of helplessness are overpowering. Malfunctioning laptops and smart phones which are the lifeline of students can lead to a crisis [14]. Schools and institutes are trying online teaching, but issues of internet speed become a deterrent [37, 38].

Management Tips

There are no quick fixes only guidelines [11]. Each of us has to devise a roadmap based on the resources, resilience and support systems available [21]. The feelings of boredom, loneliness, sadness, stress, confusion and loss of personal freedom and guilt are all encompassing. Frustration and demoralization have to be addressed and tackled; this is physical distancing but not social distancing [22, 23]. One needs to get as much information as possible about the infection and rationale behind the advocated principles of prevention [11].

One needs to stay away from base less rumor mongering and religious bigotry.

People with pre-existing mental and medical health problems may be more vulnerable than others to develop physical and psychological problems, hence continuity of care for people has to be maintained [9, 10]. Physical activity, taking up a hobby and a proper balanced diet are of importance. One also needs to stay connected to family and friends through phones and video calls. There is also need to learn healthy coping and self help skills in these difficult times, over enthusiasm and unfounded altruism should be avoided [12]. Attempts should be made to protect individual's safety and privacy.

For the health professionals working with the Covid patients simple measures like having a routine, adequate sleep, maintaining communication lines, physical and mental exercises, spirituality and faith (if one desires), proper diet are a couple of wellness mantras [22]. Developing a 'Buddy Feeling" with the team leaders and superiors can also be helpful. Rotations and work delegations are important for these professionals [23]. A proper and realistic communication along with regular brief ups bonding among self groups is important. In undesirable circumstances procedure of 'ventilation' and 'debriefing' should be ensured. Lastly seek the help of a professional if coping becomes difficult [22, 23].

CONCLUSION

Pandemics like COVID have significant impact on individuals, families and countries. Individuals have to deal with consequences of infection and also measures adopted to contain the infection like quarantines, social distancing and lockdowns. People start facing issues related to health, finances and have security concerns which in turn have an impact on the mental health.

There are multiple reports of suicide in context of the pandemic from all across the world especially those who have suffered bankruptcy or an emotional loss. These are desperate times and call for desperate measures by everyone. It is a time to reinvent and develop resources and ensure a proper rehabilitation process is on the track. Flexibility and prudence together with compassion will be needed to guide us through this crisis.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Psychiatric research studies during pandemics like COVID-19 may involve examination of psychiatry and pandemic interactions. Carrying out such studies involve handling challenges as a result of pandemic related restrictions and the risk of the contagion. However; modern advances in technology offer newer methods to effectively handle some of these challenges in research. There will be problems in facets of ethical requirements. There is an urgent need for formulating international guidelines as well as constituting large-scale organized networks to facilitate conducting research studies in psychiatry amidst a pandemic situation like COVID-19. On a parting note this pandemic is a 'slap on the ego of humanity'. These experiences can teach us the massive power of nature, who would have thought about six months back that the entire humankind will come to a halt. This can be a time of introspection for the rich and mighty across the world to feel how it is to sanction the poor nations and the people of weaker nations. Also for humankind this should be a wakeup call to live sustainably and in synchrony with the nature, to decrease the ravages of greed and the cruel annihilation of flora and fauna. May this COVID-19 crisis might teach us the power of kindness, brotherhood and compassion for a better future.

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