



EFFECT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT The current global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, has posed an unprecedented challenge to health systems, economy, socio-political organizations, and the infrastructure of most countries and the world. This pandemic has affected physical health as well as mental health adversely. Several recent evidences suggests that health systems across the world have to improve their preparedness in context to infectious pandemics. The research on mental health aspects of COVID-19 and other related pandemics is lacking due to obvious reasons. The narrative review article, along with our personal views, is on various current and future mental health issues in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on various challenges and suggested solutions. The aim is also to update mental health strategies in the context of such rapidly spreading contagious illness, which can act as a resource for such a situation, currently and in future.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

The corona virus pandemic is a global threat to 21st century. Over the last three months, there has been a significant rise in the number of infected cases and mortality due to this infection. The coronavirus epidemic started from the Wuhan city of China and subsequently spread across the globe. (1) It has been seen over the past few months that the routine health services, including mental health care, are adversely affected in many countries including India. At the same time, several lay media reports are suggesting an increase in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress-like symptoms, insomnia, and anger among the general population, health worker as well as the people who are kept in isolation (due to infection with covid-19). (2) The rapidly emerging mental health issues may destabilize individuals' general well-being and have immense potential to influence the health system of an individual; hence, they need urgent and immediate attention and action. There are several risk factors that attribute to the development of psychological symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental Health Issues Among The General Population

Under reasonable stress, anyone can experience mental morbidity symptoms after a traumatic event and pandemics, which are capable of inducing a lot of stress among large populations. Several factors determine the likelihood of a person developing these conditions. (1,3) The conditions that precede the event the nature of the traumatic event happening, the scenarios after the event; rapidity of event; level of uncertainty involved; the potential for personal risk and risk to the family and loved ones; and the overall impact on the economy, jobs, socio-political organizations, etc., are some of the factors determining the outcome.(4)

A recently concluded meta-analysis on prevalence of psychological morbidities among general population and health care workers reported that about half of the population faced psychological impacts of COVID-19 pandemic. (5)

Stress has been invariably associated with precipitation and exacerbation of psychiatric illnesses, and the level of inflammatory cytokines is elevated in these conditions, especially psychosis. It has been hypothesized that SARS-CoV-2 infection may develop psychiatric illness by disrupting hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and further resulting in immune dysfunction (increase in cytokine levels).(7)

Generally, when a stressful event occurs, it has been found that certain sections of population such as females, children and the elderly are at a higher risk of experiencing difficulties. (8) Pre-traumatic factors which could potentiate a psychiatric illness could compromise of past psychiatric illness or irresolvable loss or trauma and a history of sexual

exploitation during childhood.

Increased levels of distress and preoccupation with the disease can be acknowledged due to a constant flow of information through media outlets regarding the spread of diseases. (2,10) The specific mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic are listed below:

- Emotional problems include fear, rage, edginess and mood swings, criticism, and blaming (self and others), frustration, depression, emotional numbness, and inability to cope.(2,9)
- Biological functioning such as impairment in sleep and sexual functioning.(5,6)
- Cognitive issues include poor concentration, poor memory, inability to make decisions, integrity loss etc.
- Psychological and personality issues include emotional outbursts, anger, argumentativeness, and inability to settle.
- Variable responses depending on the level of stress perceived can be seen. Somatization often occurs in people who are unable to handle stress.(2,7)
- Suicides have been reported from various parts of the world concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. (2,8) The mental health impact of the diseases in countries like India and Bangladesh regarding the fear of COVID-19 are seen from the case reports, which warrant intervention from the psychiatry fraternity and strengthen protocols for crisis management targeted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental Health Issues Among Health Care Professionals

Health care professionals, particularly those at medical facilities that take care of people with COVID-19 disease, are susceptible to higher risk of illness as well as mental health issues. They may even feel afraid of the consequences that the illness could spread to their family, acquaintances, or co-workers. The overall rates of psychological morbidities in health professionals were higher than that of the general population (6,4). There have been reports of health professionals, isolating themselves in the underground garages of their homes, to prevent transmission to their family.

Many of the health professionals providing care to nCoV patients face discrimination from the society due to perceived carriers of the deadly virus, such as being forced to vacate rented accommodations. The unavailability of proper personnel protective equipment (PPE) can be cause of stress among the health-care providers, and reports regarding the death of health-care providers can trigger fear and negative attitudes among the health-care personnel to provide proactive care to the patients and the community. The proper training in health care management of COVID-19 must include mental health management of the staff.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

SAMPLE:

In the present study, the effect of COVID-19 on mental health was

studied. The sample consisted of a group of 100 healthcare workers from reputed medical institutes.

DESIGN:

In the present study, COVID-19 was the Predictor Variable (Independent Variable) and Mental Health was the Criterion Variable (Dependent Variable).

TOOLS USED:

An interview schedule was developed on effect of COVID-19 on mental health that included ten objective questions in total. Eg., In the past month, have you felt sad, hopeless, all or most of the time?

PROCEDURE:

Participants were informed about the study protocols and their consent was obtained in written. Participants were then instructed briefly about the interview schedule and were provided enough time to fill up the questionnaire.

RESULTS:

S.No.	QUESTIONS	YES	NO
1	In the past month, have you felt sad, or hopeless, all or most of the time.?	38%	62%
2	In the past month, have you felt uninterested in activities that you used to like, all or most of the time.?	33%	67%
3	In the past month, have you ever felt so irritable, angry, stressed, anxious or afraid that nothing can calm you down?	30%	70%
4	In the past month, have you been unable to carry out any daily essential activities such as getting out of bed, taking a shower or preparing your meals, because of negative feelings or by feeling overwhelmed by the problems you are facing.?	22%	78%
5	Are you currently using any drug by injection for non-medical use?	-	100%
6	In the past month, have you noticed an increase in your use of any of these drugs or substances for non-medical purposes, to the point of not being able to carry out your daily activities as you were able to before? (Substances: alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants, inhalants, sedatives or sleeping pills, hallucinogens, and/or opioids)	11%	89%
7	In the past month, have you had any suicidal thoughts?	5%	95%
8	Do you have plans to take your own life?	2%	98%
9	In the past 12 months, have you attempted to end your life?	-	100%
10	Are you a frontline worker in the COVID-19 response? (doctor, nurse, emergency medical staff, paramedical technician, case identifier, worker involved in dead body management, volunteer, or other)	78%	22%

DISCUSSION

The study was aimed to study the effect of COVID-19 on Mental Health. The data was collected with the help of an Interview Schedule from a group of 100 healthcare workers. The Interview Schedule Consisted of Ten Objective Questions of which participants had to answer Yes/No.

The First four questions of the interview schedule, i.e., Have you felt sad, hopeless, all or most of the time?, Have you felt uninterested, in activities that you used to like, all or most of the time.?, .. In the past month, have you ever felt so irritable, angry, stressed, anxious or afraid that nothing can calm you down.? and In the past month, have you been unable to carry out any daily essential activities such as getting out of bed, taking a shower or preparing your meals, because of negative feelings or by feeling overwhelmed by the problems you are facing.? respectively got 'No' responses than 'Yes', which indicates a negative correlation between COVID-19 and mental health. i.e., increase in COVID-19 leads to decrease in the level of poor mental health (like negative thought patterns, anxiety, suicidal thoughts etc.)

Responses for fifth and sixth question which were based on consumption of drugs on non-medical use, i.e., Are you using any drug by injection for non-medical use?, In the past month, have you noticed an increase in your use of any of these drugs or substances for non-medical purposes, to the point of not being able to carry out your daily activities as you were able to before? (Substances: alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants, inhalants, sedatives or sleeping pills, hallucinogens, and/or opioids) were 'No' which is a highly positive sign which means that none of the healthcare workers were indulged in any kind drug/substance abuse during such stressful times.

It was also found that despite of facing such stressful situations, majority of the healthcare workers did not have any suicidal or self-harming thoughts. It was found out that 95% people had no suicidal thoughts and instead chose to be strong enough to face the day-to-day challenges during the pandemic.

At the end, it was asked if the participant was a frontline worker in the COVID-19 response? (doctor, nurse, emergency medical staff, paramedical technician, case identifier, worker involved in dead body management, volunteer, or other) and it was reported that majority of them were frontline workers and despite of staying away from their respective families and facing such stressful situations on daily basis, they chose remain strong and face the situation rather than going into depression or having suicidal thoughts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. E-teaching: E-teaching is one of the best trends in vogue. The E-teaching may be a great solution to complex problems during lockdowns and difficulties in taking physical classes. This initiative in schools and medical professionals can also be prepared to target the interventions of COVID-19 and can upgrade their knowledge.
2. Resilience: Although everyone is suffering from the coronavirus pandemic and are unnerved and are trying to adapt, not everyone can cope effectively with stress and quickly adapts to new circumstances. Enhancing mental resilience will help combat the coronavirus pandemic effectively.
3. Telecounselling: Telecounselling/Online Counselling has gained popularity in view of pandemic, social distancing and fear of acquiring COVID-19 infection. The advancement of technology has brought about feasible access to health care networking telephones and the Internet.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of the present study was to study the effect of COVID-19 on Mental Health of Healthcare Workers. Findings of this study indicate that there was a Negative Correlation between COVID-19 and Mental Health, as all the Health Care Workers chose to remain positive and strong in such stressful times and didn't reported any negative or suicidal thought patterns.

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