

Review Article

COVID-19 and Mental Health

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A B S T R A C T

The infection caused by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) started from China and reached the whole world and was declared as pandemic by WHO. The COVID 19 poses challenges in all aspects of life including mental health for the entire human race. In the disturbed and crisis situation, the mental health care of people at different levels carries great importance: promotion, prevention and clinical care. First of all, we should not refer "COVID-19 case," "victim," "COVID-19 family," but "person who have COVID-19," "people who are being treated for COVID-19", etc. Social distancing is a public health strategy to limit the spread of COVID-19. There may be a feeling of ostracism, abandonment and being neglected in people, particularly the elderly when they are isolated. Older adults, especially in isolation and those with cognitive decline or dementia, may become more anxious, angry, stressed, agitated, and withdrawn during the outbreak or while in quarantine. These people need emotional support through informal networks (families) and health professionals. Maintaining social networks in situations of isolations is essential for mental health. The treating physician should ensure basic emotional and practical support to affected people. Children need special attention to express their fear and sadness.

Media has highlighted COVID-19 as a unique threat, rather than one of many, which has added to panic, stress, and the potential for hysteria. Information should be sought from WHO website and government health authorities' platforms, in order to distinguish facts from rumours. Individuals with mental illness may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of widespread panic and threat. Instead of harassment, people with COVID 19 should be offer compassion, support via phone and texts, and assistance as appropriate, but never hostility or judgment.

Keywords: Novel Corona Virus 2019, Stress, Stigma, COVID-19

Introduction

The infection caused by novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was first detected in December 2019 at Wuhan in Hubei Province of China. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared its outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in January 2020. After SARS and MERS, COVID-19

has been the third pandemic caused by the coronavirus that has led to worldwide panic.¹ Considering it a high-risk disease, the WHO has issued necessary guidelines to deal with the situation. As COVID-19 is novel virus, therefore none of the population is having any antibodies against it throughout the world. Therefore, everybody has chance of

getting the infection. It is difficult to state that the potency of COVID-19 would be attenuated in summer, but the world can expect the virus to return to its fullest potential in the coming winter. It is therefore of utmost significance that the common people, and more importantly, the professionals in healthcare sector remain vigilant and continuously prepared to challenge the pandemic for a longer period. The data from India, where a multitude of weather conditions prevail, can significantly add to the knowledge of the virus.² The COVID-19 pandemic has challenges in all aspects of life for the entire human race. Of all these aspects, mental health is a vital part of the situation.

In the disturbed times of this nature, the mental health care of people at different levels carries great importance: promotion, prevention and clinical care. This is the time to bring to the attention of the general population the importance of mental health in our day to day life.

COVID-19 has expanded from Wuhan city of Hubei Province throughout China and is exported to the whole world with onward transmission. It has affected people from almost all geographical locations across ethnicity or nationality. The WHO emphasises that the affected people should not be referred as "COVID-19 cases," "victims," "COVID-19 families" or the "diseased." They are "people who have COVID-19," "people who are being treated for COVID-19," "people who are recovering from COVID-19" and "after recovering from COVID-19 their life will go on with their jobs, families and loved ones."

Social Distancing

It is a conscious effort to reduce contact between people to slow down the spread of the virus. Social distancing is a public health strategy to limit the spread of infectious diseases including COVID-19. Even when there are no symptom and not at-risk group, social distancing should be observed. People should remain home and should avoid public places as the infection spreads from one person to another. One should maintain distance to stay at least one meter away from other people when outdoors.

Social distancing and self-quarantine are, no doubt, the arrangements that cause stress to all people, especially for the children and elderly; however, they need to be followed. There may be a feeling of ostracism, abandonment and being neglected in the elderly when they are isolated. This can make an already challenging situation far more difficult for the elderly people particularly for those who are victims of depression or other mental health problems. Older adults, especially in isolation and those with cognitive decline or dementia, may become more anxious, angry, stressed, agitated and withdrawn during the outbreak or while in quarantine. These people need emotional support through informal networks (families) and health professionals.

Maintaining mental health by self-care has to be developed that is practicable and communicated through widespread dissemination. Simple facts about the situation should be shared about what is going on and a clear information about how to reduce risk of infection should be provided to people with or without cognitive impairment. Information may be repeated whenever necessary in a clear, concise, respectful and patient manner. In addition to sharing of information and skills, there is need for support to those who need help. The mobile phone, internet can be used to 'decrease the feeling of isolation' of people. Professionals should offer free online support to people in the vicinity. Maintaining social networks in situations of isolations is essential and one should try as much as possible to keep personal daily routines.

Staying connected with the loved ones including through digital methods is one way to maintain contact. One should turn to the colleagues, or other trusted persons for social support. Qualitative communication and accurate information updates need to be provided to all staff members and they should be rotated from high-stress to lower-stress functions. Flexible schedules should be adopted for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member impacted by a stressful event.

As a team leader, the treating physician should orient the nurses, ambulance drivers, volunteers, case identifiers, teachers and community leaders and workers in quarantine sites, on how to provide basic emotional and practical support to affected people.

Children may seek more attachment and be more demanding on parents in such a situation. The COVID-19 should be discussed with children in honest and age-appropriate information. They should be helped to express their disturbing feelings such as fear and sadness. Every child has its own way to express emotions. Sometimes engaging in a creative activity such as playing, and drawing can facilitate this process. Children feel relieved if they can express and communicate their disturbing feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

In case of breastfeeding women, UNFPA has recommended that when they become infected, should not be separated from their new born while there is no evidence that illnesses can be transmitted through breast milk. UNFPA urged mothers to wear masks when handling or come close to the baby, wash their hands before feeding, and disinfect contaminated surfaces.³

Anxiety and Stress

Infectious pandemics and the spread of organisms across countries have been facilitated by global changes in earth's climate and an increase in international travel. COVID-19 is now affecting more than 160 countries, raising

concerns of widespread panic and increasing anxiety in individuals subjected to the (real or perceived) threat of the virus. Importantly, these concerns arise with all infections, including the flu and other agents, and the same universal precautions are needed and indicated for safety and the prevention of further transmission. The sudden and continuous stream of sensational news reports about a disease outbreak (Pandemic now) can cause anyone to feel worried and anxious. Media has highlighted COVID-19 as a unique threat, rather than one of many, which has added to panic, stress, and the potential for hysteria.

Pandemics are not just a medical phenomenon; they affect individuals and society on many levels, causing disruptions. Stigma and xenophobia are two aspects of the societal impact of pandemic infectious outbreaks. Panic and stress have also been linked to such outbreaks. As concerns over the perceived threat grow, people may start to collect (and hoard) masks and other medical supplies. This is often followed by anxiety-related behaviours, sleep disturbances, and overall lower perceived state of health. Individuals with mental illness may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of widespread panic and threat.⁴

Stigma

People who have confirmed COVID-19 and are in isolation, and people who may have been exposed to the infection and are self-monitoring, are doing the right thing and helping to protect the people around and their communities. They should never be harassed and bullied, including through social media or otherwise. We should offer compassion, support via phone and texts, and assistance as appropriate, but never hostility or judgment.

It will be much more difficult to check the spread of COVID-19 if people are scared of the treatment they would meet if they come forward for testing and healthcare assistance. People who are in isolation and quarantine are providing a public health service to benefit all. Those who have been hiding their infection are doing tremendous harm to the society and are posing a serious threat to the process of controlling the infection.

Other worries and concerns should be shared with a trusted person, family, therapist or doctor instead of hiding. Sharing concerns might not make the fear entirely leave, but will give a safe platform to voice your feelings and get support and validation.

Exposure to social media should be limited which may, at times give inaccurate information to cause fear and anxiety. While in isolation, time can be utilized in yoga, meditation, and art and music therapy as anxiety outlets. Nothing can escalate someone's anxiety more than false information and uncertainty, fuelled by people who don't have the correct facts.

Watching, reading or listening to sensational news is likely to cause anxiety or distress; information should be sought for protection; information should be sought from WHO website and government and local health authorities' platforms, in order to distinguish facts from rumours.⁵

Positive stories of local people who have experienced the COVID-19 and have recovered or who have supported a loved one through recovery should be amplified. The role of caretakers and healthcare workers who play an important role to save lives and keep people safe, should be recognised. They also go through stress and need strength through healthy coping strategies such as adequate rest, healthy and sufficient food and sleep.

Attention to one's own needs and feelings while dealing with cases of COVID-19 is very important. Regular exercise and indulgence in healthy and pleasurable activities with regular sleep and healthy food will help fighting the problem in an effective way.

The spirit of human solidarity must become even more infectious than the Corona virus infection. Although we may have to be physical apart from each other for a while, we can come together in the way we never have before.

Conflicts of Interest: None

References

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3. Read more at: <https://www.unfpa.org/news/covid-19-continues-spread-pregnant-and-breastfeeding-women-advised-take-precautions>.
4. Find the latest information from WHO <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/>.
5. Advice and guidance from WHO on COVID-19 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> <https://www.epi-win.com/>.