

Mental health problems during COVID-19 pandemic

Asif Hasan¹, Nongzaimayum Tawfeeq Alee², Ruqaiya Javed³, Sharaf Zehra⁴, Loaba Shafaq⁵,
Akbar Husain⁶

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

²Research Assistant, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

³Post Doctoral Fellow, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

^{4,5}Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

⁶Professor, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is now a significant public health emergency that has and is still leaving its impacts across many countries and continents. The rate at which this viral infection spreads, as well as, the lack of vaccine and anti-viral drugs to treat this disease has not only resulted in the deaths of many, but has also brought about varying degree of psychological trauma - which is yet linked to lockdown/social distancing measures being taken to curtail its spread. It has been reported that people who have been subjected to isolation and quarantine has shown signs of confusion, anxiety, anger, and post-traumatic stress - conditions that are known to accompany depression. Everyone is affected in one way or the other, with many individuals fearing and nursing the thoughts of possible transmission, while those with underlying mental health illnesses have their conditions not well-managed due to quarantine. Front-line medical health-care personnel are also not left out as they suffer episodes of post-traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety and fear, coupled with the ever-present pressure that comes with managing COVID-19 patients and their families. It is, therefore, expedient that better attention be given towards the mental health of people during this COVID-19 pandemic. The use of online mental health services to educate the populace and the adoption of digital technology for the delivery of mental health care have been suggested.

Research objective: This study aims to examine the perceived mental health problems that are connected to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic

Purpose: To discuss about how the situations surrounding COVID-19 pandemic can result (in) or exacerbate mental health problems in different individuals - from the general public to children, pregnant women, the elderly, and psychiatric patients.

Approach: This study draws knowledge from various literature and studies that have been previously conducted to evaluate the likely mental health problems that may arise as a result of COVID-19 and the measures taken to curtail its spread.

Statement of Problem

The novel coronavirus disease has created a huge stir and apprehension across the world since it was first discovered in Wuhan, China. Coupled with this, it has resulted in the deaths of many individuals with millions of persons still laying on hospital beds seeking medical attention due to this viral disease. However, while the major attention has been on finding vaccines or drugs for its cure, a lot of other underlying issues are left grossly unaddressed. Among these, are the mental health conditions that could arise from COVID-19 complications and the compulsory isolation measures that have been put by various governments to limit its spread.

INTRODUCTION

Since its appearance as an outbreak in Wuhan, China (Holshue et al., 2020), novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has grown to become a public health concern of global significance, affecting virtually every nation across the globe (WHO, 2020a). That this disease presently not having a known anti-viral cure or vaccine, coupled with the rate at which it spreads have made difficult to manage or curtail to a large extent. The rate at which COVID-19 is transmitting is known to be higher than that of SARS infection (Liu et al., 2019), and its fatality rate is even 2.3% higher than that of seasonal influenza (NCPERET, 2020).

The prevailing circumstances have had an impact on everyone; right from those who have suffered the disease manifestations to front-line responders, governments, organizations, and people who have had to forfeit their usual daily routine as they observe the lockdown and social distancing measures set in to suppress the spread of this infectious disease.

The number of confirmed COVID19 cases as of the 28th of May, 2020 was 5.7 million with 357,000 deaths reported (WHO, 2020b). While the number of COVID19 cases keeps growing in every country, the records on the probable incidences of mental health problems remain inconclusive or undecided. The disruption of normal day-to-day businesses and activities have led to varying degree of stressful phenomenon (Zhang et al., 2020). It has been reported that people that have been subjected to isolation and quarantine have shown signs of confusion, anxiety, anger, and post-traumatic stress - conditions that are known to accompany depression (Brooks et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2020). This feeling of anxiety, as well as, others like suicidal inclinations and PTSD are not new as other pandemic occurrences have also created similar impacts (Wu et al., 2009; Yip et al., 2010; Wheaton et al., 2012; Everts, 2013). It cannot, however, be ruled out that the asymptomatic transmission and uncertainty surrounding the incubation of this novel corona virus have further worsened the state of anxiety and fear among world population (Dong & Bouey, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceived COVID-19-related mental health problems among the general populace.

In an attempt to assess the rate of perceived mental health care, anxiety and other parameters resulting from COVID-19 among Indians, Roy et al. (2020) conducted an online survey that involved 662 participants. It was established that the participants were preoccupied with thoughts of COVID-19 as reflected by the persistent use of sanitizers and adherence to other preventative measures. The result showed heightened levels of anxiety among those that took part in this research with cases of paranoia and sleeping disorders being reported, even as distress arising from the increased use of social media persisted. The finding from this survey indicated that more than three-quarter of the participants needs mental health care. The study also highlighted the stigmatization and fear that may come with the re-integration of an individual who has recovered from the coronavirus disease into the society.

Gao et al. (2020) evaluated that correlation between social media exposure and mental health problems in the era of the COVID19 pandemic. The study, which was conducted online, had participants from the age of 18 years and above who lived in the Wuhan Province. The result showed that symptoms of anxiety, depression and a combination of both were prevalent as over 80% of the sample size admitted to using social media on

a frequent basis. The findings in this study is supported by the WHO's submission that rumour and misinformation spread through social networks have the propensity to stimulate bouts of anxiety, fear and stigma thus bring about mental health concerns (WHO, 2020c).

The perceived COVID19-related mental health problems are not only about adults as children are not left out. Several children with pre-existing mental health conditions are reported to suffer worsening fate and those having special education needs have shown traces of psychological distress (Lee, 2020a). In a related development, Sprang and Silman (2013) while studying the impact of quarantine, discovered that children that were placed under quarantine had post-traumatic stress test scores that were four times higher than those who did not undergo quarantine. Generally, due to the home confinement and the things their minds are fed with during this period, children may become more susceptible to worry, anxiety, sleeping disorder, fear, loss of appetite and depression (Jacob et al., 2020).

Lee (2020b) designed a coronavirus anxiety scale (CAS) with five items to evaluate loss of appetite, sleep disturbance, abdominal distress, dizziness and tonic immobility caused by COVID19. Upon testing, it was seen that Asians had a relatively higher CAS score than other races. The instrument score was highly positively associated with extreme hopelessness, negative coping strategies, passive suicidal thought process and functional impairment. Diagnosis of coronavirus disease also return higher CAS scores. Rossi et al. (2020) carried out a study to examine the psychological effects of quarantine on the Italian populace 3 - 4 weeks after the measure was engaged in the country. Besides quarantine, other underlying factors such as disrupted working routine, emotional and social problems, as well as the loss of loved one(s) due to COVID-19-related complications were critical to the mental state of health of the participants. Mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety, insomnia, depression and adjustment disorder symptoms were prevalent among the population. Though the authors reported that women were more prone to these conditions, the fact that over 70% of the respondents were women made this debatable. Nevertheless, a similar research piloted by Qiu et al. (2020) have revealed that women and young adults are more susceptible to mental health problems amounting from COVID-19-induced quarantine.

Perceived COVID-19-related mental health problems among the vulnerable

In the context of this review, the vulnerable entails individuals with pre-existing life-threatening illnesses and/or mental health conditions, pregnant women and the aged. The aged ones, due to weakened immune system, have been the most susceptible to COVID-19 infection (Li et al., 2020). The isolation of the elderly is seen as a major public health concern on its own as the incidence or severity of neurocognitive disorders, mental health illnesses and other neurodegenerative disorders may likely increase among people in this age-group (Armitage & Nellums, 2020).

The probability and/or severity of mental health problems appear to increase with increasing duration of isolation (Hawryluck et al., 2004; Marjanovic et al., 2007). In view of this, individuals with mental health illnesses prior to the COVID-19 outbreak may experience bouts of anger and anxiety post-COVID-19 (Jeong et al., 2016). That said, mental health illnesses have been linked to increased risk of infections with patients being more prone to developing new episodes of their illness as a result of the additional stress from COVID-19 (Yao et al., 2020). Fakari and Simbar (2020) hinted on how the perceived stress and anxiety amounting form this pandemic can have

adverse effects on the health of pregnant women. Such anxiety is primarily stimulated by the thoughts of possible transmission, quarantine constraint, and the inability to visit the hospital for regular check-up.

Health-care workers and perceived COVID-19 mental health problems

Conditions indicating psychological trauma have also been found among medical personnel at the front-line of the fight against the coronavirus disease. Besides the enormous pressure that comes with attending to patients in times of outbreak of this magnitude, quarantine was found to result in the feelings of depression (Liu et al., 2012) and a predictor of post-traumatic stress (Wu et al., 2009) in hospital workers three years post-quarantine. Health-care workers may show greater degree of PTSD symptoms than other persons as they exhibit greater feelings of stigmatization (Brooks et al., 2020). A study conducted by Liu et al. (2020) on Chinese medical health workers has shown that traumatic stress and depression were top two prevalent mental health conditions suffered by the participants; anxiety and insomnia were also implicated. Kang et al. (2020) reported that medical health workers experienced stress, anxiety, insomnia, anger, depressive symptoms and denial as they grappled with concerns over inadequacy of protective gear, work-related exhaustion, isolation and stigmatization. He, however, highlighted the significant role that various psychological interventions played in addressing perceived mental health issues among medical health-care workers (Kang et al., 2020).

REFLECTION

Though the psychological impacts of COVID-19 may not lead to severe mental health issues, the tendency of such symptoms could trigger the relapse of pre-existing mental disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, somatization disorder and depression in the long run (Math & Manjunatha, 2020). That aside, it is possible for episodes of psychological trauma associated with COVID-19 to remain long after this particular season (Wu et al., 2009). To this end, it is expedient that the aspect of every individual's mental health be given better attention. There have been several suggestions made in view of addressing the psychological effects of COVID-19. Banerjee (2020) pinpointed the relevance of psychiatric interventions by proposing a six-step measure that borders on educating patients about the mental health problems evolving from this type of event; encouraging the general populace to take up healthy habits; establishing an integrated health-care service that address mental health issues at the community level; promoting self-care measures for health-care providers; and empowering individuals to adopt positive coping strategies (Banerjee, 2020). Similar comprehensive interventions were also laid out by Ho et al. (2020). Liu et al. (2020) canvassed for the use of online mental health services to educate the populace while Kemp et al. (2020) suggested the adoption of digital technology for the delivery of mental health care - this could be of great use in managing the conditions of mental health patients during a crisis like COVID-19.

Looking ahead, post-COVID19, many governments across the world are more likely to focus their attention on the need to stabilize the economy of the states and nations they govern. While this may be seen as the right step to take, it is necessary that focus be drawn to mental health issues that are connected to the COVID19 pandemic. This is especially important considering that mental health problems not only create a burden on well-being of an individual, but could also be a stressor on the economy of the entire nation as productivity can be highly affected. Therefore, mental health-care

practitioners, as well as, national governments should work with the World Health Organization to ensure that initiatives are set in place in order to limit the impacts of the mental health problems that may persist after this pandemic.

Conclusion

Though most of the submissions on COVID-19-related mental health problems have been vastly empirical - this is understandable going by prevailing control measures - but the observations made are not insubstantial. Moreover, since other pandemic events prior to this one have brought about similar psychological impacts among different people, they should be given more consideration. Having said this, it is important that commitment be sustained towards providing mental health interventions to cushion the impacts of COVID-19-induced disruptions. Again, the observations from these studies can be aptly considered and employed when conducting future research on this subject matter.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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