



PANDEMIC AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

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Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic since its outbreak in December 2019 in China has been escalating and posing a serious threat to mankind. As the pandemic sweeps rapidly across the globe, it is certainly having vast psychological impacts on peoples. Literature around previous epidemics and Covid-19 shows great hazard for psychological and psychiatric morbidity. With this background, the paper analysed the psychological impact of pandemics including Covid-19 on human being both at the individual and community level. The paper identified the vulnerable section of the population and described the behavioural responses and emotional reactions to a pandemic such as fear, anxiety, PTSD, stress, and depression. State-sponsored morale-boosting actions like lighting candles, clapping, and ringing bells to encourage covid warriors were appreciated internationally. The author highlights the preventive measures and policy intervention to ensure positive mental health.

Key words: Pandemic, Covid-19, Mental Health, Policy Intervention

Introduction

Disastrous pandemics have been taking place at regular intervals throughout human history. The last one Spanish flu pandemic occurred a century ago in 1918. As the treatment of contagious diseases is neither expensive nor stressful and is not a primary cause of death in the world, the research interest in different branches of study from medical science to social science is not so visible till the outbreak of Carona Virus disease. Although the outbreak of other infectious diseases like the Zika virus, MERS, SARS, and Ebola could have drawn global attention, they had not been proved catastrophic like COVID-19. Developed countries before this pandemic have managed to significantly reduce the burden of contagious diseases and decrease possibilities of an epidemic through a better standard of living, general safety measures, and immunisation.

The Covid-19 pandemic since its outbreak in December 2019 in China has been escalating and posing a serious threat to mankind. It reminds

us of the 2003 SARS outbreak, in which a total of 8422 people worldwide were affected by 916 deaths (WHO; 2003). Covid-19 is a highly contagious disease. To date, it has affected 213 countries of the world. Millions of lives have been drastically altered due to uncontrollable Covid-19. To curb the spread of the virus, the entire world was in a state of lockdown. These states of a public health crisis in addition to physical health issues have serious mental health consequences for all cross-section of the population that is men, women, children, and old. People throughout the world were affected psychologically by this pandemic outbreak because it hampered their daily lives. Around millions of people are afraid of being affected and it will also affect their mental health because of fear and anxiety. The first case of Covid-19 in India was detected in January 2020. Since then, it was spreading slowly across the country and common people were unaware of its severity.

As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps rapidly across the globe, it is certainly having vast psychological impacts on peoples. Some of these impacts can be linked to elevated levels of stress or anxiety (WHO, 2020). Measures such as quarantine and physical distancing, while vital to stopping transmission of COVID-19, may contribute to a rise in depression, self-harm, harmful alcohol, and drug use with further negative psychological consequences. Infectious disease outbreaks have also been associated with stigma and xenophobia (Moukaddam and Shah, 2020). The Socioeconomic crisis resulting from job losses owing to organizational closure and trade barriers can cause mental health issues among the general population.

All the agencies of the government are currently focusing on the implementation of physical distancing measures, treatment and caring for Covid-19 infected patients in hospitals and providing ventilators to support the ill in intensive care units, and providing more testing kits to hospitals for rapid identification of patients. Issues such as the mental health of the general population, other vulnerable sections such as frontline health workers, police, and other essential service providers, and persons with COVID-19 are being overlooked. In many ways, the menace of mental health of people during pandemic seems to be unseen and unclear which needs urgent attention nonetheless.

Therefore the purpose of this paper is to i) analyse the psychological impact of pandemics including Covid-19 on the human being both at the individual and community level; ii) describe the behavioural responses and emotional reactions to pandemic such as fear, anger,

anxiety, stress, and depression; iii) highlight the measures to ensure positive mental health.

1. The psychological impact of pandemics on human being both at the individual and community level

It is well known that contagious diseases spread at a cumulative speed and affect people having a weak immune system. Many requisite measures have been enforced by the governments of different countries to control the contamination of the COVID-19 among people. In India, a strict lockdown has been enforced from 24th March to ensure physical distance among people. The measures include the closure of the educational institutions, shutting down public places such as park, gymnasium, community centers, shopping malls, hotels, worship places, tourist places, etc. International, as well as inter-state transport facility both public and private, has been suspended to check the movement of people. The celebration of ceremonies has not been allowed or in case of an extraordinary situation like marriage or funeral, the number of attendees has been restricted to 50 and 20 respectively. Confinement at home for a long time can create mental harassment for all segments of the population. It has been reported that social problems like child abuse, intimate partner violence, and suicide are associated with physical isolation (Barbisch, Koenig, and Shih, 2015; Urback, 2020).

Owing to fear of contamination, the family members and friends are not allowed to visit the COVID-19 patients in the hospitals and quarantine centers. These strategies of restriction of human movement by the government along with the broadcast of the COVID-19 update from time to time by electronic and social media raise the levels of perplexity, stress, and tensions among people. The financial problems due to job loss, death of close persons, and postponement of important assignments, and fear of contamination are other stress-provoking conditions.

An unexpected change in the environment makes people nervous and apprehensive. In the case of contagious disease outbreak Covid-19, the uncertainty of the disease is a major reason for psychological stress among people. People engage in making speculations as the causes and symptoms of the disease are multiple. Since the WHO declared it as a pandemic on 11th March 2020, there was a rapid rise of fear and anxiety among the general population (Nigam and Kumar, 2020). Previous records on mass occurrences, like natural disasters, shows that large

scale upsetting events are strongly associated with ill-effects on mental health - post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) being the most frequently encountered followed by depression, anxiety, and other behavioral and psychological disorders (Makwana, 2019). It is also known that when the SARS outbreak occurred, the anxiety level of people rose notably. For example, in Hong Kong, about 70% of people expressed anxiety about getting infected with SARS and they believed they were more likely to contract SARS than the common cold (Cheng and Cheung, 2005). Therefore, the current pandemic Covid-19 poses a great hazard for psychological and psychiatric morbidity.

The vulnerable

i) The Covid-19 Warriors

In India, the health workers, police, and other essential service providers who are engaged in the battle against the Covid-19 pandemic are acknowledged as Covid-19 warriors. Frontline health workers such as doctors, nurses, laboratory staff, and Asha workers are faced with the daunting task of caring for large numbers of very sick persons amid uncertainty and upheaval. The country was not prepared to countenance a pandemic like COVID-19. Therefore the scarcity of personal protective equipment (PPE), laboratory testing, and other resources needed to protect healthcare workers from infection became critical issues for mental health. The fear of contamination while treating COVID patients may influence the health workers' attitude of service. In India, more than 87000 health workers have been infected with COVID of which 573 have lost their life (Dey, 2020). Lack of rest and mandatory quarantine after duty are additional stressors for the health workers. A study in Maryland, USA reported that due to fear of contamination during a pandemic, almost fifty percent of participants out of 308 public health workers were not supposed to turn up for duty (Balicer, Omer, Barnett, and Everly, 2006).

A variety of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, fear, post-traumatic stress disorder, and frustration among both the general population and health workers was found to be associated with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Ebola Syndrome (Wei, *et al.*, 2004; Barbisch, Koenig, and Shih, 2015). Doctors who are treating COVID patients during a pandemic are highly susceptible to psychiatric morbidity. In a cross-sectional, observational study carried out on 152 doctors in West Bengal, 34.9% were depressed and 39.5% and 32.9% were having anxiety and stress, respectively. Significant predictive

factors of psychological issues are age and multiple comorbidities (Chatterjee, *et al.*, 2020).

Health workers such as doctors, nurses, paramedics, pathologists, and ambulance drivers constitute the first line of defense in the face of disease outbreaks. They are characteristically resilient and committed to and perform life-saving duties sacrificing their comfort. According to Gold (2020), regardless of their anxiety, fear of contamination, and odds of imminent future the health care personnel exhibits calmness and patience. Sometimes they are required to isolate themselves from family members to curb the risk of spreading infection. These tensions are further magnified by fear of being quarantined or having to deal with inadequacies on the system such as a lack of PPE and ventilators. Some health workers have described feeling coerced and betrayed by their employers and the government in outbreak situations (Gold, 2020). There are also the added anxieties involved with the assumption of new or unfamiliar clinical roles in outbreak situations. Due to the distressing nature of the existing COVID-19 pandemic, the healthcare personnel dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic might probably experience vicarious trauma (Collins and Long, 2003). A study in China carried out on more than 1200 health care workers taking care of COVID-19 patients reported higher levels of severe mental health symptoms in the frontline workers in comparison to those in secondary roles (Lai J *et al.* 2020). Health workers expressed their unhappiness, apprehension, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness and criticized the restrictions imposed on their movement which refrain them to have social and physical contact (Diamond and Woskie, 2020).

ii) Students

Since schools, colleges and universities are closed, COVID-19 has grave psychological consequences for all categories of students. To prevent the spread of infection among students, different states closed the educational institutions in March. Governments of different states declared the closure of all types of educational institutions in March. At that time, the HSC examination of many states, as well as central boards, was completed and valuation had not been started. Intermediate (Class-12) examination of all boards had not been completed and the valuation process had not been initiated. The semester examinations of all the semesters in college and universities had not begun, although the schedule had been declared. Generally, the semester examinations of all streams in colleges and universities commence in the first week of April. All examinations generally over by mid-May which gives

ample opportunity to students to enjoy the ensuing summer vacation of a month's duration. The examination is a stressful condition for all. As the examination stress and anxiety over with the end of the examination, young students of colleges and universities spend their vacation in varied ways. The end-semester students prepare for the competitive examination to face the entrance test for higher courses or jobs. The sudden closure of college due to the pandemic created a state of confusion and uncertainty for the students. The boarders staying in the college hostel were asked to evacuate the hostel. This order of government leading to the closure of institutions could have created anxiety and dissatisfaction among college students. For example, as stated by Van Bortel (2016), college students experience compounding negative emotions when the institution is closed. Moreover, many college and university students in our country are engaged in private tuitions and part-time jobs to finance their education as well as to support their families. Closure of institutions put them into financial constraints as they lost their jobs. In a nutshell, we can say that the closure of institutions as a preventive measure to control Covid-19 creates mental health challenges for college and university students.

Cao *et al.*, (2020) have investigated the psychological impact of Covid-19 on college students' education and wellbeing. Around 25% of the participants reported experiencing anxiety symptoms which were positively related to increased concerns about uncertainty in academics, the financial impact of the pandemic, and overall impact on daily life. Another survey by Young Minds (2020) reported that 83% of the young respondents agreed that due to closure of institutions, loss of routine life and lack of social contact has worsened the mental health condition.

iii) Women, Elderly People, Mentally Sick and Children

Since mid-March children are confined at home and their regular life has been disrupted. In some instances, children have been separated from their parents because of the contamination of Covid-19. Due to quarantine and social distancing children are likely to develop mental health problems. One chart review study from the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak revealed that children receiving mental health care and patients with neurotic and somatoform disorders may be particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of infectious disease epidemics (Page, *et al.*, 2011). Due to parental employment children may suffer from financial hardship further aggravating the psychological problems.

In India, studies report many women to suffer from anxiety and depression which may be due to more domestic work and domestic violence during the lockdown (Balaji and Patel, 2020). After speaking with 1,102 parents and primary caregivers, studies found that more than half of the children had experienced agitation and anxiety during the lockdown. Media reports indicate that they may be experiencing fears about the virus, worries over access to online classes, and stress and irritability from being unable to go out. Many have faced violence in their homes or have been victims of cyberbullying (Balaji and Patel, 2020). Mental health patients who are in the community are at risk for developing more anxiety about the pandemic, particularly if they are already treated for anxiety spectrum disorders. Worrying about the pandemics can lead to a worsening of existing mood disorders, such as depression.

2. Behavioural responses and emotional reactions to pandemic

Fear is a known, yet the common response to contagious outbreaks, and people react in many and individualized ways towards the perceived threat. Hyper-vigilance, for example, can arise because of fear and anxiety and, in severe cases, result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or depression (Perrin *et al.* 2009). In the context of Covid-19, fear of the unknown disease, the spread of the contagion, and its impact on people raise anxiety in healthy individuals as well as those with pre-existing mental health conditions (Rubin and Wessely, 2020). Individuals, families, and communities experience feelings of hopelessness, despair, grief, bereavement, and a profound loss of purpose because of pandemics (Levin, 2019). Feelings of loss of control drive fear and uncertainty as the trajectory of the pandemics is constantly evolving; so is the advice on the action to take to stop the spread of a pandemic. Perceived mixed messaging from government or health officials can also lead to public confusion, uncertainty, and fear (Han, Fisher, Duarte, *et al.* 2018).

People's responses to fear and intolerance of uncertainty lead to negative societal behaviours (Rubin and Wessely, 2020). Uncertainty increases feelings of alarm resulting in behaviours targeted at reducing uncontrollable situations that people fear. For example, we have seen people clearing shelves of supermarkets resulting in global shortages of food and essentials such as toilet paper (El-Terk, 2020). This behaviour is purported to occur for two reasons: one because the threat of

COVID-19 is perceived as a 'real' threat and expected to last for some time and second as a means to regain control (El-Terk, 2020).

Despite stringent laws to protect Corona Warriors from attacks by the public, such incidents continue to be reported from across the country. In the Belagavi taluk of Karnatak, a Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) and other officials were attacked by people, when they went to collect throat swabs of the quarantined person. The villagers attacked the officials, tore their clothes, and pelted them with stones (New Indian Express, 2020). In Odisha, an Anganwadi worker who was discharging COVID-19 duty was attacked by her husband in Tentei gram panchayat of Balasore district after she refused to leave duty. The Anganwadi worker and an ASHA worker were injured in the attack (Ommcom News, 2020).

As the health workers, as well as patients contaminated with COVID-19, are more susceptible to suffer from mental health issues; their periodical testing for anxiety, depression, and hypertension might be helpful in the long run. Mental health crisis intervention team is required to be formed by the government to meet the present and future mental health challenges. The provision of psychological counseling hotlines and online channels may help the vulnerable groups to access the service of such teams.

Measures to ensure positive mental health

As for the general population, the World Health Organization (2020) recommends that people who are affected by COVID-19 should be treated with compassion and kindness. The WHO advises that we curb our exposure to COVID-19-related news that can cause anxiety and psychological distress. The WHO suggests that information given by trusted persons should be received and the focus should be on facts rather than misinformation and rumours. In addition to protecting ourselves, we should also be supportive of others by amplifying positive and hopeful stories and positive images of local people who have experienced COVID-19.

Finally, the WHO (2020) advises the general population to honour caretakers and healthcare workers by acknowledging the role they play in saving lives and keeping our loved ones safe. In response to this suggestion, in India, the government urges as well as citizens to willingly acknowledge the care and contribution of COVID warriors. In Odisha, the state government in convergence with the Union Government declared to grant Rs 50 Lakh to all health workers and

members of all other emergency service providers who lose their precious lives in their fight against COVID-19. To boost the morale of Covid warriors, the state government also declared to treat them as martyrs and provide State funeral with State honours. Both the union and state governments of different states have taken many morale-boosting steps such as clapping, ringing bells, beating drums, and lighting candles to encourage the covid warriors.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting an enormous strain on the health care systems. It is not only a medical crisis or only affects physical health, but also has psychosocial implications at the individual and community level both for the current situation and in the long term. The establishment of mitigating strategies to preserve the mental wellbeing of all is complicated but very essential. A proactive and multipronged approach comprising longer-term strategies rather than short-term crisis responses is desirable. People can follow rules of healthy life as mentioned in our indigenous literature, regularly practice some yogic exercises and kriyas and develop a strong social network for sharing and helping each other in a crisis. Elderly, physically and mentally challenged people are the worst victims of pandemic situations and an adequate support system needs to be designed on a priority basis.

Lastly, since no vaccine or medicine has been invented to fight Covid-19, one and all do their part to curb the spread of COVID-19 by obeying public health measures of governments as well as the above-mentioned WHO recommendations. In doing so, social media and other communication technologies can be our allies. Social media, for example, can be a useful tool for information dissemination, which can be leveraged to share strategies for dealing with psychological stress in society.

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