



Psychological effects of the Coronavirus disease-2019 pandemic

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Abstract

Going by the current physical reach of the COVID-19 pandemic in the population there are bound to be long-term implications in terms of socio-economic and psychological impact. The swift rise of fear and anxiety among people due to uncertainty of the disease are coupled with essential yet socially disruptive measures like lockdowns and quarantines. These can lead to significant psychological and psychiatric disturbances such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, panic disorders, and behavioural disorders. Predisposing factors include staying away from family, loneliness, misinformation on social media, financial insecurity and stigmatization. Healthcare workers have a high risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder and burnout; therefore, it is paramount to understand and research the psychological impact and key determinants to prevent, identify, and manage such problems. Suggested actions include support lines for anxious people, tele-counselling, virtual connecting & help groups, encouraging meditation, conducting research on psychological consequences, and developing and utilising suitable interventions.

Keywords: Coronavirus; COVID-19; Mental health; Pandemic; Psychology; PTSD; Self-isolation; Social distancing; Quarantine

Introduction

The new decade brought with it the first pandemic of the social-media age - Coronavirus Disease 2019, popularly known as COVID-19. While it reminds us of the 2003 SARS outbreak, COVID-19 has proven

to be much more widespread with numbers of the affected surpassing SARS. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a total of 8422 people worldwide were affected with SARS, with 916 deaths.[1] COVID-19, on the other hand, has already had over 33,000 deaths.[2]

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The sudden outbreak of a serious respiratory illness in China followed by rapid spread to other parts of the world prompted researchers to study the disease and to isolate the virus without much delay. We now know that the disease is caused by a previously unknown virus: 2019-nCoV or SARS-CoV2. The uncertainty of the disease is a major reason for psychological stress among people. With the WHO declaring it a pandemic on 11th March 2020, there was a swift rise of fear and anxiety among the general population.[3]

Previous data on mass occurrences, like natural disasters, shows that large scale disruptive 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 & psychological disorders.[4] Therefore, the current pandemic poses a great risk for psychological and psychiatric morbidity. The disease caused by a hitherto unrecognized infection with no vaccines or approved drug regimens in place further adds to the distress.

While researchers toiled to develop vaccines and drugs, the most successful intervention to slow the spread of disease was found to be quarantining people in their homes. Reducing physical interaction, popularly known as ‘social distancing’, has been advertised by many countries. However, after people failed to practice adequate social distancing during initial stages, severely affected countries like China and Italy had to switch to strict lockdown and quarantine of its citizens. As more countries opt for lockdown, the long-term psychological impact of the circumstances remains debatable. There is very limited data available on the mental health aspect of previous medical outbreaks. Some literature shows that life threatening medical illnesses can lead to symptoms

associated with PTSD following recovery.[5,6] The question thus arises: are we heading towards a mental health catastrophe?

The vulnerable

WHO recently changed the term ‘social distancing’ to ‘physical distancing’ to make people feel less lonely and isolated. An earlier meta-analysis had concluded that loneliness is a risk factor for all-cause mortality.[7] People living away from their families for education or work, or otherwise separated from their loved ones are at a higher risk for developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, etc. Elderly people living alone are also greatly predisposed.

While social media is aiding people in being more connected in times of physical isolation, it is also a major source of rumors and false information adding to the stress. The hourly updates on death tolls and rising case numbers can be consuming, especially for people predisposed to mental health issues or already on medications for psychiatric disorders. Furthermore, lockdown has already caused many manufacturing industries to shut down and businesses to incur severe losses.[8] The enormous hit on the economy has caused financial insecurity and stress in the population which will indirectly have consequences on health. Most shaken up are the daily wage workers who do not have access to their sustenance income.[8]

Suspected cases and confirmed patients perhaps suffer the most in feeling stigmatized by the community for carrying an infection that may inadvertently affect other people. Being unable to meet their close ones in isolation can add to their suffering. The uncertainty about the severity of infection and unsureness of the treatment effectiveness may be the determinants of utmost importance.

The impact on Physicians

Another major concern is physician burnout and added stress on healthcare workers who have to constantly be on their toes with not only increasing patient load, but also new guidelines and policies.[9] It is expected that as the pandemic progresses, more healthcare professionals will be found at the brink of psychological breakdown.

Expected consequences

The sudden panic created recently with people hoarding supplies is an indication to perhaps expect a rise in cases of panic disorders. With more people staying indoors, there is a likelihood for the development of anxiety related to claustrophobia. Inaccessibility to drugs will escalate withdrawal syndromes in addicts and people who regularly abuse substances.

In addition, there may also be a steep rise of somatoform disorders as the outbreak peaks and then settles down. Therefore, mental health crisis is inevitable during and after the pandemic. The mental health effects of COVID-19 will further affect physical health after the outbreak. Therefore, it is important to understand and research the psychological impact of the pandemic to better prepare physicians, irrespective of their field of specialization, to actively look for such signs in their patients. This will aid in early identification and management of a large-scale influx of patients with behavioral and psychological problems.

A stumbling block in providing healthcare to a vast magnitude of population is the underequipped and moderately provisioned healthcare set-up along with limited number of psychiatric and psychological health providers in the country.[10] Hence, the pandemic should serve as a wakeup call to invest adequately and strengthen our healthcare

system so that the country is better equipped to fight all medical battles.

Suggestions for psychological support

As governments update daily guidelines, the healthcare set-ups formulate new policies, and the general population practices either social distancing or strict quarantine, everyone seems to be proactively doing their bit to stop the physical spread of the disease. However, with response and recovery teams in place, do we also have a plan of action for rehabilitation?

Some actions that can be adopted are: First, setting up of support lines for coronavirus related doubts, clarification of misinformation, and online and tele-counselling for people facing anxiety and stress during the pandemic can be a means to alleviate panic and fear. Second, connecting virtual and online neighborhood groups could reduce the risk of loneliness. After the outbreak, these can be converted into voluntary community help-groups to help people reknit their social fabric. Third, people currently in quarantine or under lockdown could be encouraged to take up an indoor exercise routine blending yoga, meditation, music and stretching exercises. Fourth, studies and researches need to be conducted to assess and evaluate the psychosocial repercussions on healthcare workers, on patients, and on the general population. Based on the outcomes, appropriate interventions can be put into place and efforts made to mitigate issues. Determining risks and predisposing factors prospectively can play a role in selecting people needing more care.

We need to work on these aspects in a proactive way to reduce the long-term psychological morbidity induced by the pandemic. This can be done at the community level by owning up to social accountability and civic responsibility.

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