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MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS

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“The world breaks everyone and afterwards many are strong at the broken places”

-Ernest Hemingway (1929)

ABSTRACT

Nowadays great emphasis has been put on the importance of mental health. Care of our mental health is equally essential like our physical health. As per the present pandemic scenario due to COVID-19 it has devastating effect not only our physical health but on mental health too. This paper highlights the psychological impact of COVID-19 on the some of the vulnerable group of population of our society and further focus on the some of the significant interventions that can be used to curb the issues related to psychological of the impact of the diseases.

Keywords: Mental Health, Children, Elderly people, Health Care Workers

INTRODUCTION

Mental Health of an individual is determined by not only the absence of mental illness, but also, how one feels about self and adjusts to life events. World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (WHO, 2004).

At present the world is dealing with a very dangerous enemy in the shape of Coronavirus (COVID-19). In January 2020 new coronavirus disease outbreak was declared by WHO in Hubei Province, China. It was also considered as Public Health Emergency of International Concern. WHO also stated that it is not only

limited to China however there are higher chances of COVID-19 to spread to other countries around the globe. The adverse physiological impact of COVID-19 on human body is well documented. However, in this scenario, it becomes equally important to look at the ill-effects of this pandemic on the mental health of an individual.

Dr. Deepak Raheja, a Delhi-based mental health professional opined that "Not just people with pre-existing mental health issues, even general public is gripped by the fear of stigma that comes with coronavirus". Another, Clinical psychologist Maherra Desai stated that there needs to be a very fine balance between the abundance of information that we are getting and making the optimum use of it (India Today, 2020).

PHYSIOLOGY OF COVID-19

COVID-19 is the largest outbreak of uncommon pneumonia since the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) which out broke in 2003. COVID-19 is so devastating that within a few weeks of the initial outbreak the total number of cases and deaths surpassed those of SARS (Hawryluck, 2004). This outbreak was first exposed in December 2019 when various cases of pneumonia with unidentified causes were found to be associated with exposure to a seafood market in the city of Wuhan of Hubei Province (Nishiura et al., 2020). Since then there have been continue escalation of cases inside and outside Wuhan, spreading to all the 34 regions of China by 30th January 2020. By March, 2020 COVID-19 breached the borders China and reached almost all countries around the world (Mahase, 2020).

Although the authentic route of transmission is still controversial but COVID-19 alike SARS, is a beta-coronavirus that can be spread to human through intermediary hosts such as bats. Human-to-human spread is evident via virus-laden respiratory droplets. Many cases of individuals with COVID-19 have been found who did not have an exposure to animal market (Huang et al., 2020). Chief indicators of infection include fever, chills, cough, coryza, sore throat, breathing difficulty, myalgia, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea (Chen et al., 2020). The ambiguity and low predictability of COVID-19 not only threaten people's physical strength, but also affect their mental health, especially in terms of emotions and cognition, as many theories specify.

PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES RELATED TO COVID-19

Considering the recent research done on COVID-19, various psychological theories have been identified to justify the psychological impacts of this pandemic. One of the main theories that focus on the psychological aspect of such a disease is Behavioral Immune System (BIS). According to BIS theory, it was found that people are more likely to cultivate negative emotions like aversion, anxiety, etc. and negative cognitive assessment for their self-protection. In lieu of facing potential disease hazard, people incline to

develop avoidant behaviors like avoid contact with people who have pneumonia-like signs and symptoms and obey social norms stringently (Schaller, Murray & Bangerter, 2015).

According to Stress theory and perceived risk theory, public health emergencies elicit more negative emotions and affect cognitive assessment as well. Stress in itself is a psychological phenomenon, whereas, long term stress can deteriorate the psychological health of a person. It has direct influence on the physiology and mental health of individuals. (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles & Glaser, 2002).

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VULNERABLE POPULATION GROUPS

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic sweeps across the globe, it is initiating widespread anxiety, fear and stress, all of which are natural and normal responses to the changing and unclear situation that everyone finds themselves in. However, it has more severe effect on some specific population groups such as Children, Elderly People, People with Pre-existing Psychological Conditions and Health Care Workers.

❖ Children

In this unprecedented time, Children are facing an enormous disturbance to their lives, which is probable to result in uneasiness, anxiety, and fear. Some of the fears are similar to those experienced by adults, such as fear of dying, losing a near one to this disease, or a fear of going through intense medical treatment. Apart from this, students are under huge psychological pressure, as the schools and colleges have to be closed as part of the necessary measures. The uncertainty and potential negative impact on academic advancement could have an adverse influence on the mental health of students. As the educational institutes are shut, children may no longer have that sense of structure and stimulation that is provided by an organized setting, and now they have fewer opportunities to be with their friends or classmates and get social support which is essential for mental well-being.

As suddenly children have more free time in their hands it may lead to unproductive activities such as spending too much time on social media, binge-watching videos on internet etc. Being at home can place some children at greater risk and exposure to domestic ferocity if their home is not a safe place. This is something that is very concerning. Another aspect is that children may want to be closer or nearer to their parents, make more demands on them, and, in turn, some parents or caregivers may be under undue burden.

❖ Elderly People

According to WHO (2020) evidence proposes that two groups of people are at a greater risk of getting severe COVID-19 disease. These are elderly people and those with underlying medical conditions. WHO stresses that all must protect themselves from COVID-19 in order to guard others. For older people and also those with underlying health problems e.g., cardiovascular disease, hypertension, chronic respiratory disease, cancer and diabetes, having been identified as more susceptible to COVID-19, can be extremely frightening and very fear-inducing. The psychological impressions for these populations can include anxiety and feeling stressed or angry. Its impacts can be particularly challenging for those who may be undergoing cognitive

decline or dementia. Some people in old age may already be socially quarantined and experiencing loneliness which can degenerate their mental health.

❖ **People with Pre-existing Psychological Conditions**

Like other pandemics and emerging disease outbursts, COVID-19 is also creating enormous psychological disturbances for those with pre-existing mental health conditions. A pandemic further intensify their anxious and worried thoughts and compulsive behaviors. As a result such people start staying at home with their families and reduce their recreational activities. It is further indicated that such people become over-cautious about their health and seek extra social support from their families. Schaller, Park and Kenrick (2007) stated that according to BIS theory such people act in more restrained and conservative way when they feel threatened by a virus.

Mortensen, Becker, Ackerman, Neuberger and Kenrick (2010) found that during an ongoing pandemic outbreak people tend to show more of the undesirable emotions like anxiety, stress, worry, depression and indignation and far less optimistic emotions. These results were consistent with another research conducted by Tam, Pang, Lam and Chiu (2004). They found public health emergencies (e.g., SARS) elicited a series of emotional reactions that contained higher level of anxiety, worry and depression.

❖ **Health Care Workers**

Health care workers are at the front line of the COVID-19 outbreak response and as such are exposed to dangers that put them at risk of virus. Hazards comprise pathogen exposure, long working hours, psychological distress, exhaustion, occupational burnout, stigma, and physical and emotional violence. Many nurses will be working for extended stressful or demanding shifts during which they are exposed to a great deal of human pain and suffering. Their mental wellbeing is exceptionally important if they are to be able to continue to provide the highest quality care possible. Some workers may unfortunately experience avoidance by their family or community due to stigma, distress or fear. One more stress factor that they have to face is the fear of losing life and well-being of their family in such unfortunate event.

A study conducted by Lai et al. (2020) on health care workers in China (Wuhan) to understand the psychological impact of COVID-19 on them. The cross-sectional, geographically stratified survey was conducted on 1257 healthcare workers (39% physicians; 61% nurses; 72% of nurses had junior titles). Out of total number, 42% were directly caring for patients with COVID-19. The results revealed higher rates of depression (50%), anxiety (45%), insomnia (34%), and distress (72%). Symptoms were manifolds higher in nurses, women and people who directly caring for COVID-19 patients.

➤ **Children**

Some of the strategies that can be put in place in order to address psychological issues in children can include giving young people the love, care and attention that they need to resolve their fears, and being honest with children, explaining what is happening in a way that they can comprehend, even if they are young. Children are very perceptive and will imitate their response based on the conduct of their elders. Parents also need to be supported in dealing their own stressors so that they can be models for their children. Helping children to find ways to express themselves through artistic activities, and providing structure in the day – if that is possible – through establishing routines can be beneficial. The study conducted by Zhang, Ho and Ho (2014) advised that education authorities during a pandemic needs to develop online portals and web-based applications to deliver lectures or other teaching activities. It was reviewed that young people are more amenable towards smartphone applications.

➤ **Elderly People**

Elderly people, in order to shield their mental health at this time can take some steps themselves or with the support of caregivers. These include many of the strategies that are recommended for the entire population, such as undertaking physical activity, keeping to routines or creating new ones, and engaging in activities that give a sense of achievement. Maintaining social connections is also vital. Some older people may be familiar with digital devices and others may need supervision in how to use them. Once again, the mental health and psychosocial support services and other services that are appropriate to this population must remain accessible at this time.

➤ **People with Pre-Existing Psychological Conditions**

Speaking of the problems faced by people with pre-existing psychological conditions, it is difficult for such people to visit their psychiatrists for periodical sessions. To combat this problem, health authorities could consider providing online or smartphone-based psycho-education and psychological mediations e.g., cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) to lessen the risk of virus transmission by face-to-face therapy (Do et al., 2018). Family members also need to be extra compassionate while dealing with such individuals. Curtailing the spread of fake news about the negative effects of such pandemic can also help in controlling anxiety levels of such patients.

➤ **Health Care Workers**

Considering the problems faced by health care workers in such testing times when they are working 24/7 around the globe to take care of COVID-19 patients, it becomes imperative to give them deserving respect and appropriate tools for self-care. It is important to look after the mental health of such professionals and their families. Some of the suggestions given by WHO (2020), for psychological well-being of health care professionals are; ensuring rest and respite during work and between shifts, eating sufficient and healthy food,

involve in physical activity, and staying in touch with family and friends. However, they must avoid using contrary coping strategies such as tobacco, alcohol or other drugs. In the long term, these can degrade their mental and physical wellbeing. To avoid social stigma attached with their occupation of handling the COVID-19 patients they can stay connected with their loved ones through digital means. They can also turn to their coworkers, managers or other trusted persons for social support.

While dealing with COVID-19 patients, health workers are putting their lives on the line which gives birth to a sense of insecurity about the future of their families. In order to deal with this problem, government can provide financial security to such professionals. It is noteworthy to mention that on March 26, 2020 The Government of India announced rupees 50 lakh insurance cover per person for health workers involved in handling the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This step is worth appreciating.

CONCLUSION

At present the world is going through difficult times because of the rapid rise in the severity of COVID-19. As COVID-19 cases are multiplying by every passing hour only the time will tell how much impact this pandemic had over human population. In this scenario it becomes very important to deal with this situation in a multi-dimensional way. One of these dimensions is to identify psychological impacts of this disease on individuals and how to deal with them.

Considering the psychological aspect of COVID-19 WHO Regional Director for Europe, Dr. Hans Kluge (March 26, 2020), stated at a press briefing “With the disruptive effects of COVID-19 – including social distancing – currently dominating our daily lives, it is important that we check on each other, call and video-chat, and are mindful of and sensitive to the unique mental health needs of those we care for. Our anxiety and fears should be acknowledged and not be ignored, but better understood and addressed by individuals, communities, and governments”.

It has become very clear that by the end, this pandemic will adversely affect most of the world. However, certain classes of individuals are more vulnerable than the others. A few of them are discussed in this work. It is advisable that society and the authorities must thrive to provide extra care for safeguarding the mental health along with physical health of these classes. The mental health and psychosocial support services and other facilities that are significant to this population must remain accessible at this time.

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