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Effect of COVID-19 on mental health

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Abstract---The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt raised serious concerns on public health. While trying to protect physical well-being, people often fall prey to mental distress. Several factors including financial crisis, job loss, home quarantine, self-isolation, lockdown, shut down etc. have contributed severely in affecting mental health of the people. Exaggerated news on electronic & social media played major role in enhancing depression in the minds of the people of almost all age groups. Violent behaviour, restlessness, self-harm and cases of suicides have been reported more during the lockdown period. Misinformation can be very dangerous for emotionally fragile persons. COVID-19 patients and their family members usually have to go through a lot of mental traumas. The plight of mentally ill persons also need attention as they need more care which cannot be denied in any situation as a little recklessness can worsen their condition. The psychological well-being of healthcare professionals who are frontline worriers against COVID-19 is another concern. The stress and trauma of healthcare service personnel were unimaginable. Media have paid least attention to stop infodemics which was of great concern. This article is an attempt by the author to analyse the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of people in India. With the help of primary data, the various factors contributing to poor mental health will be ascertained and recommendations will be made accordingly.

Keywords---COVID-19, Mental Health, Depression, Healthcare professional, Infodemic, Social Media.

Introduction

The proverb health is wealth holds good for all. Mental health is “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). Health does not only mean physical health mental well-being is equally important. In a world where everyone is always trying to cope up with some kind of stress this pandemic has aggravated stress and frustration in people. Although being happy is in our hands still an array of external factors affects our mental stability and peace. Both infected patients of COVID-19 and non-infected persons experienced mental distress during lockdown and post lockdown period. Daily news, bulletins, morality reports constantly reminded people of the crisis situation. Indian Government announced lockdown on 24th March, 2020 in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak as a measure to prevent spread of the disease then the Government carried on lockdown in various phases and gradually lifted some restrictions phase by phase. Still after this students could not return to schools and colleges and for some people work from home continued for long. Mental health is an integral part of human rights. Various reports highlight that during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, mental health has been neglected and there has been gross violations of individual liberties and basic human rights such as right to move freely, access to proper information, right to privacy, protection of health workers, right to education, and discrimination of marginalized population etc(Rahman et al.,2021).

A recent survey by the Indian Psychiatric Society shows a twenty percent hike in mental illness since COVID-19 outbreak in India (Loiwal, 2020). “Psychologists and mental health professionals speculate that the pandemic is going to impact on the mental health of the population globally with the increase in cases of depression, suicide, and self-harm, apart from other symptoms reported globally due to COVID 2019” (Li et al., 2020; Moukaddam & Shah, 2020; Yao et al., 2020).

COVID-19 is the first pandemic wherein social media platforms and technology have been used extensively to create awareness and mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infection. Along with relevant information various irrelevant information was also circulated which created more confusion and distress. In addition to misinformation various other factors have also affected the mental health of individuals. Mental health is subjective in nature. The response to different situations varies from person to person depending on their profession and social status. For instance, the effect of pandemic on mental health of doctors and healthcare professionals was much more than common people. On the other hand, people who lost their jobs or means of livelihood were also more distressed compared to those who had job security. Suicides of doctors, migrant workers, those in quarantine centres was reported in the news during lockdown (Roy et al.,2020). Along with anxiety, depression, fear,insomnia and anger some people have also gone through the thought of self-destruction. So the extent of this issue is understandable now.This study will explore the factors which had a much greater impact on mental health so that necessary suggestions can be made.

Methodology

In current article the researchers have reviewed the existing literatures on mental health issues during COVID-19 pandemic, mental health and human rights violations due to pandemic in South Africa, Malaysia and some other countries, effect of misinformation and rumours, psychological impact on doctors etc. The researchers have searched relevant articles in Google Scholar, SSRN journal, ResearchGate, PubMed, World Health Organisation and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare- Government of India (MOHFW) websites etc. Relevant newspaper articles, magazine articles and posts in social media i.e facebook, whatsapp, twitter have been studied. The researchers have used keywords like mental health, depression, anxiety etc. The researchers have done a descriptive-analytic researcher to analyse the factors affected mental health of people during pandemic. Primary data is used to show which factors affected mental health mostly in order to derive relevant suggestions and conclusion from the same. The method of sampling is convenient sampling. Questionnaire tool is used to collect data from people belonging to 15-55 or above to analyse the overall impact of pandemic on mental health of Indian people.

Discussion

The factors affecting mental health are as follows

Lockdown

The international human rights law state that restrictions on mobility i.e. lockdown, compulsory quarantine, isolation etc. can be imposed for limited period and with due regard to human dignity during public health emergency. Although quarantine are useful in curbing the spread of contagious diseases, but they increase the risk of psychological impact other behavioral changes. Restrictions on movement and stay at shelter homes were found to have adverse impact on poor mental and social well-being. Prolonged stay within four walls has more or less affected all. The lower income group of India (mainly migrant workers and daily wage earners) had faced difficulties in abiding all COVID-19 precautionary norms. They were under constant stress as the stretch of lockdown was uncertain, job loss, desertion by employers, financial troubles etc. Pregnant women were apprehensive about proper medical attention during pandemic (Rahman et al., 2021).

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, in April 2020 during lockdown period around 27 million people between 20-30 years age group lost their jobs. Study shows that 369 cases of suicides and attempted suicides were reported in online news media during lockdown of 2020 whereas in 2019, 220 cases of suicides were reported. There has been a sharp increase of 67.7% in online news reports of suicide cases. In comparison to 2019, suicides in 2020 have been mostly committed by middle aged, employed men who were suffering from poor mental health. The demographic factors of suicidal behavior between 2019 and 2020 have shown huge changes. These news reports are probably indicative of the pecuniary crisis and job losses during pandemic (Pathare et al., 2020).

Lockdown has had deep rooted consequences on our society. Around “178 manual scavengers have been engaged in illegal bone trade in the graveyards of Birbhum, Siliguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal” as revealed by a joint research study by the World Sanitation Workers’ Alliance, the South Asian Sanitation Labour Network (SASLN) and the Safai Karmachari Ekta Manch, West Bengal. As the scavengers were left with no other options to feed themselves and their families during lockdown they illegally gathered and sold human bones for a small amount of Rs.200 per transaction. These bones are sold to traders who eventually sell them to factories engaged in calcium manufacturing and other small units engaged in cosmetics production (The Wire, 2022). Crime is the genesis of poverty. Some people with malicious intentions have compelled poverty-stricken people to take the path of crime during economic crisis. This incident not only highlights awful crime but also shows mental distortions of humans.

Which of the following factors affected you the most during the pandemic?

36 responses

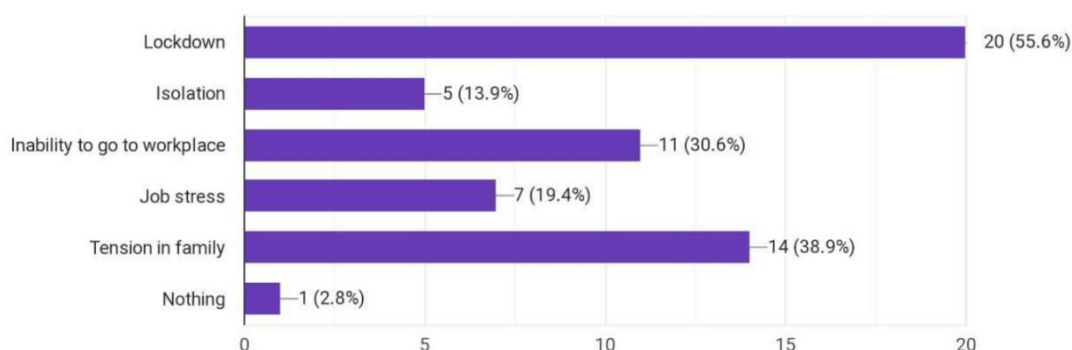


Figure.1

From our study it is clear that the mental health of people have been mostly affected due to lockdown. 30.6% of the respondents reported concern about inability to go to workplace and 19.4% of the respondents were stressed about job. Many people who were staying in abroad or in a different city away from their family and friends suffered more mental agony as they were apprehensive as to when they will be able to reunite with their families. During lockdown the idea of quarantine and isolation which was previously unheard became a source of stress for many as they knew once they will contract the infection they will be isolated and blamed for it. Further people of different ages reacted differently during lockdown. According to various studies pandemic has adversely affected children’s behavioral patterns, development, physical health and academic output(Roy et al.,2020).Children became more clingy and showed aggressive behaviors while adults became more impatient and melancholic.Children who lost their parents need more conducive environment to express their feelings. Another thing that became common during lockdown that people started hoarding essential commodities out of anxiety inspite of the fact that Government had made it clear that essential commodities will be made available. Many people due to confusion and misunderstanding as to how many times hands should be

washed started washing hands at regular intervals (Times of India, 2020). In some cases family members of COVID-19 patients died out of sudden shock. Many suicide cases were reported. All these instances point to the fact that how fragile and important is our mental health which needs more care and attention in emergency situations.

Lack of access to medical facilities

As part of the right to health, The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to further the basic right to health urged the Government of State Parties and health agencies to optimize the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) among Health Care Workers (HCW) during health emergencies such as COVID-19. This includes providing training, education, and adequate equipments to prevent physical and mental harm from infections. However according to the UNICEF and WHO reports the HCWs had to work in adverse situations. Healthcare institutions lacked basic infrastructural facilities such as water, sanitation, hygiene, PPE kits and basic health care-related waste management. Lack of PPE had negative consequences on HCWs' mental health. Many a times HCWs reported that they had to work in congested and ill-equipped workplaces. Due to this, in addition to physical stress they also feared getting a serious infection and communicating the same to their family members. Sometimes the HCWs had to isolate themselves to protect their family members, this in turn increased their mental distress. Doctors had long lasting affects on mental health as they had to witness so many death cases everyday. The mental agony of doctors is immeasurable. A cross-sectional survey in India have revealed that persons who were mentally ill did not receive proper medication and medical assistance during lockdown as caregivers did not get financial support and were overburdened. Patients missed their routine appointments with doctors. Sleep impairment and reemergence of previous psychiatric symptoms have been noted among mentally ill patients (Rahman et al., 2021). Patients suffering from diseases and disorders other than COVID-19 faced difficulties in meeting their doctors during lockdown. Many doctors were reluctant to see patients due to fear of COVID-19. The patients who required immediate surgery had to wait as there were shortage of hospital beds. All these created psychological pressure on the patients. Majority of the respondents reported that they suffered from the fear of contracting COVID-19 which is not something unusual. However this mental distress would have been reduced if proper medical facilities were made available to all.

Social Media and COVID-19 infodemic

COVID-19 related infodemics spread like wildfire through social media. Infodemic is the intentional circulation of misinformation or disinformation mainly through social media platforms. In a country where the illiteracy rate is high, even literate people also sometimes fail to believe in misleading news these COVID-19 infodemics can make all the efforts of healthcare professionals futile, and can thereby increase fear, anxiety, and mistrust among public. Infodemics involve too much misinformation about a problem which makes it difficult to achieve any probable solution. This unrealistic information is publicized through Facebook posts and tweets often by people having some political or economic interests. Sometimes the

sheer objective of posting misleading information and remedies for COVID-19 is to get more likes in various social media platforms. When news is biased and misleading, it have adverse consequences on the health and well-being of the population. The fear and panic which these news have generated, have had a long-lasting effect on mental health of people (Su et al.,2021).

These misleading information related to treatment of COVID-19 had lead to disobedience to many acceptable practices to be observed to stop the spread of COVID-19 in India. This disease is under-researched so disobedience to social distancing and sanitisation by confused population had led to further spread of COVID-19 infection. Although Government had repeatedly created awareness about the disease and safety measures still misinformation purported by social media crept into the mind of some people. For instance, many people were reluctant to get vaccinated because of rumours that they will become infertile in future if they take vaccine. In another instance in India, a father of three committed suicide after being diagnosed with COVID-19. Even after vaccination many people stopped wearing masks and their compliance to other norms also reduced because of misinformation. People should remember that unless and until World Health Organisation (WHO) declares that the world is free of pandemic we all have to observe certain norms to keep ourselves safe. In India and other countries incidents have been reported wherein thousands of individuals were infected by few person who refrained to stay in home quarantine and isolation and visited various places. Such issues lead to suboptimal control of the coronavirus pandemic across various populations. These misinformation and rumours ultimately delay the process of total eradication of pandemic and promote erroneous practices among public that lead to poor physical and mental health(Tasnim et al.,2020).

'Exaggerated news in the media became a major cause of mental distress'

36 responses

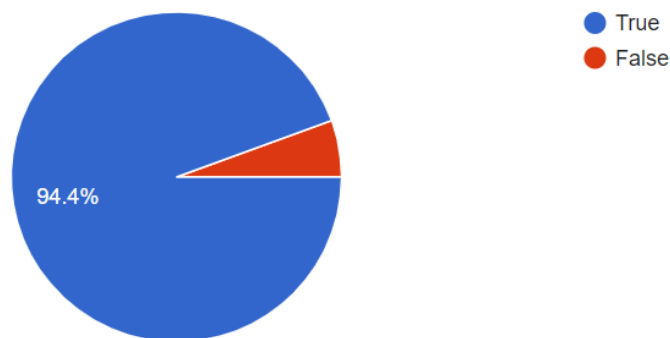


Figure 2

This data shows that how much exaggerated news have affected people's mental health. So we can understand the impact of exaggerated news on the population of India

'Misinformation and unappealing pictures on social media affected me a lot'

36 responses

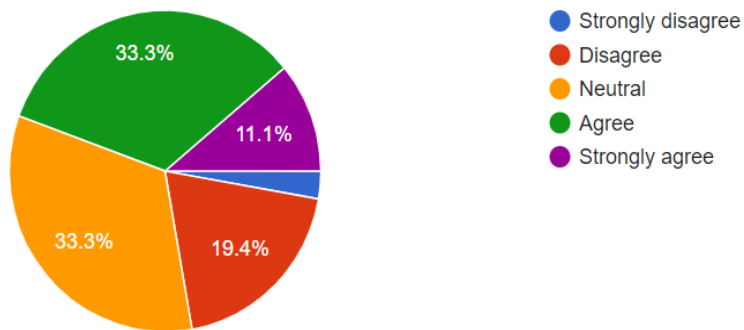


Figure 3

This figure shows that misinformation and unappealing pictures have greatly affected 33.3% of the respondents and around 11.1% of the respondents agreed that infodemics related to COVID-19 was a source of stress for them.

How often you believed all news on the media regarding Covid-19?

36 responses

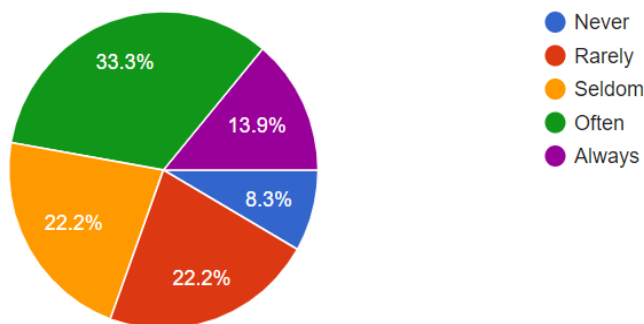


Figure 4

According to our study most of the respondents believed in the news shared via social media. Many social media users expressed frustration about conflicting information regarding COVID-19 outbreak. This information has created much stress, anxiety and panic among public. In social media various excessive posts on deaths rates in various countries have been circulated. Pictures showing dead

bodies and awful photos have been circulated thus people using social media became more frustrated. The findings point that acquiring information through social media platforms in times of crisis may enhance anxiety. Some social media users personalise the information they share to gain popularity and, in this process, accurate health information are overlooked. However, some people relied upon social media after due deliberation and for some people divergent opinions from close circles added to psychological distress. Inadequate social support and prolonged stress during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic may cause serious mental health consequences.

Laws to curb misinformation through social media

According to Section 54 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, “Whoever makes or circulates a false alarm or warning as to disaster or its severity or magnitude, leading to panic, shall on conviction, be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to one year or with fine.” Under Section 505(1) of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, “whoever makes, publishes or circulates any statement or report containing rumour or alarming news with intent to create or promote, or which is likely to create or promote, on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, caste or community or any other ground whatsoever, feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious, racial, language or regional groups or castes or communities, shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.” The punitive provisions are very minimal and the laws are inadequate. Social media have content moderation policies relating to sexual content, violence, child exploitation wherein public can flag and report those contents but social media platforms lack effective measures to stop spreading of misinformation.

Suggestive measures to mitigate the effect of pandemic and infodemics

1. State must understand and recognize mental health concerns of the citizens. People should not be reluctant to seek help from psychologists. India must introduce emergency psychological crisis interventions as has been implemented by China (Kumar et al.,2021).The psychological intervention medical team shall become a part of the medical team to response to people whose mental health have been affected by the pandemic.
2. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and NGOs must spread awareness on how to take care of mental health during crisis times. Although the Government of India left no stone unturned to keep the public informed about appropriate COVID-19 guidelines still some people did not paid heed to Government guidelines mainly due to lack of faith on Government policies during pandemic. Public must rely on information from authentic sources.
3. According to our study 52.8% of the respondents spread news of social media without verifying it's authenticity. People should deter themselves from doing this.
4. Few of the respondents reported that their bonding with their family members during lockdown was poor. Around 25% of the respondents stated that they were unable to communicate their concerns with their near and dear ones. In times of crisis it is the responsibility of close ones to take care of each other so that each other's trouble can be lessened. When any change in behaviour is

seen in any person family and friends should show greater coherence and shall consult psychologist if required.

5. Social media platforms should introduce proper guidelines relating to permitted content sharing. Content moderation is not enough as once any misinformation is shared it keeps on transmitting from one person to another. Social media must use appropriate Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies to curb spread of infodemics. Seeking prior approval of social media platform before posting anything can reduce this problem up to some extent. Along with this India needs proper legislations to fight misinformation.
6. Government must take necessary measures to provide for required medical facilities and economic assistance in times of crisis.
7. Regular exercise always helps us to boost up our happy hormones and that gives us instant relief and happiness and with that healthy diet and regular practice of gratefulness can alter our attitude to handle any crisis period. So, regular exercise, yoga, meditation, healthy diet are the keys to maintain a positive mental state in any crisis period. Government can make our lives better by educating people regarding the importance of taking care of everyone's mental state properly. Even in USA students from the primary classes get education to keep themselves mentally and physically fit and healthy but in India it is not a serious topic to discuss. So, Government should focus on this issue properly.

Conclusion

Along with safety of physical health, a good mental health is also necessary so the medical team and psychologists should be made available to provide mental support in times of crisis. Section 18 of the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 states that accessing mental healthcare is a right. So persons who were mentally instable previously their concerns and treatment cannot be neglected at any cost even in times of crisis. Sufficient measures must be taken to assist such persons with their therapist when they require. Happiness is a state of mind which depends on us how we react to various situations. Although it becomes very difficult to stay stress free in times of economic crisis or public health crisis. These issues can be solved by proper intervention of the Government. People can attend various workshops on mental health that are held online so that they can cope up with their stress in a much better way. There is an urgent need to stop spread of misinformation for now as well as in post-pandemic age for the sake of psychological health.

Conflict of interests: Nil

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