

COVID-19 and Mental Health

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1. Abstract:

COVID-19, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, has already put tremendous strain on the healthcare system. It has negatively impacted the economy of the countries. Neurological manifestations have been reported in a significant number of COVID-19 patients. However, the long-term consequences of this disease on mental health need to be investigated.

2. Key words: COVID-19; SARS-CoV-2; Coronavirus; Mental Health; Pandemic.

3. Main Text

The coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) is caused by a virus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) [1]. Emerging in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China, in December 2019, this virus quickly spread to other countries. The researchers are trying to develop vaccines and therapeutic measures at an unprecedented level. The efforts to create awareness about the virus has borne fruits, and almost everyone, children to elderly alike, talk about this virus and take measures to limit its spread. On the other hand, this virus has created fear in the minds of the patients, family members, healthcare workers and the general public.

In order to reduce the spread of the virus, the infected individuals are quarantined where interaction with family and friends is reduced substantially. Although now it has reduced considerably, in the beginning of the pandemic, infection with this virus was unjustifiably associated with tremendous stigma also. The patients who have recovered from the disease are expected to have developed immunity against the virus. Given that some cases of re-infection have been reported, the survivors are not at ease and worried about re-infection. In addition, the survivors are concerned about potential long-term effect of the infection.

People going to work are worried about bringing the virus to their family members. Despite precautions, the healthcare workers are under constant threat of infection while making sure that the delivery of healthcare services is not compromised. The daily wage workers are concerned about getting work that can fetch some money to buy essentials for their families. People who have lost job are concerned about where the next installment for home loan or vehicle loan will come from or how they can arrange for payment of school fees for the children. Teachers have to adopt to new ways of teaching, and students have to adjust to new ways of learning. Significant number of students from the under-privileged background have difficulty in arranging for the electronic gadgets for online classes. The classroom interaction with classmates and playing in the field is greatly missed by the students. They are also anxious about their future.

A lot of elderly people used to meet for group activities including exercises and leisure activities. These are either missing or have been

reduced considerably. Interaction is mostly limited to family members. At the work place, one has to maintain adequate physical distance while interacting with colleagues. While walking in a public place, one has to be constantly on the watch for physical distancing. When we touch a door knob, or the button of an elevator, we have to remember to sanitize our hands or wash them at the earliest possible opportunity. Thus, we have to be constantly on the watch to reduce the chances of getting the viral infection.

All this has led to considerable amount of stress that we are exposed to on a daily basis. Given that stress is associated with several mental health conditions including anxiety and depression [2], rather constant stress during the pandemic may potentially increase mental health problems. Although acute effects of COVID-19 on mental health issues including anxiety and depression have been reported [3-5], the long-term effects need to be investigated.

Large scale screening and intervention measures are needed to tackle the mental health issues due to COVID-19. If we consider only the people confirmed to have been infected, given the current number, even if a small percentage of them develop mental health issues, the number will be substantial to warrant special attention. The hospitalized and recovered COVID-19 patients are well characterized on their health parameters. It may be possible to trace them, enroll them in cohort studies and assess their mental health in carefully planned follow-up studies to understand the long-term impact of COVID-19 on mental health.

The healthcare system is indeed overburdened with the COVID-19 crisis, and the available resources have to be justifiably directed towards tackling this pandemic. The non-life-threatening mental health issues should also be given due consideration. The potential long-term adverse effects of the pandemic on mental health needs attention of researchers, clinicians and the policy makers. Self-help groups and non-governmental organization can effectively create awareness about the mental health issues. Several measures including eating healthy, taking enough sleep, exercise, yoga and meditation and talking to others may help in coping with the stress, but if the situation does not improve, professional help should be sought.

It is neither desirable nor feasible to screen everyone for potential mental health issues. A simplified version of screening tools may be developed in the form of an application that a concerned person can use to assess the family members. The teachers could use this tool to screen the students in the class. If the results are concerning, professionals should be approached for help. Collectively, the small efforts will go a long way in building a healthy society.

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