

Psychological Well-being and Mental Health Challenges during Covid-19 Pandemic in India

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Abstract

The disease of Covid-19, originating in Wuhan, China, rapidly became a global crisis, resulting in significant human and economic costs. India implemented measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, creation of health infrastructure, and public awareness to contain disease. But, the challenges caused by pandemic persisted due to high intensity of fatality and infection, country's large population, and limited healthcare infrastructure. The pandemic had profound psychological effects on well-being and mental health of people such as increasing feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression among others. Vulnerable populations, including healthcare workers, children, elderly, women and marginalized groups, faced heightened stress and burnout. Addressing these challenges requires ensuring access to world class and accessible mental health services, reducing stigma, and providing support to these vulnerable groups. These efforts are very crucial in alleviating the mental burden of the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, mental health, well-being, psychological impact, India.

Introduction: The pandemic of Covid-19 initially originated in Wuhan, China, but swiftly spread globally, leading to a global crisis and generated severe economic repercussions. In the middle of the next year, the pandemic has caused more than four lacs deaths, and more than eight millions reported cases worldwide. To contain the virus, countries worldwide implemented various healthcare measures, including the practice of social distancing, lockdown etc. (Fong *et al.*, 2020).

The emergence of the pandemic in India was marked by the first reported case in month of January of 2020, following the global spread from its origin in Wuhan, China (Shereen *et al.*, 2020). As the number of cases began to rise, the Indian government implemented a series of measures to contain the disease. Such

measures included the imposition of a nationwide lockdown in month of March of 2020, which was one of the strictest in the world, aimed at limiting the movement of people and preventing the further transmission of the virus. Additionally, various other measures such as mandatory mask-wearing, social distancing guidelines, and the promotion of hand hygiene were implemented to curb the spread of the virus (*Government of India, 2020; various guidelines and policies of Government*).

Despite these efforts, the country faced significant challenges due to its large population, dense urban areas, and limited healthcare infrastructure, highlighting need for innovative strategies to combat the pandemic (*Ghosh et al., 2020*). The various aspects of psychosocial well-being and mental health challenges, impact of pandemic and potential strategies to address these issues have been discussed in the paper.

Psychological Impact: Mental health challenges and psychosocial well-being have become increasingly significant areas of focus, especially amidst pandemic in India. The pandemic has brought about numerous challenges for individuals' well-being. The prolonged pandemic, along with lockdowns and social distancing, has led to increased feelings of isolation, loneliness, and stress. The older individuals, youth, and marginalized populations have faced problem of psychological disorders such as anxiety, stress, depression, and, in extreme cases, exacerbating existing mental illnesses (*UNDP, 2020*).

The fear of contacting the virus, apart from uncertainty about the future, has also resulted into heightened levels of anxiety and depression among general population. In studies conducted by various researchers and organisations, it was found that stress, worry, fear, and disruptions in daily routines presented challenges to individuals, global healthcare system and economy (*WHO, 2021*). Personal-level effects included feelings of personal insecurity, fear, danger, loneliness, anxiety, and depression (*Ventriglio et al., 2020*).

Closures of schools and disruptions to traditional learning methods have shifted to online and remote approaches of teaching-learning process. Online and remote learning challenges and uncertainties about the academic future led to stress and anxiety among learners and parents (*Ornell et al., 2020*). The economic factors such as loss of jobs, financial instability, and concerns about the future have contributed to increased

stress and anxiety levels. Financial stressors have adversely impacted the state of mental health among various segments of the population (*Bhuiyan et al., 2020*).

One of the key challenges faced in addressing mental health issues during the pandemic was the limited access to mental health services. Due to lockdown closures on mental health centers, many persons have not availed the services of health professionals.

Vulnerable Population and Pandemic: Vulnerable populations, such as frontline healthcare workers, the elderly, the children, the women, the migrant labourers, marginalised communities and people of lower income strata of society have been particularly affected by the pandemic and faced heightened levels of stress, anxiety and burnout. In the study, it was observed that women exhibited a higher susceptibility to stress compared to men, although this finding is not consistently reported in existing literature (*Huang and Zhao, 2020*).

Children, especially younger ones, were also vulnerable during the pandemic. They experienced limited social connection, reduced physical activity, loneliness, and boredom at home during pandemic (*Jiao et al., 2020*). The psychological challenges may be severe for marginalized groups like farmers, who already bear psychological burdens due to pre-existing issues in the agriculture sector. Nearly 16,500 cases of farmers' suicides are reported every year due to their poor socio-economic conditions, which may be exacerbated by the pandemic (*Hossain et al., 2020*).

Healthcare professional workers experienced trauma in view of overwhelming pandemic's nature, some of them went through Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during the pandemic. The healthcare professionals experienced elevated levels of psychophysical stress (*Mohindra et al., 2020*). They also faced secondary traumatic stress disorder, which occurred when treatments were unavailable for all patients, forcing professional workers to choose who can access those (*Lai et al., 2020*).

Individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions suffered due to increasing their symptoms in view of added stressors of the pandemic. Many patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) worried about catching by the disease or contaminating others and these feelings have been intensified by the pandemic (*Fontenelle and Miguel, 2020*). In psychiatric patients, the pandemic has worsened mental health outcomes.

The uncertainty, fear, and social distancing measures magnified pre-existing psychiatric conditions and triggered symptomatology (*Holmes et al., 2020*).

Suggestions to overcome challenges: Addressing the challenges caused by the pandemic of Covid-19, requires a multi-faceted approach and strategies. There is strict and urgent to availability and accessibility of world class mental health services for all the potential individuals. The mental health infrastructure may be increased by providing tele-medicine and tele-counselling services to reach the unreached. The state and the society as a whole should work together towards to reduce the social stigma pertaining to mental health in India through community-based interventions, such as support groups and community outreach programs.

Capacity building programmes for individuals to cope with stress and anxiety may also be helpful in increasing well-being and mental health scenario (*Mental Health Covid-19, 2020*). The state and healthcare providers should proactively help professional workers in dealing with situations of mental health and psychological well-being and monitoring health staff more closely (*Greenberg et al., 2020*).

Conclusion: The Covid-19 has far-reaching effects globally and in India, significantly impacting mental health and psychosocial well-being of individuals. The healthcare measures imposed to contain the virus paved the path for increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression in general and vulnerable population sub-groups in particular. Special attention should be given to create health infrastructure to cater the increased demand and to vulnerable groups to prevent harmful emotional repercussions and provide necessary assistance.

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