

## COVID-19 & Mental Health

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### BACKGROUND

Although the world has suffered from many infectious disease outbreaks from antiquity the general public as well as most of the medical fraternity had begun to think that these were the problems of the past. The world was totally unprepared physically and psychologically for a pandemic because we had not expected it. The COVID-19 pandemic has been raging on for the last six months throughout the world. The novel corona virus has already infected more than twenty million people and killed more than seven hundred thousand people globally. As I write this article the Covid-19 pandemic is spreading on an increasing rate in our country. This pandemic is affecting us in many ways. As the virus threatens to overwhelm our health system it has taken a huge toll on our mental health. The covid-19 pandemic has lead to emotional distress even among those who have not been directly exposed to the disease.

### CAUSE OF STRESS:

As the pandemic is spreading, naturally people are afraid of falling ill or dying. They are also worried about the well being of their family members. As people hear of health care facilities being overwhelmed they are afraid that they may not get proper care if they get infected. Many are afraid that if they died of Covid-19 they may not even get a proper funeral. The infected people and their family members are also being subjected to significant amount of stigma. The workplace closures and downturn in economy has rendered many people without a way to earn their livelihood which obviously is stressful. The constant news from the 24 hour news channels and social media has added to the anxiety suffered by people. The conflicting messages from different authorities and

multitude of fake media have increased the stress level of most individuals. The lockdown has lead to social isolation as people are unable to meet friends and relatives. Although the lockdown has enabled people to spend more time with their family members it has also increased conflicts within family members. The incidence of domestic violence has increased during this lockdown.

### VULNERABLE GROUPS:

Although everyone is vulnerable to stress related to the current pandemic some groups of people are more vulnerable than others. The elderly people are one group especially vulnerable to the stress related to the pandemic. The elderly people are often painfully aware of the fact that they are at increased risk of falling seriously ill and dying because of their advanced age and preexisting health conditions. Even under normal circumstances the elderly are prone to social isolation and the pandemic has worsened this isolation. Social interactions which form a large part of their life in retirement have been drastically disrupted due to the lockdown. The lack of avenues for social interaction can precipitate or worsen mental health problems in the elderly. Because of strict lockdowns the elderly may have difficulty in accessing medications and health facilities. If such persons are unable to obtain a regular and sustained supply of medication, they are bound to suffer relapses or deterioration in their mental state. One sad thing is that many reports have shown that lockdowns raise the risk of abuse among older people. During the pandemic, older adults have become even more dependent on their caregivers, and some caregivers have used the pandemic to exercise their control and abuse further.<sup>1</sup>

The health care workers, especially those who are working in COVID-19 treatment centers are another group of people who are vulnerable to the stress caused by the pandemic. During the pandemic their work load has increased because of a surge in the number of patients seeking care. They may be working for longer hours and separated from their family members. They are worried about getting infected themselves and passing it to family, friends or their colleagues. The protective equipment which they need to use may be unfamiliar, uncomfortable, may limit communication and be of uncertain benefit and there may be shortages of them. Working in a pandemic situation may be rewarding on one hand but on the other hand they may suffer from exhaustion, frustration, anger and guilt.<sup>2</sup>

Those people with preexisting mental illness are also vulnerable to the adverse psychological stress due to the pandemic. The constant bombardment of the pandemic related news and information in different sorts of media may be overwhelming to them. They may suffer from loss of continuity of care because of the lockdown which may lead to worsening of their symptoms.

The people placed in quarantine and isolation centers are another group of people who are at risk of having stress related psychosocial problems. The government of Nepal announced lockdown and closed the international borders of the country on 24 March 2020. Since then hundreds of thousands of people returning back to Nepal have been quarantined in different center throughout the country. The stay at quarantine centers has been psychologically challenging for most of the people. They are often fearful of becoming infected and passing the infection to others. They suffer from frustration and boredom during their stay at the quarantine centres. There is often a problem of inadequate supplies of food, clothes and medical care at the quarantine centers. The loss of income during the period of quarantine may be quite stressful for people of low socioeconomic class. Their distress is often amplified due to insufficient information from the concerned authorities. Even after coming home from the quarantine centers the people often have to face stigma from the society. The distress related to quarantine is significantly high if the duration of

quarantine is prolonged and when people don't understand why they are being quarantine.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

When the patients who have been infected are placed in isolation centers they also suffer from stress due to many reasons. The isolation in COVID wards can be quite palpable, physical(contact barriers, protective equipment, physical separation by locked doors or glass and symbolic(separation from loved ones, inability to read facial expressions from masked faces, feel a human touch, in inability to make out a human shape underneath protective equipment). The other crucial psychological aspect of isolation is uncertainty- those who are ill in isolation are uncertain about their survival and recovery. The initiation of oxygen therapy is often taken as a death sentence. They often feel guilty about not been able to prevent oneself from infection. Some may be even angry with others for passing the infection to them. The isolation from society can be severely stressful. As health workers spend only short time in isolation wards and carry out their work hurriedly the patients may feel that they are being discriminated by health workers and not being cared enough. They may also suffer from stress due to inadequate supplies. Many times several members of a family are isolated together. They may have difficulty in meeting the needs of small children. They may also have to encounter bad news like losing a family member, friend or colleague. They may fear uncertainty about future. They may also face from stigma and discrimination from society even after being discharged from hospital.

#### **ROLE OF MEDIA**

This pandemic is being covered extensively in social media. In one hand social media is being used to spread information, educate and communicate concerns but on the other hand it is also being used to spread rumors, increase stigma, and increase the fear and confusion. Hence the role of media is both positive as well as negative. It was noted that that although 4 out of 5 posts in social media were true the posts that went 'viral' were mostly fake. The pandemic has disturbed our sense of reality and order leading to a changed way of storing and metabolizing our memories and experiences.<sup>6</sup>

## **PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS CAUSED BY PANDEMIC**

Studies carried out in USA has revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with mental health challenges related to the morbidity and mortality caused by the disease and to mitigation activities, including the impact of physical distancing and stay-at-home orders. Symptoms of anxiety disorder and depressive disorder increased considerably in the United States during April–June of 2020, compared with the same period in 2019.<sup>7,8</sup> The prevalence of symptoms of anxiety disorder was approximately three times those reported in the second quarter of 2019 (25.5% versus 8.1%), and prevalence of depressive disorder was approximately four times that reported in the second quarter of 2019 (24.3% versus 6.5%).<sup>8</sup> Of course most people are resilient and do not succumb to psychopathology. Indeed, some people find new strengths during challenging times like this.<sup>9</sup> The behavioral and psychological problems arising due to the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic can be classified as distress reactions, psychiatric disorders and risky behaviors. The distress reactions can manifest as changes in sleep, decreased sense of safety, irritability, distraction, social withdrawal and somatic symptoms. The psychiatric disorders may manifest in the form of depression, anxiety, complex grief and post traumatic stress disorder. The risky behaviors manifest as increased use of alcohol and drugs, interpersonal violence and participation in restricted behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

### **PREVENTION & MANAGEMENT:**

For prevention of psychosocial problems people should be encouraged to use the media carefully. They should limit the amount of time they spend on watching or reading news. They need to read news only from trusted sites like ministry of health, Center for Disease Control (CDC) or the World Health Organization (WHO). They also need to take break from social media. To combat the social isolation caused by the lockdown people should stay connected to friends and family by the use of technology. They should not use alcohol, smoking or drugs to cope with stress. They should also be advised to adopt a healthy lifestyle. They should eat a

balanced and nutritious diet and drink plenty of fluids. They should be exposed to fresh air and sunlight as much as possible. They need to do something pleasurable like reading a book, listening to music or watch a favorite movie. Use of humor should be encouraged to beat the stress. Yoga and meditation can also be recommended to promote psychosocial wellbeing. People must be made aware of the fact that some amount of worry and stress is normal during difficult periods like these. However they should not hesitate to take professional help if they suffer from sustained sadness of mood, poor sleep, increasing irritability or hopelessness.<sup>10</sup> Many parents are not aware that children may also be stressed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so open discussions should be encouraged to address children's reactions and concerns. It has been noted that children often reflect the emotional response of the parents, so people need to remain calm and confident when dealing with their children. They need to make themselves available to listen and talk with their children. They need to provide information that is truthful and appropriate for the age and developmental level of the child. Children should be told that some stories on COVID-19 on the Internet and social media may be based on rumors and inaccurate information. People must reassure their children that they are safe. They should let the children know it is okay if they feel upset. People need to pay attention to what children see or hear on television, radio, or online and consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19.<sup>11</sup>

Health care workers must also ensure that their basic needs are met. They must be sure to eat, drink and sleep regularly. They must take breaks at regular intervals. They need to connect with colleagues so that they can support each other. They need to communicate with their colleagues in an optimistic way. They must be in regular contact with their family members. They need to stay updated but limit their media exposure. They must monitor themselves periodically for symptoms of depression or other stress disorders. They should be encouraged to talk to a peer, senior or take professional health if they suffer from any stress related symptoms. They need to have hope that

one day this will pass off and vast majority of us will do good. Most important of all they need to honor their service. They need to remind themselves that despite obstacles or frustrations, they are fulfilling a noble calling of taking care of those most in need. They need to recognize their colleagues either formally or informally.<sup>2</sup>

In light of the widening economic crisis and numerous uncertainties surrounding this pandemic, suicidal ideation may emerge and necessitate immediate consultation with a mental health professional or referral for possible emergency psychiatric hospitalization. On the milder end of the psychosocial spectrum, many of the experiences of patients, family members, and the public can be appropriately normalized by providing information about usual reactions to this kind of stress and by pointing out that people can and do manage even in the midst of dire circumstances. The problems that cannot be managed by the primary care physicians need to be referred to mental health specialists.<sup>9</sup>

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Covid-19 pandemic has an alarming risk of causing psychosocial distress at the individual as well as collective level. Education and training regarding psychosocial issues should be provided to health system planners, first responders, and health care professionals. In addition to providing medical care, the health care providers need to play an important role in monitoring psychosocial needs and delivering psychosocial support to their patients, health care providers, and the public. As psychiatrists we must not only provide mental health services, we also need to advocate with the planners and policy makers to integrate mental health activities into general pandemic health care.

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