

## COVID-19: Mental Health Matters

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Coronavirus disease (COVID) -19, a global pandemic, has already celebrated its first birthday. It has, so far, affected 224 countries around the world, with almost 100 million cases, and above two million deaths.<sup>1</sup> It is a major threat to the human life, health, and economy; with tremendous impact, not only at the individual level, but also in the family and societal level. Such effects are more pronounced in the developing countries like Nepal.<sup>2</sup> Almost three hundred thousand cases and above two thousands deaths, has been reported, so far, in Nepal.<sup>3</sup>

Mental health effects of COVID-19 equate the psychosocial problems associated with earlier pandemics in the world history.<sup>4,5</sup> In addition to the treatment related factors like lengthy hospitalization, Intensive Care Unit (ICU) admission, and prolonged mechanical ventilation, substantial reduction in quality of life and stigma-laden psychosocial stressors are considered the factors responsible for the enormous mental health burden of COVID-19.<sup>6,7</sup> Social (physical) distancing measures, such as isolation and quarantine, considered to be the proven measures to contain the infection, are also associated with adverse psychosocial consequences.<sup>1,7,8</sup> The healthcare professionals, including the frontline workers, exhibit variety of psychological problems with increased workload, lack of adequate motivation, and diverse forms of stressors negatively influence the psyche of the health care workers.<sup>5,9-11</sup>

The worldwide disruption of mental health services had substantial impact on the already limited psychosocial facilities of the developing countries like Nepal.<sup>5</sup> Closure of the psychiatric care facilities that were converted into isolation or quarantine and deployment of the mental health care staffs to the COVID-19 response team may have further contributed towards significant psychological turmoil in this corona era.<sup>5,12</sup> However, only a few countries were found committed to accommodate psychosocial intervention in their COVID-19 response plan.<sup>5,11</sup> In this gloomy scenario, massive mental health challenges are expected, which may further deteriorate in the days to come.<sup>7</sup>

The common mental disorders (anxiety and depression), and stress- associated psychiatric conditions are mostly described among the population in this pandemic period.<sup>8,12</sup> Unhealthy coping strategies like substance use (alcohol, tobacco, and other addictive drugs) and problematic internet use are also of great concern.<sup>12</sup> There are also reports of recurrences of psychiatric disorders among the mentally ill population.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, escalating rates of suicide boost public health alarm.<sup>14</sup> Frontline workers in health and security sectors, who are themselves the first responders, elderly and children, pregnant and child-bearing women, people with pre-existing health problems, and those from conflict settings, are more vulnerable to the psychosocial problems.<sup>12</sup>

Proper care of mental health is essential not only for good functioning of any society, but also for the control of the current pandemic situation. Poor mental health increases susceptibility to infection and promotes further viral transmission. It may also have deleterious effects on the success of the COVID-19 infection prevention and control strategy, due to defective uptake of vaccines and non-adherence to the safety precautions (wearing masks, frequent hand washing, and physical distancing).<sup>5</sup>

In order to improve mental health in such pandemic, we should promptly act to strengthen the psychosocial support mechanism and enhance the sources of resilience available in the community.<sup>11,12</sup> Quarantine and isolation centers should have adequate facilities with sufficient basic supplies, and proper provisions of communication and entertainment; where people should be kept for shorter and reasonable duration, as far as possible.<sup>8</sup> Early identification of high-risk people, proper screening for psychiatric morbidity, and adequate and clear public dissemination of information, is necessary.<sup>11</sup> Frontline workers require additional psychological support; non-pharmacological interventions like relaxation and deep-breathing exercises, and mindfulness or cognitive approach may be helpful.<sup>10,11</sup>

National strategies to incorporate mental health and psychosocial intervention in all the COVID-19 programs that ensures widespread availability of mental health and psychosocial support in the community is essential.<sup>12</sup> Our current world is actually unprepared for dealing with the post-COVID psychosocial hitches. Hence, in future, we should prepare surplus mental health service centers in order to provide essential psychosocial support.

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