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Mental Health Issues in Covid and Post Covid-19 Scenario: The Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic has been spreading around the globe over the last eleven months now. More than 54.5 million people have been infected worldwide, and 1.3 million of them have died due to the disease as of November 15, 2020. India's corona virus case tally rose to 8.8 million (6380 per million infected), and the number of deaths rose to 1.29 lacs (94 per million deaths) as of November 15, 2020.

India and many other countries have gone through various lockdown periods with a devastating outcome. Millions of households suffered, and millions of laborers have lost their job during this period. There has been a significant impact on the financial, occupational, social, environmental, intellectual, and emotional wellbeing of our people, more so, on the fragile and vulnerable groups like the elderly, disabled, migrants, refugees, homeless, women, children, girls and adolescents.

The present write-up is divided into two broad headings. First, a general narrative is there on various health issues in Covid and post-Covid-19 scenario. The next part of the essay will be focussed on mental health issues in Covid and post-Covid-19 scenario. Finally, this review summarises the present Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of World Mental health day and world mental health week themes in the prevailing scenario.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Post covid-19 scenario, Mental health in Covid pandemic

INTRODUCTION: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The coronavirus pandemic has been spreading around the globe over the last eleven months now. More than 54.5 million people have been infected worldwide, and 1.3 million of them have died due to the disease as of November 15, 2020[1]. India's coronavirus case tally rose to 8.8 million (6380 per million infected), and the number of deaths rose to 1.29 lacs (94 per million deaths) as of November 15, 2020[2].

This rapidly increasing number of infections and deaths around the world have made the COVID-19 pandemic one of the greatest health and illness-related challenges to human existence since World War-II. Of late, a few western countries and regions are going through the second wave of the pandemic, and experts are predicting the same for our country also in the coming months. The only silver lining in this bleak scenario is that daily infection in India has come down to less than 50 thousand, and recovered patients have out-numbered the new cases daily. The recovery rate increased to more than 90%, and the death rate reduced to less than 1.5% [2].

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We have seen the various preventive measures are taken worldwide, including our country, vary from complete

to partial lockdowns of countries, states, regions, or smaller localities. These measures have had a significant impact on the economy, society, household, and individual level. Especially affected are fragile and vulnerable groups like the elderly, disabled, migrants, refugees, homeless, women, children.

We all know the basic definition of health as given by WHO (1948) as “*health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*”[3]. A little modification is added to this later by WHO (1984) as that “*health is a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living*”[3]. In an article, the Lancet (2009) defined health as ‘the ability of a body to adapt to new threats and infirmities’[4]. This definition is especially relevant today as the world combats one of its biggest transformative challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Wellness Institute’s definition of health and wellness as follows: “*Wellness is the active process of becoming aware of, and making choices towards, a healthy and fulfilling life.*” It has described various dimensions of wellness, including financial, occupational, social, environmental, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional wellness[5]. A detailed discussion of all these factors is beyond the scope of the present article. We will be focussed on emotional wellness, understanding one’s feelings and coping effectively with stress, paying attention to self-care, relaxation, stress reduction, and the development of inner resources and strength. We have seen these health and wellness have been severely impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The topic will be discussed in three broad groups: (i) first, a general narrative will be given on various health issues in Covid, and post-Covid-19 scenario; (ii) next, a special brief narrative will be there on mental health issues in Covid and post Covid-19 scenario; (iii) and finally, the way forward, keeping in view of this year’s theme of World Mental Health Day/week ‘***Mental Health for All: Greater Investment – Greater Access***’.

GENERAL HEALTH ISSUES IN COVID AND POST COVID-19 SCENARIO

We all have heard PM Narendra Modi’s first broadcast to the entire nation during the first lockdown period

with the slogan “***Jaan hai to jahaan hai***” there is a world out there only if you stay alive. In other words, it is the survival that is a precursor, a pre-requisite to having a life [6]. This thought of survival is dominating and will dominate the thinking of most people around us, before all other things or activities in the days and months to come. Health has become an important theme in common man’s daily lives. Precaution and prevention of illness have started dominating the thoughts of common people. Social distancing has become the new mantra, during the first partial lifting of lockdown, with PM Modi’s new slogan “***do gaz ki doori mask hai zaroori***” becoming a must while interacting socially[7].

The use of masks, gloves, hair nets, no contact deliveries, hand-washing, and sanitizers has become a daily habit of our citizens. The new health lexicon for the common public’s lips now is isolation, quarantine, containment, etc. Prime Minister’s next slogan follows “***jaan bhi jahaan bhi,***” and though some of the cautions got diluted by this, now onwards health sensitivities amongst common people got ingrained sharp and strong[8].

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease in the US, said, probably, “***we should never shake hands again.***” “*Maybe the world will embrace the Indian ‘namaste’ or the Japanese ‘ojigi’ (bow)*” [9]. The doctor will be no longer the only source of information on health; they will come into the picture only at a much later stage of the health trip. More and more people are turning to a variety of digital platforms to understand their health problems and concerns. Google has become the number one destination for health queries. Most searched items on Google at the onset of the pandemic are ‘loss of smell,’ ‘yoga at home,’ plasma therapy,’ etc. So, Search and self-awareness has and will become a critical part of the health and wellbeing of the common public in the times to come.

The Aarogya-Setu app has been made compulsory by the government for its employees [10]. It has become a must for travel, and health Passports are becoming mandatory for travel. Building immunity has become the new mantra with many home remedies, magic formulae, wonder foods, immune supplements are flooding the market and being tried in the quest to strengthen the body against infections. Prevention through various alternate medicines, especially Ayurveda,

has become the talk of the town. In Ayurveda, there are concepts of “Dinacharya” - daily regimes and “Ritucharya” - seasonal regimes to maintain a healthy life. Ayurveda advocates drinking warm water and the daily practice of ‘yogasana’, ‘pranayama’ and ‘meditation’ to boost one’s innate immunity[11].

Thus the ‘life style health is a new consciousness’ now-a-days. COVID-19 has forced a significant lifestyle change, especially when billions around the globe forced into lockdowns. We are choosing a more vegetarian diet, opting for less travel, indulging more in meditation, and giving more quality ‘me’ time for ourselves[12]. During the post-COVID-19 scenario, “occupational health” will demand more attention; occupational safety and health will take on even greater importance. But in our country, where 90 percent workers work in the private and unorganised sector and are forced to work in cramped and unhealthy workplaces, it will be a herculean task to address occupational health issues[13].

Telemedicine is surging and will surge further in the post-COVID-19 period. The corona crisis acted as the trigger for large-scale trial and acceptance of telemedicine. Patient acceptance, physician cooperation, and legal and liability issues have all got fast-forwarded. With social distancing is now a universal norm, the general public will insist more and more on new technologies that don’t force them to visit hospitals or clinics. So, telemedicine is here to stay and expected to grow at a faster rate in coming months [14].

Healthcare cost is expected to cost higher in the days and months to come, and health insurance will cover less and will cost more. In the post-COVID-19 scenario, the cost of treatment of the viral infection may run into lakhs of rupees. In a worse scenario, many private hospitals are turning back the Covid infected patients while government hospitals are over-full and ill-equipped. In the coming days, health insurance covers will see significant changes due to this pandemic outbreak, and the insurance premiums are expected to see sharp hikes of 25-40 percent during renewals [15]. The disease is and will be debilitating for those infected, both financially and physically.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN COVID AND POST COVID-19 SCENARIO

Many epidemiologists opine mental illness will be the

‘next wave’ as a sequelae to COVID-19 pandemic [16]. Covid-19 resulted a sudden and stark change in the way people live their lives. As we are returning to some semblance of normality, we are faced with the long-term impact this pandemic will have on mental health. COVID-19 pandemic is leading to mass unemployment, depleted social safety nets, starvation, increase in gender-based violence, homelessness, loan defaults, and millions more population slipping into poverty [17].

In India, at-risk populations include 150 million people with pre-existing mental health issues, Covid-19 survivors, those who are quarantined, frontline medical workers, young people, differently abled people, women, workers in the unorganized sector, the millions of migrants returning home, and the elderly, esp., with comorbid physical illnesses [19].

This post-Covid landscape is a fertile breeding ground for chronic stress, anxiety, depression, alcohol dependence, and deliberate self-harm, leading to an overall significant rise in morbidity and mortality through suicide linked to mental health [20]. Each one of us reacts differently to stressful situations borne out of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. How we respond to this stress depends on our background, our social support from family or friends, our financial situation, our health and emotional background, the community we live in, etc.

Signs and symptoms of stress overload include emotional symptoms like anxiety and agitation, depression or general unhappiness, moodiness, irritability, or anger, feeling overwhelmed, loneliness, and isolation. Cognitive symptoms of stress include memory problems, inability to concentrate, poor judgment, seeing only the negative, constant worrying, etc. Physical symptoms of stress include chest pain, rapid heart rate, breathlessness, tremulousness, dry mouth, diarrhea or constipation, nausea, dizziness, etc. Behavioral symptoms of stress include sleeping too much or too little, withdrawing from others, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax, and various nervous habits (*e.g.*, nail biting, pacing) [21].

Healthy ways to cope with stress arising due to the COVID-19 lockdown scenario is briefly as follows: (i) contact a health professional before you start any self-

treatment for COVID-19, (ii) know where and how to get treatment and other support services and resources, including counseling or therapy (in person or through telehealth services), (iii) take care of your emotional health-It will help you think clearly and react to the urgent needs to protect yourself and your family, (iv) take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including those on social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting, (v) take care of your body: Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate, (v) eat healthy and well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, avoid drugs and alcohol use, (vi) make time to unwind. Try to do some other activities you enjoy, (vii) connect with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling, (viii) connect with your community- or faith-based organizations. While social distancing measures are in place, consider connecting online, through social media, or by phone or mail [22].

Reaction to severe stress and adjustment disorders secondary to Covid-19 infection may result in acute stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or adjustment disorder. A detailed discussion of these disorders is beyond the scope of this essay. Similarly, this pandemic has seen an increase in frequency and severity of various anxiety and depressive disorders and substance abuse disorder.

Suicide needs a special mention here. Every year one million people commit suicide, accounting for about 2 percent of total global mortality. This means, globally, one person commits suicide every 40 seconds [23].

As per the report of Suicide Prevention India Foundation, rural India is expected to be particularly susceptible to suicide due to the influx of migrant workers and also because it is home to the at-risk farming community. The reverse migration of millions of day workers to their villages is also fertile ground for deterioration of mental health scenario in rural India [24]. News of suicides poured in from India and the world over, during this lockdown and subsequent period. During two months of devastating lockdown in USA, doctors at one California clinic said they'd seen more suicides than Covid-19 deaths [25].

Warning signs of suicide help us to answer the critical

question what is our patient doing (observable signs) or saying (expressed symptoms) that elevates his or her risk to die by suicide in the next few minutes, hours, or days? Higher-level warning signs are threats of harming or killing self, seeking means, such as access to weapons or pills, talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide, and giving away personal belongings. Lower-level warning signs are various symptoms of depression like hopelessness, rage, anger, seeking revenge, acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, feeling trapped, increased alcohol or drug use, withdrawing from friends, family, society, anxiety, agitation, insomnia, hypersomnia and dramatic changes in mood [26,27].

Suicide prevention measures include removal of access of instruments of suicide. Treat sleep disturbances and Insomnia, as insomnia is a well-established suicide risk factor. Provide adequate social support; as we know, social support is a well-established suicide protective factor. It also promotes belonging, provides appraisal, nurtures self-esteem, and allows for tangible support. Close buddy watch to be followed, another member at home, hostel, usually a close relative or friend, is assigned to constantly monitor the at-risk member [27].

Child and adolescent mental health: According to UNESCO, by April 2020, schools were suspended in 188 countries. Over 90% of enrolled students, about 1.5 billion young people, worldwide are now completely or partially disconnected from education. Approximately 10% to 20% of all young people experience mental health problems. We can expect this number is likely to increase significantly in the days and months to come in this corona pandemic period. Many children and young people are struggling with lockdown experience. They are missing the security that school, friends, and normal activities used to provide them. Managing their lives online and meeting study demands has become impossible for some. Teachers witness student's distress more and more, and these teachers will need to be trained so as to support their students appropriately and refer, if necessary. Isolation and confinement at children and adolescent age group and staying at home for extended periods dramatically changes their normal daily and social routines [28].

There is an increased risk of different types of addictions in the children like misuse of the internet, online

gaming, social media, and use of recreational drugs and alcohol. Such behaviours increase depression, anxiety and stress among secondary school students.

What we can do to help our loved one with a mental illness in present scenario? If we know someone with a mental illness, now is the time to step up and make sure we are helping them in whatever way we can. Reach out—be it via video, phone, text, or social media—to check in and be an active part of their support group. Now that lockdown period is over, reach out to the needy one physically. Reach out with the intention of letting them know that we are there and wanting to know how they are. Tell them we have been thinking about them and genuinely ask how they are doing. Remember that, this simple act of connecting with another human being can be life-saving.

EPILOGUE : World Mental Health Day is observed on October **10** every year. Theme for this year's World Mental Health Day is '**Mental Health for All: Greater Investment – Greater Access**' [29]. The goal is to help raise mental health awareness around the world and to put all our efforts in support of mental health. The first World Mental Health Day was observed on October 10, 1992. 'Kindness' announced as the new theme for Mental Health Awareness Week 2020, in response to the coronavirus outbreak. In a Joint press release by the World Health Organization, United for Global Mental Health and the World Federation for Mental Health on World Mental Health Day, on October 10 highlighted following things: (i) mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health, (ii) close to 1 billion people are living with a mental disorder (iii) Approximately 3 million people die from the harmful use of alcohol per year and (iv) one person dies from suicide every 40 seconds. And now, the COVID-19 pandemic has infected billions of people around the world, which is having a further effect on the mental health of people. So, we're potentially facing a post-COVID-19 mental illness tsunami. COVID-19 reminded us that mental health is no longer just a question of individuality. It is formed by relationships and livelihoods that allow us to belong to the society and to contribute to it. Recovery will require that we restore the socio-economic parameters of good mental health (*e.g.*, food, shelter, adequate income, social connection, etc.), empower local communities to support vulnerable individuals and families, encourage each of us to recognize our own distress and take responsibility for our mental health.

A post-COVID-19 landscape will, probably, be a fertile breeding ground for an increase in chronic stress, anxiety, depression, alcohol dependence, and self-harm. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged governments, civil society and health authorities to urgently address mental health needs arising from the coronavirus pandemic [31]. He said, 'After decades of neglect and under-investment in mental health services, the Covid-19 pandemic is now hitting families and communities with additional mental stress'. 'Rather than hurtling toward a post-Covid mental health crisis, this pandemic must be used as an opportunity to evaluate the current provision of mental health services. This means giving mental health services the long-overdue parity, we have desperately needed, to ensure we move forward for the better³¹. Tony Bates, professor of psychology, aptly said '*Covid-19 has not only shaken us up but it has also opened our eyes. We became kinder, more aware of how fragile we are, clearer about our values and appreciative of people whose services we previously took for granted*'.

Key recommendations, we can think of, to deal with post-Covid-19 mental health care demand are (i) The world is following the concept of universal health coverage. An integral part of UHC must be mental wellbeing. Ability to mental health care should not be denied to anyone because they are disadvantaged or live in a remote area (ii) according to WHO Mental Health Atlas (2017), mental health expenditure is less than 2% of global median of government health expenditure. This scenario has to change for the better, (iii) at least, double mental health spending over next 5-year planning period, (iv) ensure access to mental health services at PHC level, (v) patients with pre-existing mental health conditions, should get the care urgently, and finally, (vi) recruit, train and place of mental health staffs on priority basis at PHC level.

Finally, our Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi aptly said during his last 'Man ki Baat' radio-broadcast, "*Jab tak dawai nahi, tab tak dhilahi nahi*". We should not lower our guard, till an effective medication, an effective vaccine is available to us [32].

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