

An Adaptive Approach towards COVID-19: Managing Psychosocial Crisis

Maryam Khan & Sana Zeb

Abstract

Background: The world is facing an unprecedented challenge of COVID-19; which is undoubtedly giving an equally tough time to both, general public and vulnerable groups in terms of mental disruption and massive uncertainty. This paper is designed to review a few extensive scientific explorations for helping people understand the situation, plan their behavior and devise their adaptive approach towards this pandemic.

Methods: The present attempt was destined to review recent work to explore three specific questions like what are the prominent psychosocial challenges being faced by the masses, what should be the role of media in general and social media in particular (at present), and what would be the adaptive strategy to manage this hard time. Therefore, five recent research papers from a renowned journal - the lancet - were reviewed, specifically addressing the mentioned concerns. The inclusion criteria, as having the three month-timeline of April to June, 2020 publications, the papers addressing psycho-social impact of COVID-19, and a direction to respond the above mentioned questions, was specified.

Results: Findings, presented an increase in distress, anxiousness, suicide rate and self-harming tendencies; disorganized, threatening role of media; and a need to develop an understanding and careful distinction of social distancing, and loneliness along with building resilience to battle against this pandemic.

Conclusions: The study would help people to manage their emotional challenges and life activities as per the findings. Also, a food of thought for future consideration and a call for mental health practitioners for easing this transition back to normality is offered.

Keywords: COVID-19, Distress, Emotional blow, Mental Health, Psycho-education

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Background

The tantalizing segment of the day is undoubtedly featuring the psychological and social difficulties of COVID-19; coronavirus pandemic outbreak 2019. It has deeply deteriorating direct as well as indirect effects not only on human health but also intensive jerking for the social structure and global world order. All of the sudden shut of life is plainly reflecting the extrinsic along with intrinsic downfall starting from financial rift, moving through the domestic violence, trickling down slowly but terribly inside the brains and hearts of people. Thus, emotional challenges in these locked and isolated days are strikingly knocking and calling mental health professionals to come and rescue the seekers who believe in altering the mindsets for making the difference.

The current and future perspective to the situation presents that these effects would have lasting impact (Ford et al., 2020). The virus causing the complications is recognized as a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 being found as a threat for the brain tissues which may trigger immune responses, damaging the functioning of the brain and causing mental disruptions of the patients. Recent investigations have attempted to explore the neuro-psycho-social aspects of this problem and highlighted its massive influence for the common people.

It is asserted that mental health sciences: an umbrella terms for psychology, social and behavioral science, neuroscience, psychiatry and medicine needs to come up with integrated approach towards the treatment and management of the problem having multidisciplinary demands. The immersive scientific research and reviews would help defining the problem and finding the solution. This approach could help in addressing the behavioral issues of the masses to reduce the spread of disorder. It is perceived that the patients, frontline workers or all others who are directly exposed to the illness might experience serious mental breakdown in the form of emotional difficulties leading to the suicidal thoughts or even suicide because of stigmatization and difficult reactions of others. Also, the psychiatric patients might experience worse symptoms than usual and general population, might develop serious mental problems like anxiousness, depression, and post-traumatic stress, particularly addressing the growing emotional challenge that all such complications, are directly connected with suicide risk (Holmes et al., 2020).

The obvious mental disturbances might get fueled from the burning concerns of battling against COVID-19 through fearfulness, social distancing and self-isolation. It is found in an effectual investigation that the biggest adverse consequence of this situation has greater chances of increasing social isolation and loneliness which are the close correlates of depressive disorders and self-harming challenges eventually leading to the emotional reactions like suicide (Matthews, et al., 2019).

Loneliness and social isolation are two different concepts and could represent different pathways requiring to be carefully informed specifically to the administrative bodies for addressing the socioeconomic aspects of their policies to manage the spread of pandemic as these attempts are undoubtedly causing serious mental troubles due to the increase in the rate of unemployment, the continues threat

of financial insecurity, and mounting poverty in across the globe (Frasquilho et al., 2015). The researchers stated that the subjective reporting of lived experience by the sufferers would generate good piece of information for alleviating the negativities through better identified behaviors. The right balance of controlling infection and mitigating the mentioned socioeconomic complications would have promising outcomes to be struggled for (Prieto, & Sacristán, 2003).

The emotional challenges due to the outbreak of a pandemic might have different nature on the basis of different health control measure of different countries; the distinctive aspects of sociocultural characteristics along with demographic considerations, and the types or modes of available supportive measures. The situation might be more intense in resource-poor countries having critical economic problems as well as minimal or even lack of welfare services. Further, the administrative attempts of banning typical social events like funerals or religious gatherings would result in interpersonal or domestic violence and presents quite vulnerable situation for migrant workers. In this unprecedented time the difficulty lies in the growing curse of distress, fear and uncertainty, having a critical role in developing severe mental health complications like emotional disruptions causing suicide or self-harming tendencies (Kawohl, & Nordt, 2020). It is foreseen that such complications would have greater chances to last long even after the actual pandemic remission.

The other clear precipitants of these emotional challenges include massive alcohol consumption, mood swings, frustration and domestic violence during social isolation or in lockdown. It is also highlighted in recent researches that repeated exposure to the threatening information or excessive media reporting might increase fears, insecurities, death anxiety and irresponsible reporting of suicide might spike the respective increase in such intense reactions (Gunnell et al., 2020).

COVID-19 and Pakistan

COVID-19 is specifically posing a bit more drastic scenario in developing countries like Pakistan having difficult financial conditions in comparison with China, Russia, USA and UK to fight this pandemic outbreak. Testing facility, number of hospitals, and quarantine services are not sufficient (Waris et al., 2020). Also the reaction of general public is deeply entrenched with excessive worry, anxiety, fear of death, frustration and increasing psychological problems among masses along with specific worsening of conditions for the people who were already suffering with psychological disorders (Mian, 2020). Further, typical mind-sets, a few cases of physical abuse and domestic violence are igniting this situation, and all these features have serious emotionally challenging repercussions.

In this paper, an attempt is made to thoroughly review the currently available scientific insight, specifying it for the exploration of psycho-social aspects to respond the emotional challenges in an affirmative manner.

Method and Procedure

This paper incorporated the systematic review approach and a few recent studies on COVID-19 pandemic were specifically considered to collect the information about some existing psycho-social concerns. It included, the

five recent research papers from a renowned journal, the lancet, for addressing three concerns as what are the prominent psychosocial challenges being faced by the masses, what should be the role of media in general social media in particular, and what would be the adaptive strategy to manage this hard time. The inclusion criteria, as having the three month-timeline of April to June, 2020 publications, the papers addressing psycho-social impact of COVID-19, and a direction to respond the above mentioned questions, was specified. The role of cognitions, emotions and behaviors was further explored with reference to the current problem, role of media in terms of disseminating information and causing hoax was addressed and finally the effectual attempts or behavioral measures for meeting the emotional challenges of the hour were gathered from the well-established researching bodies to create awareness among masses and to help mental health strugglers as well as general public.

The conventional content analysis was the employed approach to thoroughly analyze the selected papers, and get the suitable response for the study questions. The relevant, combined, repeated and endorsed information was gathered and designed accordingly to present the scientific knowledge for answering today's serious concerns.

Results

The persistent findings of a few explorations in terms of the above mentioned concerns reflected enormous effects of social distancing on mental wellbeing of the individuals. It is being reported that there is a continual rise in emotional challenges like stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and associated negative feelings along with consciousness of masses about the practical implications of the response towards COVID-19, specifically pointing the financial complications. An insightful element of such mental difficulties is reported as the biggest challenge for the family members and significant others of the patients, frontline workers and other members who are directly exposed to the condition in some manners.

Firstly, excessive feelings of distress, suicide and social harm are reflected among the behaviors and feelings of the general public as well as the mental strugglers due to isolation and retarded life-activities (Gunnell et al., 2020). Further, substance misuse, domestic violence, child abuse, increase in crime rate and other psychosocial complications like unemployment, emotional disturbance, bereavement, sense of loss, relational damages and lack of social connectivity, along with a growing rate of cybercrimes in the form of bullying and harassment are complicating the situation (Turecki, 2019).

Secondly, role of media is found to be quite crucial in terms of having power to disseminate both adaptive and maladaptive messages. It informs as well as misinforms and even increases the terror, uncertainty and fearfulness among masses (Wang et al., 2019). The bombardment of information from different media forums has added fuel to the fire by amplifying negativities and impairing an appropriate functioning of life. It further worsened the condition by promoting emotional hype creating complications for the health-care system because people are getting over conscious, visiting again and again emergency departments, hoarding the desired materials like face masks and sanitizers et cetera (Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020).

The need is to highlight the true responsibility of media for the spread of effective and reasonable information to assist public in understanding the problem and directing them to manage their behavior.

Lastly, the need of psycho-education for helping people identify the inherent inhibitions to change their mind-sets regarding the pandemic and to follow the instructions of health practitioners, adopting effective strategies, practicing stress management techniques et cetera are considered to be the effectual attempts to manage the crisis situation.

Discussion

The present study attempted to review the recent scientific literature for addressing three key concerns as found direly needed to be addressed. Researches are advocating that the pandemic has increased emotional challenges for the general public and aggravated the psychological complications of patients with existing mental-illness. The literature presented that the basic problem of the day is the gruesome increase in fear, anxiety and stress of the people getting worsen day by day due to the uncertain situations and social disruptions of life activities like financial crisis, frustration due to sudden stoppage of daily routine, lack of outdoor exposure, domestic abuses and difference of opinion resulting violence, inability to discuss problems and meet the distant living loved ones, et cetera are generating serious emotional troubles (Holmes et al., 2020). Therefore, an immersive review of relevant scientific papers was executed to come up for the answers of a few emerging concerns.

The cognitions, feelings and behaviors of people suffering directly or indirectly due to the exposure of COVID-19 was explored to identify the emotional challenges having scientific documentation. Secondly, the role of media, the way it is being perceived by viewers and listeners, and the nature of information it is delivering was investigated and potential feature are identified. Lastly, the adaptive strategies and affirmative measures were explored to give food for thought and cautions to be taken for better adaptation of the irregular, tormenting and critically demanding situation of the pandemic. This all presents that the change of mindsets in a better way would be very promising to understand, decide and perform for the continuation of life activities with an inculcation that it is crucial but a manageable cold.

It is reported that the emotional challenges in the form of increase in stress, anxiety, depression and self-harming attempts including suicide are the prominent outcomes of social distancing and it is elaborated that this rise could be controlled with national policies and mitigation efforts of administration and respective bodies (Gunnell et al., 2020). The economic down turn is expected to be among one of the burning issues to inflict distress for those who are actually effected through it and also for their families. In 2003, the severe acute respiratory syndrome was reported as an epidemic resulting in an increase of 30% suicide rate among the individuals of 65 years and the older ones, and even after recovery 50% of the patients were found to be still anxious; and the proportion of health care workers being suffered from emotional distress was reportedly 29%. Those who survived that life threatening damage were found to be at the risk of developing clinical depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Tsang,

Scudds, & Chan, 2004). Many of the above mentioned psycho-social consequences of quarantine (Brooks et al., 2020) and social distancing behaviors are itself leading to mental complications.

The necessity is to track loneliness and intervene timely to reduce such feelings and to promote sense of belongingness among masses, which is regarded as essential mechanism to meet emotional challenges like self-harm and suicide et cetera (O'Connor, & Kirtley, 2018). People needs to understand the difference of social isolation and loneliness for properly planning their moves and managing the life activities accordingly. It must be recognized by the administrative bodies as well to keep this point in mind while devising the policies to manage COVID-19 at national level particularly gauging their socioeconomic impact (unemployment, poverty, etc.) which in turns disturbs the mental health of people (Frasquilho et al., 2015). The studies reported that lived experiences of individuals presented that the right balance of pandemic control and alleviation of socioeconomic complications would result in promising outcomes (Prieto & Sacristán, 2003).

Properly mapping out the healthy mental lifestyle requires optimal structure depending upon the contextual background and resource conditions of the individual for battling against COVID-19. The change of sleep and diet patterns along with all other life activities is also found to be associated with mental health concerns and development of distressful tendencies. The paramount importance is devoted to the understanding of specifically tailored individualized coping styles (Folkman, & Moskowitz, 2004). Further, proper sleep, healthy diet, sound familial interaction et cetera are the important resources to be resilient in these traumatic exposures (Sehmi, Maughan, Matthews, & Arseneault, 2019)

The role of media and social media is depicted to be crucial requiring critical guidance to deliver effectual information. It has both positive and negative impacts on the mental health of the public. It is reported that the media reports of pandemic are elevating risk for the amplification of anxiety among masses. Media is creating a false alarm of highly traumatic and threatening condition so, the research is suggested to be conducted for the purpose of defining and highlighting the real role of media. It needs to emancipate the information regarding the future approaches, presenting strategies for individuals to handle the situation, prevention of overexposure to despondency being spread-up by news and manage the impact of the broadcasting of traumatic images and content. Researchers are asking for the work on developing strategies to mitigate individuals' exposure to excessive, unwanted and misinformation and promotion of emotion management strategies and techniques. Positive role of media, adaptive measures and compliance strategies from influential role models are suggested to be endorsed and harnessed.

Moreover, the focus on behavioral change for instance, repeated hand washing, use of tissue, prohibiting the touch of the T-zone of the face, and maintaining social distance et cetera requires consistent reminders, public service messages about what to do, how to do, to motivate people to follow instructions and avoiding negative consequences are identified as a key (Holmes et al., 2020). Proper education, and increase in confidence of people with

clarity regarding an adherence to health protective measures (Peters, Ruiters, & Kok, 2013) would help them managing distress. Further, researchers are working on deciding the research priorities for the effective and specific exploration in social, psychological and neuroscience particularly addressing this pandemic and its influential aspects through these disciplines while talking about emotional challenges.

Apart from that, reducing excessive exposure to news and taking break from these misery creating coverages would prove to be beneficial in these days. Reading and writing good stories, books, scientific exploration, listening music or productive information, enjoying oneself, and having creative digital technology usage are a few choices to have extensive experiences. Also, connecting with people, particularly loved ones, talking and expressing concerns, and maintaining good interactions (Mian, 2020) would not only reduce but also can remove emotional disturbance and mental complications of public.

Implications and suggestions

This review paper has sufficient material for understanding the situation and responding in a well-organized and a bit more desired manner. The ways to manage emotional challenges and avoiding excessive media exposure are addressed for adapting the exceptional circumstances. Also, the future research considerations would easily be sought out through this effort.

Conclusion

The extensive review of the scientific researches addressing the novel outbreak of COVID-19 along with its world-wide impact, since last three months, presented a sharp increase in the rate of mental complications and emotional challenges due to the growing uncertainty of the pandemic. The need of psycho-education to help people understand the situation and plan effectively is highlighted along with some genuine directions for media and specifically social media to use their powers positively and efficiently for guiding people in this difficult time. Lastly, careful attempts and positive mind-sets can facilitate people to adapt these unusual circumstances.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: The authors are well informed and declared no competing interests.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank all students who participated in the current study.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request.

Author's contributions

MK: study design, literature search, first draft, manuscript revisions, approval of the final version.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The integrate study was approved by the National Institute of Psychology Review Board. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

Competing interests

The authors declare to have no competing interests.

**Received: 11 November 2019 Accepted: 25 July 2020
Published online: 31 August 2020**

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