

## Psychosocial Support during COVID-19 Pandemic

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
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### Abstract

Amid COVID-19 pandemic, the entire world is having to deal with the physical and mental health crisis along with the different psychosocial issues. Alarming number of deaths globally has made the people survive a strict lockdown, shutdown and prohibition period which accelerated adaptive and maladaptive human responses to the crisis. These maladaptive human responses are correlated with adverse physical and mental health issues. During the time of pandemic, primary symptomatic treatments along with the preventive measures psychosocial support is crucial to better deal with the global crisis. The most significantly recommended psychosocial support during COVID-19 includes; staying informed, focusing on self-care, connecting to others virtually, taking time for physical activities, making schedules and seeking for help if needed.

**Key words:** Pandemic, Psychosocial Support, COVID-19

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### INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the coronavirus in December 2019 commonly known as COVID-19 rapidly progressed from China and within a span of a few months turned into a worldwide pandemic leading to a severe global health emergency and psychosocial shock event. The World Health Organization recognized it as a pandemic, with no known vaccine or specific antiviral treatment till date.<sup>1</sup> Its outbreak and an increasing death toll of more than one hundred thousand people across the globe<sup>2</sup>,

has left people having to survive the strict lockdown leading to travel restriction and curfews. People are terrorized with the fear, doubt, and uncertainty of being infected with the virus, fear of being the vector for others, followed by other psychosocial issues leaving neither rich nor poor aloof.

In addition to this, the economic meltdown has been one of the major setbacks of the century followed by this pandemic in several sectors resulting in severe global socio-economic disruption. There is a widespread

shortage and price gouging of supplies due to panic buying of essentials like first aid kits, sanitizers, toilet paper, etc.<sup>3</sup> Covid-19 has repeatedly been described as a killer virus, has perpetuated the sense of danger and uncertainty among health workers and the public.<sup>4</sup> With this difficulty of prevention, treatment, and control, even for the well-developed countries with the best health care facilities, countries around the world including the Government of Nepal have been practicing lockdown with the possibility of further elongation to flatten the curve.

### **Mental Health Issues during COVID -19**

Mental health becomes the critical and integral part of the pandemic response.<sup>5</sup> Stress responses during and in the immediate aftermath of threatening events are correlated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes over time.<sup>6</sup> These stress responses like nightmares, anger, irritation, fear of being infected, guilt, etc., followed by pandemic and lockdown, is normal to experience resulting in overburdened health care facilities triggering the help-seeking behaviours. Apart from the physical suffering, the suspected and confirmed cases of the COVID-19 may experience fear of severe disease consequences and contagion<sup>4</sup> leading to experiences of loneliness, denial, anxiety, depression, insomnia. Health professionals found that more than half of the participants reported depressive symptoms, anxiety, and sleep disturbance.<sup>7</sup>

### **Psychosocial Support during COVID -19**

Center for disease control and prevention states the primary treatment being symptomatic and supportive therapy along with the recommended preventive measures like handwashing, covering one's mouth when coughing, practicing social distancing, self - isolation and quarantine for people who

suspect themselves of being infected. Yet, social distancing and isolation are not good for mental wellbeing, say, experts. Researchers have found that quarantine could increase the sufferers' anxiety and guilt and despair, with increased risk of aggression and suicide.<sup>8</sup>

Front-line workers during this time of crisis including health professionals, counselors, psychologists, psychotherapists, security forces are more prone to be infected by the virus and other mental health issues. Recent research findings suggest about the effects of contagion and stigmatization<sup>4</sup>, societal rejection, financial loss and discrimination, and high prevalence of psychological distress and disorder.<sup>9</sup> This is also the reason why widely used social distancing is now replaced by physical distancing which emphasizes keeping a safe distance from others physically followed by staying together through different means. Psychological ramifications can be long-lasting even after the epidemic has ended<sup>10</sup>, for this reason, it asks for continuous mental health and psychosocial support.

More than long psychotherapy or counseling sessions, brief psycho-social support, and psychological first aid is crucial for this crisis intervention. Recently, National Association of Clinical Psychologist has published the guidelines for remote psychological first aid. Even then an individual is not suspected to be infected by Covid-19, having to be locked down in-home, is contributing to many psychological issues. And it is important to help ourselves to be able to deal with these issues. Here is what we can do:

### **Dealing the pandemic situation**

The Covid-19 pandemic is new to all of us. There is no actual right or wrong way to deal with the pandemic. Some people may increase

their productivity while others may not be able to do so. Whether being able to perform well or being unable to stay motivated at this time both could be the normal responses in conditions like this. So, it is important not to pressurize oneself as there is no fixed road map to get through this.

Also, it is necessary to keep in mind that some things are unalterable regarding this pandemic condition. The utmost importance should be taken for things under our control, as Physical distancing, making health choices for self, seeking fun in day-day activities, trusting authentic sources for Covid-19 related news, etc.<sup>11</sup> However, some things are beyond our control as the length of stay of this virus in the world, the aftermath of a pandemic situation, the action of others, etc. Focusing on things we can control helps us in combating with situations effectively.<sup>12</sup>

### **Stay informed**

People across the globe tracked the news and updates of unfolding crisis via live streams, victim counts, updates on the discovery of policies, plans for managing impact, etc. This flared up the news rapidly. However, having the feeling of missing the information makes us anxious and stressed. That's why we over-read or listen to or watch the news. Doing so can result in infodemics - the condition when we collect excessive amounts of information concerning the problem that the solution is made difficult. Hearing or watching the news about the crisis repeatedly can make us distressed but also at the same time research shows that the limited knowledge of the COVID-19 and the overwhelming news may lead to anxiety and fear.<sup>13</sup> The common problem with too much exposure to news is information disorder. It includes:

**Dis-information:** this is when false information is shared with the intent to harm others.

**Mis-information:** false information is shared but it does not have the intent to harm others. It may also be due to the mistake.

**Mal- information:** this is when true information is shared with the intent to harm others. It occurs often by leaking the information that is expected to stay private into the public sphere.

Polluted information streams are the characteristics of our modern, networked, and the increasingly polarised world.<sup>14</sup> Followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation regarding Covid-19 could contribute a lot to mental health issues like an irrational fear, nightmares, anxiety, obsession, suicides, and so on rather than Covid-19 itself. So, avoiding too much exposure to the news, checking for the authenticity of the news, and following the authentic news portal to stay informed is crucial to be able to support ourselves and our children adolescents during the time of crisis.

### **Learning to acknowledge and accept**

Experiencing a tremendous amount of fear with a flare of positive corona cases, increased death rate, and even dealing with the loss of near one, time and again we seem to experience feelings that range from ok to feeling anxious, stressed, and depressed at different time zones. Also, the issues of unemployment, unexpected disruption in time zones, financial security, the welfare of close ones, etc have stretched the unhelpful thought patterns. There is swaying of emotions that follow during such a condition. In fact, there is no right or wrong way to think.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging the facts and demands of the current pandemic condition virus help us to

turn our minds towards accepting the bitter reality of the situation and making a way to deal with the prevalent situation rather than questioning oneself for how one feels.<sup>15</sup>

### **Focus on the self-care**

During a crisis situation like this we may feel stressed /overwhelmed. So, it is important to equip ourselves to take care of ourselves and others. Taking care of ourselves during times of crisis helps us to think clearly and respond to our urgent needs to protect ourselves and our family members rather than being reactive. Also when things calm down, we can bounce back, clearing the debris of the impactful situation and get through the aftermath of the whole situation.<sup>16</sup>

General notion of self-care is physical but self-care may be in different forms; physical self-care, psychological self-care, emotional self-care, financial self-care, spiritual self-care, environmental self-care, professional self-care and social self-care.<sup>17</sup> For instance, an individual preparing for Lok Sewa Aayog can do their professional self-care investing this time of pandemic in collecting the information or resources materials to get prepared for the competitive exams where as some others could take care of themselves by having nutritious food, taking appropriate food which forms the physical self-care rather than taking in the productivity pressure from the environment.

### **Connect to others**

The current situation of Covid -19 demands the need to maintain physical distancing keeping the social/relational connection with others intact. It is important to do it at this point of time also because sharing our concerns about how we are feeling with one of our trusted friends or family members helps to reduce the intensity of the feeling and feel safe and enhances our strong support

system. Sometimes, a simple hello or namaste or asking how somebody is doing, helps to stay connected. Also, different social media have been useful in breaching the gap between isolation and ensuring connectedness.

Social connection is an important aspect of human life, as this can reduce the further rise in the issues of loneliness, says psychiatrist Dr. Carolyn Boulos. Ignoring the need to connect with others during this pandemic may bring about challenges in addressing other health risks as stress, low immune function, diminished resilience capacity<sup>18</sup>

### **Take time out for physical activity**

Physical activity plays an important role in making an individual physically and mentally healthy but the prolonged period of staying at home during this period of isolation and quarantine has posed a challenge for staying physically active. Several studies have shown that exercise can act as a powerful tool in creating differences in the way we think and feel. Especially during stressful conditions, engaging in activities may be therapeutic in itself by boosting the mood, reducing the stress, improving the sleep, maintaining focus, etc.

Simple activities like organizing the room, managing the garden, getting engaged in discovering new habits such as cooking, dancing, painting etc. could also set a way forward for getting along activity. So, setting a small, manageable goal<sup>12</sup> and accomplishing it, further boosts in continuing the flow of action.

### **Lifestyle changes and eating habits**

During the periods of emotional distress and confusion, eating and sleeping habits become erratic.<sup>19</sup> With regards to food habits, either insatiable appetite or loss of appetite may

arise with stress, boredom, loneliness, sadness, fear etc. So, one must be careful to avoid skipping meals to get rid of emotional eating and binge eating<sup>20</sup>

The dietary intake influences the quality of sleep.<sup>21</sup> Several researches suggests that the lack of sleep has been found to be associated with overeating patterns or craving for high calories food. And during the time of pandemic, it is crucial to be able to take care of diet and sleep. So, it is recommended to set up a daily sleep schedule, minimize the use of caffeine and devices before bedtime, and reduce irregular or long naps during the day are several ways to improve sleep.<sup>20</sup> Having no vaccines or any other treatment for Covid-19, the only way to fight against the virus is our enhanced immune system. Research suggests correct nutrition requisites and balanced sleep patterns is crucial in preparing the immune system to respond against viruses well.<sup>21</sup>

### **Make a schedule**

Having some form of routine/making a schedule might be helpful as routines offer a sense of structure and stability in day-day tasks and aids in lessening the anxiety.<sup>22</sup> However, sticking to the usual activity has been disrupted, as getting along with the pandemic is a race in itself that has left people in despair and grief. Having said this, it is important to create a routine that serves for the self -discovery of the whole family to bring about a holistic environment and sense of togetherness. It is not an easy task to implement a new routine in one go. So, it is also important to recall oneself that as old habits took a certain time to form, adapting to a new schedule will also take time. Schedule may not always have to be productive/result oriented but can be simple engagements activities as well e.g. workout/some exercises,

reading for certain hours every day, eating together, etc helps in gaining self-control after an unusual change in schedule mentions Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy, a holistic health counselor and CEO of Power Living Enterprises, Inc.<sup>23</sup> Further, psychotherapist Dana Dorfman states that there's no right way to deal with this pandemic other than finding a way to be yourself<sup>16</sup> So, not to be stuck and keep on moving whatever schedule fits in to yourself is the key idea.

### **Seek help**

Common signs of distress during the time of crisis are difficulty breathing, feelings of numbness, disbelief, anxiety or fear, change in appetite/sleep, difficulty concentrating, nightmares, upsetting thoughts, or images, and so on. In addition to this, there could be increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or others followed by the increased risk of abuse (child sex abuse, domestic violence, partner violence) and suicide. Sometimes asking for help is very necessary yet, since it makes us feel vulnerable, it could be a very difficult step. More than 70% of people worldwide who suffer from mental illness do not receive any mental health treatment from health care staff<sup>24</sup>. The likelihood of treatment avoidance or delay is due to the lack of knowledge to identify features, ignorance about how to access treatment, and stigma associated with mental illness.<sup>25</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite all the normal stress responses to severe mental health problems during the pandemic, remember it is okay to be not okay and it is more than okay to ask for help. If you or anyone you know are having any of these problems then please feel free to ask for help with a counselor / psychotherapist/clinical psychologist/psychiatrist as per need or link them to the concerned authority.



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