

Webinar – Is the World Experiencing Dual Pandemics: COVID and Mental Health? Let's talk Positive

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Abstract

Background: In partnership with the Poornima University, the Jodhpur School of Public Health conducted a participatory and live webinar on “Is the world experiencing dual pandemics- COVID and Mental Health? Let's talk positive.” On 15th May 2021. Dr. Naresh Nebhinani Additional Professor, Department of Psychiatry AIIMS Jodhpur was the distinguished speaker, who along with Poornima University co-founder Mr. Rahul Singhi and other panellists from Jodhpur School of Public health addressed the topic.

Findings: The COVID-19 pandemic and the shattering economy have resulted in a detrimental impact on many people's mental health around the globe. It has created new barriers among children, health workers, and elderly along with those who already suffer from mental illness. Every third person who was infected by COVID has shown some signs of mental health issues in one form or the other and prevalence of such disorders have increased by 35% in COVID. The role of behavioural changes towards mental health issues, along with positive attitude, better coping mechanisms, positive lifestyle changes including healthy living, sobriety, healthy eating, regular physical exercise, relaxation, spiritual practice, connectedness with family and close associates, balanced use of gadgets, proper sleep etc result in better outcomes and indicators of mental health resulting due to COVID 19 impacts could be controlled.

Conclusion: While the health-care system fights to rescue millions of lives on a daily basis, there is a significant risk of a looming pandemic of hidden mental health conditions that might devastate the present mental-health infrastructure. We need inter-disciplinary support of various sectors to execute the plan for people's participation to talk about mental health issues. With specialized psychological interventions and multi-stakeholder collaboration, we can easily curb mental health issues and have a positive outlook in life thereby establishing a balance despite external situations.

Key words: Mental Health, COVID 19, pandemic

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Introduction

An engaging and live global webinar on “COVID and Mental Health” was hosted by Poornima University and Jodhpur School of Public Health (JSPH) on May 15th, 2021. The webinar aims to highlight on the emerging cases of mental health disorders as a side effect of COVID 19 pandemic lockdowns and ways to develop various coping skills. COVID-19, like other pandemics in history, has resulted in highlighting mental health issues. According to an impact assessment conducted by the NNCBI, signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety-depression were more prevalent even after one year of Ebola response in the instance of the 2014 Ebola outbreak. The global HIV pandemic also provides a similar picture. It is found that the prevalence of mental illnesses in HIV-infected individuals is substantially higher than in the general population. Rapid human-to-human transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 resulted in the enforcement of lockdowns to stem the further spread of the disease (World Health Organisation). This resulted in isolation, social distancing, and closure of educational institutions, workplaces, and entertainment venues, forcing people to confine themselves to their homes in order to help break the transmission chain. Individuals’ social and mental health have clearly been harmed as a result of these restrictions. Therefore, the distinguished speaker and chairpersons of the webinar, along with other team members, met to discuss the current global situation of mental health issues amid COVID-19 outbreak, challenges and preventive measures, and future directions for long term victory to eliminate any mental health issues due to such outbreaks.

Overview and Findings:

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020.

COVID-19 Pandemic has reached a level of a humanitarian crisis with over 398 million confirmed cases and over 5.75 million deaths reported globally to date (till 9 February 2022) with India contributing almost over 42.4 million confirmed cases and about 5 lakh deaths. This global humanitarian crisis of COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed a significant risk to physical health and wellbeing, but has also

made an impact on mental health, which can have disastrous effects on the health system⁵. According to an impact assessment conducted by the NNCBI, signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety-depression were more prevalent even after one year of Ebola response in the instance of the 2014 Ebola outbreak. The global HIV pandemic also provides a similar picture. It has been found that the prevalence of mental illnesses in HIV-infected individuals is substantially higher than in the general population. Rapid human-to-human transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 resulted in the enforcement of lockdowns to stem the further spread of the disease (World Health Organisation). This resulted in isolation, social distancing, and the closure of educational institutions, workplaces, and entertainment venues, forcing people to confine themselves to their homes in order to help break the transmission chain. Individuals’ social and mental health has clearly been harmed as a result of these restrictions. There have been reports of mental health issues from all across the world. Stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, denial, rage, and fear were the most commonly reported mental health disorders. In this scenario, children and the elderly, frontline workers, and those with mental illnesses are the most susceptible. Suicides associated to COVID-19 are becoming more common. Mental health issues have been addressed globally through the use of guidelines and intervention strategies. In this context, social media has had a significant impact. The Government of India has released state-specific intervention methods, tele psychiatry consultations, and a toll-free number for psychological and behavioural concerns to address this critical issue.

Preventive Measures and Strategies:

The mental health issues are subject to behaviour change, Positive attitude in seeing the predominantly positive part i.e. glass half full, not half empty. It believes in ‘seed of equivalent benefit’ i.e. fixed purpose to make every experience, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, yield some form of benefit. It helps to maintain equanimity and to nurture resilience. Hence, a positive Attitude is very useful to everyone. Qualities of maintaining a positive outlook involve being more relaxed, comfortable, approachable, and more resilient. It is also labelled as Positive Mental

Attitude and is a plus characteristic in all of us. Individuals should strive to clear mental lenses so they are more able to see situations in an opportunistic manner. The 'Covey's Circle of Influence' highlights the importance of a Proactive approach compared to Reactive focus. Majority of people become reactive in any given situation, thus reducing one's circle of influence (things within our control). However if one becomes proactive, practical, positive, focused, with problem solving and adaptive approach in any given situation, one's circle of influence increases and one tends to keep the situation within control⁸. So, one must focus on problems and not on the emotions and should always remain proactive especially during these testing times.

The example of good or bad coping mechanisms could be explained by an example of 'Stress Bucket', where a bucket depicts resilience and a tap depicts coping behaviour. The size of the bucket depicts one's resilience. The more resilient one is, the better prepared one becomes to handle stress. However, the problem starts when this bucket overflows. If one is able to cope up with the stress, it will not affect the individual, however if one lacks a healthy coping approach, then one can land oneself into trouble. Therefore, if the bucket of resilience is large, and the tap of the bucket depicting a coping approach is working, one can handle any problem and related stress that comes one's way. Stress is a concept that depends on one's outlook, 'The concept explains that one needs to understand that stress is not only 'the pressure from outside, but it is also one's response to stressors. Stress prevention and management becomes easier if one improves on how to perceive and how to respond⁹.

Another healthy coping mechanism is explained through The Spoon Theory, created by Christine Miserandino, which materially explains the concept of energy in relation to mental illnesses and stress. Although the original example was used in relation to chronic illness, it applies to mental illnesses as well. The spoons represent the amount of energy a person has to spend on any given task in the duration of that day. If an individual wakes up to realize they do not have the mental energy to complete as many tasks as they were able to yesterday, they may characterize that as having only ten spoons. This means that

the individual should practice healthy coping mechanisms and realize that they will have to spend their spoons, or energy, wisely. For example, a list of tasks for an individual include brushing their teeth (which costs them two spoons), making breakfast (five spoons), and doing laundry (five spoons). This adds to a total of twelve spoons when the individual only has ten to spend. In this scenario, the individual can either save one task for another day or use more energy than they possess. The latter would take away from the next day's spoons and the cycle would repeat. However, if an individual wakes up with fifty spoons, they will have more than enough energy to tackle those same tasks and more. Thus, The Spoon Theory in relation to mental health is so important as it helps individuals recognize the amount of energy they have and can then take steps to help their mental health on any given day. It makes managing stress much smoother and can help an individual recognize their needs so they are better able to take care of their mental health.

There are several practices that everyone should follow as a routine: deep breathing, having a smiling face (keeps a person light, and positive), and pursuing a productive, exciting and active life. Setting goals, having a gratitude jar where one can show gratitude towards the world, god, cosmos and our near and dear ones who have made good things for them. The other solutions to a healthy life include physical exercise, good nutrition, self-reflection, mindfulness, and spirituality.

Due to the pandemic, we are encouraging immunity boosters, similar to that for mental health psychology. Immunity should be built which is a system of adaptive resources and positive characteristics¹⁰.

The Mental Health Care Act 2017 was passed on April 7, 2017 as part of the National Mental Health Program (NMHP) and went into effect on July 7, 2018. "An Act to provide for mental healthcare and services for persons with mental illness, and to safeguard, promote, and fulfil the rights of such persons during delivery of mental healthcare and services, and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto," the law stated in its first paragraph. The Mental Health Act of 1987, which was passed on May 22,

1987, was replaced by this Act. The program's main goals include ensuring that everyone has access to basic mental health treatment, supporting the application of mental health knowledge, encouraging community engagement in the development of mental health services, and improving human resource development.

Challenges:

We appear close to the finish line, yet we still have miles to run to successfully implement mental health strategies. There are many barriers to overcome to reach our goal of eliminating mental issues. Unfortunately, those most likely to be affected by Mental health issues are also finding it difficult to access healthcare, including knowledge gaps, stigma, shortage of human resources, and accessing quality of care when it comes to mental health issues.

The following are some of the challenges facing the prevention of mental health issues:

1. Knowledge gaps: While the issues of mental health have been prevalent for a long time in the society, they have been amplified by the pandemic. Yet, information regarding mental health is outdated or insufficient. We need to make sure that the best practices in this field are available and can quickly be disseminated.
2. Stigma: The stigma in society about mental health prevents people from seeking treatment. People are not encouraged to talk openly about these issues.
3. Access to care: mental health issues are not showing any visible symptoms which makes it challenging to seek professional care. Health services at any level do not have enough capacity to take care of this sensitive problem. The barriers to mental health care accessibility should be encouraged on a mass level. The insufficient mental healthcare policies, lack of education about mental illness, and disorders along with stigma in the society need to be addressed.

Conclusion

While the health-care system fights to save millions of lives on a daily basis, there is a significant risk of a looming pandemic of hidden mental health

conditions that might devastate the present mental-health infrastructure. To tackle the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, people's mental health must be addressed simultaneously with other measures for managing and controlling the disease and the pandemic as a whole. Specialized psychological intervention, as well as proper and consistent risk and crisis communication, are all essential. Major innovations in the field of testing, technology, and medicines have made the commitment to elimination possible. The need for awareness, affordability, and training is of utmost importance to reach the set goal.

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