

COVID-19: Psychological Impact and Psychotherapeutic Intervention

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Abstract

The Novel Corona Virus Disease (COVID 19) is a novel disease condition and highly contagious in nature. The alarming number of infections, resultant deaths worldwide and restrictive lockdowns in various countries including India has created a generic feeling of apprehension and panic. The stress related to Corona pandemic can be understood in framework of stress reaction, and majority of people would be capable of coping with it. However, continuation of the stress symptoms in anxiety prone and some specific populations could possibly trigger clinically significant anxiety and related symptoms and worsening of pre-existing physical and mental ill health conditions. This short communication aims to highlight the possible psychological impact of the corona pandemic in different populations and suitable psychotherapeutic approach to counter them.

Keywords: Corona Virus Disease (COVID 19); Psychological Impact; Psychotherapeutic Intervention

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness [1].

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic sweeps across the world, it is causing widespread concern, fear and stress, all of which are natural and normal reactions to the changing and uncertain situation that everyone finds themselves in isolation and quarantine help protect the public by preventing exposure to people who have or may have a COVID-19. Considering the highly contagious nature of the virus, several countries across the world, including India have imposed lock downs spanning more than a month. While these preventive measures are important to retard the spread of the virus, the stalling of usual daily routine has induced a sense of apprehension and anxiety among the mass.

Although all human beings are susceptible to the disease, specific groups have been identified as more at risk. These include but are not limited to: the elderly, children and those with underlying health conditions. This makes it likelier for these groups, their family members to feel more worried and fearful. When considering the psychological impact of the condition it is important to differentiate among the following with respect to the nature and severity of psychological impact:

- Patients infected with the virus and under treatment.
- Healthcare professionals treating affected individuals.
- Other health care workers and essential service providers.
- General unaffected Public in locked down situation.

As the corona virus is an altogether novel situation; its clinically significant psychological impact for both affected as well as those in isolation, confinement, or imposed lock down is not well documented. While most people are equipped to deal with stresses like confinement and isolation; the unavailability of cure for the condition, uncertainty regarding continuity and final resolution of the situation, and rising number of infections and death worldwide may trigger clinically significant anxiety features in anxiety prone persons and those in disadvantageous position in terms of daily life resources. Financial setback and possible loss of employment can trigger serious ramifications. In recent past India has witnessed several suicide cases by farmers due to debt burden and crop failure as one of primary reasons.

The psychological impact of COVID-19 can be well fit into the frame of acute/persistent stress. Broadly the resulting emotional and behavioural manifestations could be:

- Fear and worry about own health and the health of loved ones
- Persistent worry about financial loss incurred
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty concentrating and irritation
- Worrying about and actual worsening of chronic health problems
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

Many of the above stated symptoms could be auto resolving but as mentioned earlier, anxiety prone and people in disadvantageous position could be at risk of continuation of these stress reactions and further worsening of their existing physical and mental health conditions. It can be postulated that the pandemic may lead to increase in obsessive cleanliness in some people (which may not warrant clinical attention).

Role and approach of psychotherapy/counselling

In absence of cure for this disease at present, it is likely that people get overwhelmed, feeling anxious, overthink and resort to negative and faulty ways of thinking in face of stress. During this pandemic, behaviors like bulk purchasing and excessive cleaning are on the rise.

Underlying these behaviors are a range of negative thoughts and painful emotions. CBT tells us that excessive attempts to control are associated with thoughts such as "I am vulnerable," and assumptions that "If I don't over prepare, then I will fall victim". When we think this way, we feel fear and irritability. When thoughts, emotions and behaviors are aligned in this way, a repetitive cycle begins based on the belief "There is danger and whatever I do is inadequate". This is how individuals trying to gain control over situation ends up feeling less in control over the threat situation.

As the symptoms primarily have anxiety at its core; psychotherapy or counselling with a cognitive behavioural focus could be helpful in these conditions. The underlying principle of Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) focuses on recognising faulty ways of thinking, identifying cognitive errors in thinking, and restructuring them. CBT is uniquely suited to help people gain control of their lives and feel better. However, many people in preliminary stage may not require intensive CBT and may benefit from structured crisis intervention and supportive counseling.

Psychoeducation: Majority of the people upon detection with the COVID-19 or those indirectly affected due to effect of restrictions could benefit from psychoeducation. Psychoeducation is a tested and evidenced based approach used for enhancing insight of clients and caregivers to enhance treatment adherence, reducing stigma, and reducing worries regarding the illness condition. Primarily meant for psychiatric illnesses, psychoeducation has emerged useful in clinical trials as well as community settings [2] and in general medical conditions too. In contrast to traditional medical models, psychoeducation has a holistic and competence based approach stressing on health, collaboration, coping and empowerment [3]. The client and therapist are partners in the psychoeducation process working on the premise that knowledgeable care recipients and informal caregivers will have more positive health-related outcomes [2]. Psychoeducation for COVID need to incorporate detailing about the nature of disease, its risks and likely outcome. It may focus on preventive strategies, describing the very low mortality rate in premorbidly healthy people and chances of recovery. Real time statistics can be used to assert the facts. Letting the clients seek for scientific evidence (e.g. preventive strategies of repeated hand washing and social distancing) can help reduce repeated thoughts about the disease and further the related distress.

Similarly, a crisis intervention approach for infected and family members of infected people could be beneficial. People in crisis display psychological disequilibrium characterized by feelings of anxiety, helplessness, fear, inadequacy, confusion, agitation, and disorganization [4], a pattern expected for COVID-19 infected persons. Apart from the identification and assessment of the crisis, key components of crisis intervention relevant to COVID-19 could be brainstorming alternatives and discussion of available resources. It is suggested that the intervention should be adapted to suit different stages of the pandemic [5].

People with more intense psychological symptoms may need structured CBT. Considering the preventive and restrictive measures laid by authorities in different countries, therapy can be administered using online/telephonic mode, as already in practice in different parts of the world [6]. People could have anxious thoughts, preoccupations and erroneous thought patterns like catastrophization, filtering, jumping to conclusions, selective abstraction. The approach to deal with these would be conventionally CBT in nature including identifying the faulty ways of thinking, examining evidence (chances of one getting infected), considering odds, considering alternative ways of thinking, and assessing facts. Behavioural components too must be included in the process. Activity scheduling to maintain productivity and inclusion of social connectedness is very much recommended. Relaxation techniques, yoga and indoor exercises can help a great deal to counter the stress.

Conclusion

The psychological impact of corona pandemic can well be understood within the frame of stress reaction. The amelioration of symptoms could be self. Mild stress can be countered with Psychoeducation and crisis intervention approach, however people directly affected and with preexisting mental/physical health conditions may require structured psychotherapy within cognitive behavioural framework and expected to have positive outcome.

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