

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN INDIA: UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS OF SUICIDES DUE TO PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic is not just impacting tremendously on physical health, rather it has a serious effect on the psychological health as well as the mental health of individuals. This needs to be addressed on an urgent basis. The paper looks forward to examining the various kinds of repercussions the current pandemic is having with regards to the deterioration of mental health conditions among individuals, resulting in suicide. The outbreak of Coronavirus has brought about massive changes in India. A lot of misinformation is circulating and this has subsequently led to the creation of anxiety issues among individuals.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; mental health; suicide; India

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has infected 178,964,181 in the world and it claimed lives of 3,875,656 individuals across the globe (as on 20th June 2021) [38]. India has witnessed 2,98,81,405 cases with 3,86,741 deaths as on 20th June 2021 [38]. The only silver lining that provides a ray of hope is the discharged/ cured number of cases in India which stands at 2,87,58,560 as on 20th June 2021 [38]. The disease which started from Wuhan, China [1] is seen to be spreading across the world [2] like a wildfire and is responsible for causing high degrees of morbidity and mortality. The World Health Organisation (WHO) [3] declared COVID-19 as a pandemic as it led to this global health crisis. The pandemic has shaken healthcare systems worldwide. [4, 32]

The pandemic is considered as one of the deadliest and biggest challenge at the global level and can be designated as a global health crisis. [5, 31] During these testing times, issues of mental health were reported from across the globe. [6, 20] Mental health is the combination of emotional, psychological and social well being. It has an impact they way individuals, feel, think and display various behaviours. This also assists in determining as how people handle stress and also make various choices.

Considering the catastrophe the pandemic is capable of, it was witnessed that several countries initiated a lockdown process thereby to ensure maximum social distancing among individuals to curb the spread. [7–10] The mitigation strategies adopted by various countries included cancelling all mass gatherings as well as shutting down

educational institutions, places of work, religious places and places of worship [4,11] which could potentially trigger the spread of the pandemic. As a result, this led to a spike in the mental health issues.

In the testing times of the unavailability of vaccine for the virus and huge amount of population being susceptible to it, the need of the hour was to ensure mechanisms to avoid human contact, for which the lockdown was the best possible policy strategy developed. Lockdowns initiated by various countries had tremendous effect on the economy and several research studies raised concerns regarding enhancement of mental health issues. [12, 33] Scholarly studies have documented that lockdown and isolation has resulted in enhancement of psychological issues like, anxiety, panic attacks, depression, trauma and extreme levels of stress. [5, 13–17] Mamun and Griffiths [15] have stated in their studies that psychological issues might have contributed to around 90% of suicides.

COVID-19 is not only a national concern but has become a challenge faced at the global level, with almost all countries affected by it. In most countries, the healthcare sector is facing tremendous challenges to deal with the pandemic. In addition to that, no individual can make a proper forecast as how long the virus is going to stay and what number of individuals will be casualties. A pertinent challenge to deal with the pandemic is the asymptomatic nature of the disease. A major problem the pandemic is posing is that close to 80% of individuals with COVID-19 show mild or no symptoms of the same, which is termed "asymptomatic", and only 14% of affected individuals are said to be severe and another 6% are believed to be critically ill. A chain reaction has started, owing to the lock down initiated by the pandemic, which has resulted in salary reductions, job loss and rising rates of unemployment [18]. People are more than worried, as the world had not experienced anything of this kind before. These circumstances of job loss and unemployment appear to have huge psychological effects in terms of anxiety, depression and stress on people worldwide. [4] Sher in his article [1] has highlighted the fact that the tendency of suicidal thoughts among individuals may be a result of both neurobiological factors and psychological factors.

Social Media is largely responsible for creating unnecessary panic among individuals thereby spreading false and half-baked information. [34] Considering the large-scale uncertainty surrounding the virus and thereby the role of social media in compounding the misinformation, it is a

perfect breeding ground for posing large scale threats to the mental health issues of individuals. [34] COVID-19 has certainly aroused several narratives and discussions about the state of healthcare systems.

METHODOLOGY

An extensive review of literatures was basically conducted to carry out the study. The study is a narrative review trying to focus on the issues of suicides due to pandemic. The research paper included literature focussing on issues of suicides due to pandemic. Plenty of research papers are available on impact of COVID-19, however, only the research papers focussing on issues of mental health and suicide due to the impact of COVID-19 were taken into consideration.

The present research paper relies on information collected from secondary sources. Research papers, newspaper articles, books and reports were analysed for the present study. The keywords used to search for research articles were suicide, suicidal tendencies, COVID-19, and mental health. The central objective of this research paper is to understand the psychosocial impact of the current pandemic on individuals and subsequent development of suicidal thoughts and suicidal tendencies among Indians.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

The effect of pandemic is unimaginable and unpredictable. Such pandemics have brought about in the past tremendous burden on the economy as well as having had an impact on the mental health of various segments of the population. Issues like anxiety, stress, depression related issues are believed to be able to be addressed by social interaction. However, the current pandemic and its contagious nature, has demonstrated, has severely minimised social interactions. Lockdown, shut down and social distancing practices has even made things worse. Subsequently, it had a tremendous toll on the mental health of people. Suicides or suicidal tendencies are a byproduct of two extreme situations in society. As has been pointed by Durkheim, [36] extreme or less social integration can lead to suicide and extreme or minimal social regulation can lead to suicidal measures. [36]

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Various disease outbreaks, pandemics and epidemics are largely responsible for generating widespread fear and have the potential of inflicting negative thoughts in the minds of individuals. [4, 30] de Hoog, Stroebe and de Wit

[19] have defined fear as an unfavourable state of mind, which is the result of anticipation of a threat. There have been instances where persons have committed suicide only by the thought that they have contracted COVID-19 whereas the later autopsies have exhibited that they are not affected by the virus. The fear of the virus is looming larger than the virus itself. [15, 20]

Patients who have survived COVID-19 should be screened and kept under review as they are the ones who are more vulnerable and are more prone to commit suicide. [37] The prime reason or the cause of suicide is the presence of large amount of depression. It can be inferred here that the patients who have recovered from COVID-19 face tremendous amounts of mental stress and agony, which can result in suicidal tendencies. [1] Sher has pointed out [1] that the individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 still need psychological guidance considering the fact that they have undergone through a lot of mental turmoil. Moreover, there is a need to examine the various interventions that could be helpful to reduce suicidal tendencies and psychiatric morbidity.

Considering the rate at which the COVID-19 is spreading, it is evident that there will be far reaching effects of the same and they will be largely responsible for an impact on the psychology of individuals. [21] Negative consequences of COVID-19 may extend far beyond its considerable death toll, having a significant impact on psychological well-being. The World Health Organization reports [22], suicide happens to be one among the leading causes of death worldwide. In this context there is a need to seriously consider the case of COVID-19 and subsequent repercussions on the mental health issues of individuals. In addition to that, when we have instances of people committing suicide with the apprehension of having contracted COVID-19, there is a serious need to revisit and debate these issues.

COVID-19 has become a global health concern that is impacting both physical and mental health across populations. Alongside depression, anxiety, distress, phobia, and many other psychological impacts, [23, 24] COVID-19 is also found to be associated with suicidal behavior (1). Several cases of suicide are reported amid COVID-19, [15, 20, 25] where the affected individual experienced psychosocial stressors attributable to fears and misconceptions on COVID-19. COVID-19 may directly impact mental health and wellbeing among individuals and populations; however, infection prevention measures

like lockdown may have indirect socioeconomic and psychological implication. [13, 26] There is a need to acknowledge the fact that India being a developing country is not well equipped to deal with mental health issues and the number of mental professionals is also very less in number. In addition to that, it may be highlighted here that the limited mental health professionals will never be able to address to the needs and demands of the large scale up surging cases relating to mental health. Hence, a large number of mental health issues might go unnoticed which are bound to create and pose large degree of problems in future. This might further lead to issues in employment and general lifestyle of various individuals affected by COVID-19.

In this research paper, we describe suicides committed by various individuals in India, evaluate the social and psychological determinants of suicidal behavior in that context, and discuss potential interventions addressing the same.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The World Health Organisation [22] sets out that 703,000 people commit suicide every year and there are more than 20 suicide attempts per each suicide. The degree of seriousness regarding the magnitude of mental health issues can be gauged from the above information. Hence, a detailed review of literature will help to understand as how the global pandemic has made worse the already problematic situation.

Halford, Lake and Gould in their article [27] "Google searches for Suicides and suicide risk factors in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic" have documented the fact that due to COVID-19 there has been paramount changes in the lifestyle of individuals. Speaking of the various stressors, which come alongside the pandemic, poses a serious threat to issues of mental health and subsequently increases chances of individuals being vulnerable to suicidal tendencies. This study was conducted in United States of America to examine the effect of COVID-19 on suicidal tendencies at the early stage of this pandemic and it was based on the data collected by Google trends. It revealed that there was a drop in Google search regarding suicide and its related concepts but in long run, there was a chance of increased suicide ideation and known risk factors of suicide. As after the crisis of September 11, there was a decrease in suicide

rates but in the long-run aftermath of the influenza pandemic, there was an increase in suicide rates.

The authors Kakunje et al. [28] have highlighted that due to COVID-19, people are forced to stay indoors and their regular activities have been disturbed and restricted. Due to this confinement and reduced social interaction, many psychological problems started which includes high stress levels, sleeplessness, and subsequently anxiety and suicide cases were reported. To face this challenging time mental health awareness, mindfulness and digital psychiatry has played major roles.

In Asian countries, the research data is also corroborating with the western research output in terms of mental health issues like anxiety, depression and suicide during this COVID-19 pandemic. Mamun and Ullah reported in their study [24] have documented that in developing countries people die not just because of CORONA rather many other factors were there. Those were fear of infection, economic recession and distress, fear of COVID-19 and work stress. The data were collected from the cases reported at Government level for the first time in their country to monitor the suicide cases and to plan for intervention programmes in line with need.

Mamun and Griffiths in their study [15] on Bangladesh have documented first suicide case from the country as a result of fear due to COVID-19. A man of Ramchandrapur village in Bangladesh had returned from Dhaka and subsequently he exhibited certain symptoms related to COVID-19 like cold, fever and weight loss. Despite of being empathetic towards his condition, villagers exhibited severe degree of social avoidance and discrimination. This compelled him to commit suicide but from biopsy, it was revealed that he did not contract COVID-19 virus. The authors have suggested that bias and prejudice claimed the life of an innocent person which could have been otherwise saved.

Rajkumar conducted a pilot study [23] of media reports on suicides related to COVID-19 outbreak in India. They have collected the data through media reports in the period of 12th March to 10th April 2020. The author has highlighted various impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of individuals.

The findings suggests that few of the suicides are due to a direct outcome of COVID-19 related stress. The drastic and sudden change in lifestyle induced by the pandemic has caused potential threats to mental health and is leading to

suicidal tendencies and suicides. It can also be ascertained that the state of mental health of majority of people has comprehensively deteriorated during the COVID-19 phase as compared to the pre COVID-19 phase. The lockdown, social distancing and quarantine measures initiated by the Government has led to sudden confinement and has reduced as well as restricted social interaction. The reduction in social interaction has paved the way for emergence of various psychological issues like anxiety, sleeplessness and suicide ideation. Moreover, the loss of jobs, economic recession, work related stress and financial insecurity is adding to the existing mental health issues. In addition to that, the discriminatory practices targeted towards an infected person is worsening the mental strength of a person to deal with the virus.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first suicide in India due to COVID-19 was reported from the state of Andhra Pradesh on 12th February 2020 [35]. The person belonging to the Chittoor district communicated to a doctor he consulted that he was having some kind of viral illness. However, with the extreme level of false news going on around he believed that he has contracted COVID-19. It was reported that for quite some time he was obsessed with several videos where he saw many Chinese people collapsing in public. Moreover, he was under the impression that people who have contracted the virus will be forced to stay in a quarantine facility against their will where the treatment will be inhuman in nature. The very thought process that he might contract other people or his friend and family, resulted in resistance by him as he was supposedly throwing stones to family members and his close friends who tried to come close to him. After a few days, he was found hanging from a tree apparently having committed suicide and the fear he had was that he had contracted the virus.

Several developing and underdeveloped countries including India are reporting cases of suicides. [20] According to the reports of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [29] approximately 55% of the world's population do not have access to adequate mechanisms relating to social protection and the current pandemic poses serious threat to their level of subsistence. It can also be highlighted that their basic accessibility to education is severely compromised and in general it can be said that their basic human rights are vulnerable as well.

The Indian Government initiated lockdown to contain the virus and effectively manage the spread of the disease. However, the lockdown initiatives have resulted in serious and severe psychological distress among individuals leading them to commit suicide or at least have suicidal tendencies. Lockdown measures have resulted in unavailability of alcohol and drugs, which has led to an extreme situation of psychological distress. [35] This has further resulted in individuals with serious degree of addiction succumbing to self-harm activities. Moreover, lockdown has resulted in economic crisis amounting to unemployment and subsequent poverty thereby creating a fertile ground for forcing people into psychological distress. Excessive amount of psychological distress is largely responsible for suicidal tendencies.

Media is primarily responsible for creating panic among vulnerable individuals. Therefore, contemporary need is for media houses to display a higher degree of integrity in delivering their responsibilities and to ensure that the transmission of news happens in such a manner that it should not scare people.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is imposing psychosocial challenges among individuals and populations, which can be unique and severe among marginalized population. It is inferred from our discussion that COVID-19 has brought about massive changes in the social structure, which is largely responsible for putting psychology of individuals under severe duress. This has also resulted in surge in suicides in the country. This requires adequate and comprehensive support of services (mental health). Under the circumstances when the face-to-face meeting with the psychologists is not a viable task, several other options can be explored like tele-mental health care. In addition to that, adequate and correct knowledge of COVID-19 should be available for the public. This would largely play a role in reducing unnecessary panic and stress among individuals. Social Media platforms, news channels, and other media platforms should shoulder responsibilities to promote positive mental health in dealing with COVID-19.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Organizing mass media campaigns and infotainment programs to alleviate the fear of COVID-19 and promote regular activities with preventive measures
- Reliable and authentic information programmes about COVID-19 and promotion of tele-medical care

- Arranging community-based mental health promotion programs engaging community stakeholders and psychosocial care providers
- Incorporating mental health services in primary care as well as telemedicine programs with provisions of referral for qualified cases
- Providing targeted individual and group-based interventions for individuals who have acute or chronic psychosocial problems

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