**PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS LEADING TO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA: A REVIEW**

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**Abstract**

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in humans being isolated and socially distanced from each other. Social isolation and behavioural changes have contributed to many lifestyle changes due to the safety measures initiated during the pandemic. Apart from the pandemic scare, home confinement and work from home have further contributed to the mental burden in humans. The article analyses the psychosocial factors that affect mental health in different areas of social, behavioural and professional due to changes in one’s behavioural learning association, social alienation, lack of community support and work from home demands. The article emphasises the need for critical mental health understanding during a pandemic and methods to overcome it.

**KEYWORDS**

mental health, COVID-19, psychosocial, stress, anxiety, OCD

**INTRODUCTION**

**COVID-19**

The coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) is an extremely contagious disease and is an infection transmitted by a newly found corona virus. The existing pandemic is particularly prone to contracting the disease among humans when they come in direct contact with each other, causing major illness. Due to the high contamination rate of the disease humans were asked to stay home, work from their respective locations, and not go out in public areas. Places which are more crowded like academic institutions, religious places, social events, and industrial places of work, office places and other such activities that are capable of gathering many individuals were mostly put on a break for quite a while. In the seclusion of the living space, those who can work from home have been doing their job, despite of the day and week. The blue-collar workers like the undocumented labour, routine wagers have lost their jobs and are dislocated from their place of sustenance. The COVID-19 has disrupted the norm of the day and made the people take a back seat and focus on their own well being.

**LOCKDOWN**

The government of India brought India under complete lockdown to handle the COVID-19 situation, which regulated individual and group movement, temporary restriction of work throughout all industrial and service areas, as well as other places of work for a limited period. In general, people stayed home and nobody worked. The first lockdown process in India was declared for a period of 21 days on 24 March 2020**,** as a pre-emptive measure against the pandemic, this lockdown restricted the movement of billions of people in India (1). The lockdown was further extended with certain relaxations by the government till 3rd May 2020 and again by 17 May 2020. Many zones were formed after May 31and certain regions continued to be in partial or full lockdown mode, depending on the severity of the cases affected. The times of lockdown ensured that the people in India were confined to their homes and would not go out. Buying essential household items was only allowed. They were not permitted to move or contact another human nearby. People were required to forcefully wear masks, wash their hands and religiously sanitize them and maintain a distance of 3 feet from others in public places. To sum it up, India’s entire population was under lockdown for more than 60 days without much movement and community involvement and followed strict safety guidelines. As a protective measure, the lockdown largely limited social contact and elicited behavioural changes in people.

**SOCIAL CHANGES**

Aristotle has long ago said that “Man is by nature a social animal”. The exchange of cultures, knowledge, commerce, language and best practises has led to years and years of colonisation and communication between humans. As a species, we have evolved together. The culture plays a critical role in influencing one's mental health expectations and values. The Community has an important role in India. Social Interdependence pervades in Indian life. People have a deep sense of inseparability from family, clan, classes, religions and communities (2). For every event in one’s personal life like a wedding, the birth of a child, the loss of a family member people come together to celebrate or share the sorrow. Group events are therefore an unavoidable aspect of one's life. Individuals who refrain from participating or attending such gatherings are looked down on by society. One of the reasons for us to pursue such behaviours has been group thinking and social influence.

Social influence plays a major role in Indian everyday life; it influences people's thoughts and behaviour. Following group’s conformity norms, an individual gains recognition and significance from the group and its members. For example, in a place where everyone is dressed in formals, one might not want to go in casuals and look like an odd man out. Zimbardo et al (1973) in their classic Stanford Prison Experiment have shown that Social roles influence behaviour (3). People value the opinions of other members. Social gatherings sometimes may bring positive mental and health benefits. The sense of self-identification with the larger community contributes to an optimistic feeling. Many researchers have shown that the ability to deal with problems has been related to improved social support, which decreases stress (4). The above support measure is effective for people working in demanding jobs (5)(6), elderly at old age home (7), Soldiers in military units (8), and more generally among members of local communities (9)(10).

The lockdown restricted people to their homes, cutting off individual social and community support. Ammar et al conducted a multi-country analysis on the impact of home confinement on mental wellbeing and lifestyle habits during the COVID-19 outbreak and found that physical (15.2 %) and social (71.2%) inactivity were encountered by a higher proportion of people out of the 1047 study population; they also encountered psychosocial and emotional problems (10% to 16.5%) (11). Living inside the four walls of the house possessed a greater challenge than going out and carrying out regular activities. It was really difficult to maintain one's mental balance inside the four walls of the house and keep doing one 's job.

In terms of wellbeing and social interactions with each other, the COVID-19 pandemic was a great challenge to humanity. Isolation, restricted to no community movement, has now become the rule of the day. These restrictions were imposed upon the people of India during lockdown. It is necessary to follow these impositions until the Pandemic cure has been discovered or it simply disappears, and whether one of these will occur, it is highly uncertain. Numerous studies have shown that the return to normalcy of life is difficult after a natural or man-made disaster and the memories of it continue to stay in thoughts (12). Limiting the population to conduct social meetings and having group discussions have had a significant impact on their mental health, resulting in increased stress and a desire for social support.

**BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES**

Psychologist have said that behavioural changes can be positive, but a behavioural change triggered by an environmental change can cause more and more significant harm to the person as a result of an environmental cue (13). The present pandemic has recommended that people adopt a number of behavioural changes, such a washing one’s hand many times a day, frequently sanitising hands, cleaning surfaces and items they use often. Repeated hand washing and disinfecting behaviour are linked to psychological issues associated with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) which can create stress, anxiety among humans. Self-doubts as to whether one has properly washed one’s hands and protected their loved ones from infection can lead to paranoid thoughts, a kind of anxious thinking. Roy et al conducted an online survey in India, from the 662 responses in their survey they found that 80% of the respondent population were pre-occupied with the thoughts of COVID – 19 and 72% reported the need to use gloves and sanitizers (14). The anxiety levels reported in the study were high. Also, the study reported sleep difficulties and paranoia about acquiring COVID-19 infection. The perceived mental health care need was seen in more than 80% of the population in the study.

The pandemic scare has made individuals more likely than ever before to develop OCD than other variables. Frequent hand washing, checking the news repeatedly for virus alerts are some of the repetitive habits that can contribute to OCD acquisition in the long run. Contamination is the most common fear among people with OCD, even in normal circumstances, people with OCD are very wary to overcome this and given the pandemic conditions, every other person is afraid to get infected with the virus, thereby raising the rate of having OCD as a learned behaviour at least once in the lifetime of everyone. Mowrer’s Two Process Theory confirms that OCD can occur because of learned behaviour. According to his theory, a non-reactive stimulus becomes associated with a terrifying thought or occurrence through classical conditioning and comes to elicit anxiety. For example, the concept of contamination may be associated with touching a door handle or shaking hands. After this connexion has been learned, the person will try to reduce their anxiety by washing hands or sanitising them. Repeated hand washing and reduced levels of anxiety strengthen the reaction to washing and make it habitual and constant. This makes it more likely to happen when the condition evokes fear about contamination in the future. It is also very unlikely for these avoidance reactions to get extinct once it has been learned (15). In the background of COVID-19 pandemic, literature around the globe showed a substantial worsening of OCD.

'Hoarding' an OCD associated illness is another issue that has risen to a new level. Hoarding disorder characterises the acquisition of items which are not beneficial, the accumulation of more than necessary and the inability to do away with unnecessary material. After the announcement of lockdown, it was seen that people began to hoard excessive amounts of drugs, sanitizers, toilet papers, etc., triggering a global scarcity for others in dire need. This hoarding behaviour has made every other person purchase goods in several quantities and keep it safe for them, for fear of not getting them if needed. Literally, the aisle of several big super markets was seen empty, there was little left behind to buy. The lack of toilet paper availability lead to major stress and anxiety among individuals due to sanitization concerns (16).

Physical distance and staying at home for a long time have paved the way for greater changes in people 's lifestyle, and these changes in lifestyle are a detrimental factor in keeping one's mental health in balance. Changes in lifestyle such as sleeping patterns, the monotony of staying at home, lack of interest in doing work due to no external motivation, lower energy levels due to cutting off from outdoor activities such as gym, cycling, exercise, indulgence in overeating and many other such changes are all collectively associated with mood and related disorders. In the current Pandemic scenario, people with pre-existing mood disorder condition showed elevated levels of the condition (17). Therefore, due to the given conditions and lifestyle changes, the vulnerability of a normal person to acquire mood and associated disorder is very high. In a study conducted on the general population in India, it was seen that the respondents worry and sleep disturbances were higher and common than earlier, and the pandemic affected their mental health negatively (18).

**IMPACT ON THE WORKING CLASS**

During this COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, many individuals from different industries in India had to start working from home and are still continue after easing of the lockdown. Although IT businesses have been open to many employees to work from home since time earlier, this has now been given to employees employed in academic-oriented, service-oriented, customer care-oriented and, to some extent, white-collar manufacturing unit workers. In other fields described above, working from home is a relatively recent trend. Without much official facilities, the workers working at office locations were only asked to stay at home and do their job. All the official duties and activities were demanded to be carried out with a mere laptop and a phone, creating a fear of job insecurity and performance pressure to achieve the business requirements by being highly productive with limited resources (19). Along with Job insecurity, financial planning had to be reworked keeping the uncertainty of the external situation. The idea of unforeseen incidences arising at home or around, such as getting sick, higher rents, high energy bills, high beverages and cooking costs, clubbed with one's fear of job insecurity, emerged as potential stressors that cause a person to be stressed and anxious. Working from home has no defined guidelines for work hours; there are no weekdays or weekends. People tend to overwork in such situations, having exhaustion, stress, insomnia, and anxiety as the new normal (20).

**PRIMARY SECTOR**

The agriculture sector may appear to be least affected by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, however, this area is equally affected due to its dependability on other sectors for its smooth running. Transportation, intra-state and inter-state services, market places, shopping malls all were severely regulated and controlled for their transport movements, making it impossible for farmers and farm workers to survive as trade exchanges were absent. In the past, India has witnessed many farmer suicide cases due to factors such as crop failure, finances, daughter marriage, debt pressure, price drop, etc. The price drop of agriculture commodities by 20% globally has added to the plight of the farmers (21). Farmers are the backbone of the country's economic system, and it is highly important to look closely at their growth and needs in this pandemic, without hindering their work. In order to combat the long-term consequences of the pandemic, mental health care for them is very important.

**SECONDARY SECTOR**

The secondary sector involves manufacturing and other production units such as textiles, handicrafts, manufacturing of raw materials , manufacturing of finished products, manufacturing of vehicles, etc. This sector is seen to be worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, as most businesses are production units that need operation at the source site, making it impossible to keep the work going on. Production schedules, supply chains, have been delayed, causing global demand and supply shortages to cause businesses all over borders to be stressed. For the units which were granted to work with the minimum workforce, lots of precautionary measures which the government iterated had to be followed, like wearing of mask, gloves, maintaining social distance, and using sanitizers at repeated intervals. The new work rules and guidelines were a burdensome process adding to the existing hard working condition in the manufacturing units.

**TERTIARY SECTOR**

Various industries in the tertiary sector, such as hotels, restaurants, food chains, transport , communication, financial firms, insurance, e-commerce websites, social and personal services, education services, etc., are almost closed or remotely operated. The livelihood of people working in such sectors has deeply affected their finances and daily lives (22). After the COVID-19 pandemic, education at all levels was impacted, from primary schools to universities, all were fully closed until further notice. Cambridge University has announced that they will be going online for the academic year 2020-21 (23). As India is a developing country, it's still a question for many educational institutions to go online for the entire academic year however an online mode of education is still offered by many schools and colleges. The school teachers and professors are trying hard to catch the attention of their wards via online mode wherever possible. Lack of motivation in students to attend online classes, feedback responses from students, and face to face discussions, are some of the major stressors faced by the educators while taking online classes. The teachers in India are overworked and underpaid compared to the global teacher population (24), which causes burnout and job distress.

**THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF COVID**

The loss of business has lead many industries to take short term bank loans to sustain themselves through hard times. The Government of India has released massive economic relief packages to many small and large scale industries to help them survive and overcome this panic situation. Yet the people among the low-income group, having unsecured jobs, temporary workers, micro-business owners have reported to have a greater amount of anxiety and depression along with apprehensive post lockdown anxiety and paranoia, the major stressor being the loss of earnings (25). In India, the social-economic impact of COVID-19 has called for a well-developed mid-and long-term strategic model to stabilise the economy because of the economic impact of the pandemic (26).

**LESSONS FROM EARLIER PANDEMIC**

Spanish flu that lasted from 1918 – 1919 was one of the great pandemic that stuck humans. As many as 500 million were infected and approximately 50 million reported dead. Much research on the origin and identification of the pandemic was carried out, however, there was little research done on the long-standing impact of the Spanish Flu on mental health (27). During the Spanish influenza, Mamelund researched mental wellbeing and found that flu-related mental illnesses rose on average 7.2 times in the 6 years following the pandemic. In previous times, such a lack of research has left us incapable of solving the mental health challenges that occur during pandemic situations. World Health Organization has said that COVID-19 is not going to be the last pandemic and the world must be geared up for the future in terms of Public Health. Health, in general, must contribute to well being of mental health as well and not only the physical aspect. The lingering effect of mental health on disease also needs to be studied. Thus research activity needs to be focused to study the current and long-term effects of a pandemic on mental health. This will pave way for future references and preparedness.

**MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT**

The following precautions will help in keeping one’s mental health in check during the current scenario. People who feel like they may have begun to show symptoms of OCD or are going over the board in cleaning should try to follow the government's necessary precautions and not over do them. They can set a standard for themselves and set a practical plan such that it is not necessary to disinfect surfaces daily if they or their family members have not been outside for the day. They may wash their hands when they come from outside, before eating, after using washrooms, coughing, sneezing, and not all day along unnecessarily. People can limit watching the news and social media. The American Psychological Association advises people to set a limit, such as reading or watching the news only once per day (28) as it helps in easing anxiety caused by the pandemic news. They also suggest sticking to a few sources for searching the news. Many therapists offer therapy sessions online and have limited in-person meetings to make individuals feel more comfortable. People can make use of such online sessions. Individuals experiencing serious psychological changes can contact a therapist and undergo cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) programmes that have been effective in the treatment of OCD and related disorders. The use of video calls to socialize with family and relatives can make one feel with their community and clan (29). People can take this work from the home period in a positive way. Positive occurrences like, spending time with one’s family, having meals together, sitting and talking to one another elicit a positive thought which invariably reduces stress.

**CONCLUSION**

A pandemic situation, technological challenges, over-working hours, fluctuating finances, behavioural changes and less social participation have created a stressful environment for people and have had an immense impact on individuals' mental health. The psychological, physiological and psychosocial changes have majorly evoked stress, anxiety, depression, and other related mental health conditions. In order to gain awareness and prepare humanity to tackle the psychological implications of a pandemic, extensive research on the impact of a pandemic on mental wellbeing during and post-COVID 19 is strongly needed.

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