

Mental Health in Pandemic – Neglected as Always

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Definition of health is known to all, we all know it is not complete without mental wellbeing. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The state of our mental health determines how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.¹ So it is quite natural that mental health affects all aspects of our daily living, relationships, and physical health. Yet, mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health.

For last two years the coronavirus pandemic has changed almost every aspect of our daily life. It has caused a considerable degree of fear, worry and concern throughout the world among people of all ages and among certain groups in particular, such as older adults, care providers and people with comorbidities. The pandemic has induced increased stress or anxiety, loneliness, depression, harmful drug use, and self-harm or even suicidal behaviour.²

In a joint release by the World Health Organization, United for Global Mental Health and the World Federation for Mental Health on the eve of world mental health day in October of 2021, it has been stated that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a tremendous impact on people's mental health. In order to raise awareness and to address the ever neglected issues, the World Health Organization has issued guidance and advice on mental health for health workers and other frontline workers, managers of health facilities, and people of all ages whose lives have changed considerably as a result of the pandemic.³

The breakout of COVID-19 has created mental health emergency just as much as it has created physical health, economic and social emergencies. The factors playing major roles include the fear of being affected, obligatory social isolation, financial loss, loss of job, reduced access to mental health services, housing insecurity, and loss of coping mechanisms. It has been speculated that

the impacts of COVID-19 may worsen pre-existing mental health conditions while also affecting people who have not previously experienced any mental illness.^{4,5}

It is an established fact that major epidemic and pandemic outbursts have several negative impacts on individual and collective mental health in the society.⁶ Likewise the ongoing pandemic and the fear of coronavirus infection have impacted the lifestyle, psychological health and relationship status of people.⁷ A study in China revealed about 52.1% of people felt worried during the COVID-19 pandemic, and among them 57.8%-77.9% needed mental support from their family and friends.⁸ The mental health of many individuals is potentially affected by COVID-19 in many ways. Family members and friends of patients with COVID-19, their close contacts, isolated or suspected population, healthcare providers, and the general population have experienced extra mental health burden during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ The immediate psychological impact of COVID-19 was assessed by Li and colleagues in the Chinese population, and negative emotions such as depression and anxiety, as well as increased sensitivity to social risks and decreased happiness and life satisfaction were reported.¹⁰

The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) of Bangladesh reported the first COVID-19 cases on 8 March 2020.¹¹ At the initial stage of the pandemic, many hospitals were not ready to treat COVID-19 and testing facilities were limited. This situation impacted the mental health of many Bangladeshi people. Most of the Bangladeshi population depend on regular income, and due to the indefinite lockdown they were uncertain about returning to their workplace. This situation created a confounding impact on their mental health status.¹² In Bangladesh, we

observed several reported suicide cases during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of getting infected, economic loss, social security, job security and emotional breakdown among low income group of people.¹³ Several studies were conducted in Bangladesh to assess the mental health status of people in the pandemic. In one study the prevalence rates of loneliness, depression, anxiety and sleep disturbance among the general population were 71%, 38%, 64% and 73%, respectively.¹⁴ In another study the most commonly observed psychological manifestations included fear of getting sick or dying, feelings of helplessness, depression, anxiety, isolation, and stigma.¹⁵ In another cross-sectional study the prevalence of mild, moderate, and severe psychological impact was 10.2%, 4.8%, and 45.5%, respectively.¹⁶

The social panic caused by COVID-19 is a growing catastrophe affecting a large number of people with anxiety, affective disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and a series of other adverse effects. A six-step intervention strategy to alleviate the psychological problems of affected individuals specially the young ones is proposed in a scientific paper by Chen et al.¹⁷ These steps include delivery of positive epidemic-related information to optimize the risk perception, to reduce the opportunities for negative behaviour, to improve their knowledge of stress management, to alleviate family conflicts and improve family relationships, to cultivate positive behavioural habits, and to adjust expectations.¹⁷

So it is to be emphasized that more attention needs to be paid to mental health burden during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and we all should be vigilant to help those in distress or are at risk of being affected psychologically. It is tremendously important for low-income and middle-income countries, where resources are limited to tackle any pandemic situation and its associated mental health issues.

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