Psychological Effects of a Lockdown

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The entire world is under the impact of COVID-19 (or SARS-CoV-2) with about 5 million people affected and more than 3,00,000 having lost their lives. The pandemic has led to the announcement of nation-wide lockdowns in more than 190 countries. This lockdown was initially announced for 21 days but had to be extended in order to curb the spread of the disease. At present, it is in its 4th phase, keeping people inside their homes, offices shut and almost an entire life coming to a standstill (except for essential services being functional) for almost about 2 months now. Though the lockdown has been necessary for the containment of COVID-19 cases, it has had a humongous emotional and psychological impact on individuals [1].

The lockdown has affected everyone at various fronts such as social, psychological and financial. However, the effect of lockdown can vary from individual to individual, depending on various factors. The impact of the lockdown has been worser in terms of psychological impact for some people, that has resulted in anxiety attacks, panic attacks, low moods, emotional breakdowns and high levels of distress [2]. Some of these particular groups are such as: [3]

- 1. Daily wage workers and people who have a strictly budgeted lifestyle are more affected by the lockdown given that commercial and economic activities have subsided greatly. People belonging to the lower socio-economic strata and those below the poverty line have lost lives due to hunger as a result of the inability to earn a wage to fill their daily meals.
- 2. Migrant workers and population have also been the worst affected with lack of shelter, food and remuneration which pushed thousands of them to take to roads and walk back home. Several migrants lost their lives while making it on their way back home.
- 3. Those who have lost their jobs or had their businesses shut as a result of the recession are far more hit, vulnerable and psychologically disturbed as compared to those who have had a chance to shift work virtually and / or have had their jobs retained. Additionally, those individuals who have received pay cut or no salary are worse affected than those who have been receiving their pay.
- 4. People living in unsupportive families where abuse and violence are high have had a tougher time and greater psychological worries in times of lockdown. Especially, women and children have been reported to be at the receiving end of increased domestic violence, emotional and sexual abuse.
- 5. It has also been a challenge for people who feel less accepted in their household and have interpersonal conflicts with family members. The lockdown period has put people together for longer durations that they were not used to before and this has evoked greater number of conflicts resulting in emotional turmoil.
- 6. Individuals staying alone and away from families have experienced worser episodes of low moods, panic attacks, feeling isolated and overwhelmed.
- 7. People with pre-existing mental illnesses have also had a challenging time where people with anxiety disorder have had higher number of panic and anxiety episodes and individuals with depression have had lower / sadder moods. People with severe mental illnesses have also had worser impact with poorer hygiene, lack of awareness of the pandemic situation, lack of access to healthcare facilities and also those who are homeless and disorganised- all these factors put people with severe mental illnesses at a greater risk for developing the illness yet worsening their mental state.

- 8. The lockdown has also had a great toll on the elderly, especially those who have been living alone and away from family / children. Many elders are living with no support in the form of house help, getting essentials or even access to basic medical help in times of need. A special challenge also arises for those suffering from existing medical / psychiatric illnesses and access to hospitals / clinics has been restricted.
- 9. Children in general have found it difficult to adapt to being at home round the clock, adapt to online classes and find ways to occupy their time indoors without having the opportunity to meet friends or visit the park / pay grounds. Emotional and behavioural issues such as temper tantrums, irritability, anger issues and lack of discipline / routine. Further, children with special needs have had a greater challenge finding it difficult adjusting to the sudden change of lifestyle.
- 10. Another subset of the population that has psychologically been impacted are the LGBTQIA+ group that have faced hostility and grossly negative environments at home where they are not accepted for their identity / orientation.

The psychological impact of the lockdown among people has been wide ranging psychological stress and disorder, including low mood, insomnia, stress, anxiety, anger, irritability, emotional exhaustion, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms. In severe cases, suicide has also been reported (due to the fear of developing the disease or getting to know that their loved one acquired the disease). Apart from this, the lockdown has had an exhausting effect of people, leaving them with time to think (and overthink) about the past squabbles, making them irritable over little things and ruminating over the past issues- all of this has added to their emotional exhaustion. The fear of going out has been on the rise among people in general as a result of getting infected by the COVID-19 virus [4].

General experiences of staying indoors for longer periods, not being able to freely move about and inaccessibility to basic public amenities has impressed a general sense of frustration and agitation among people. People have always been used to moving ahead despite all the challenges and hazards having come in the way, this pandemic however, has packed away everyone in their houses with bare financial resources, inactivity and restricted freedom. One of the biggest fears and worries that have housed everyone's minds during the lockdown is about how things will be post-lockdown- businessmen, industrialists, entrepreneurs, educators and corporates, everyone is plagued with the uncertainty of the future along with the constant worry of a big recession kicking in [5].

Corona-anxiety

Many people develop what is called Corona anxiety and they feel that they may contract the virus. Mild fever and cough may be thought of as COVID and anxiety may develop. The thought of stepping out may precipitate anxiety and this will be more in people with personalities that are predisposed to anxiety and worry. In those who may get infected the knowledge of the diagnosis, and isolation for treatment can be a potential trigger for anxiety and depression. Excessive protection and obsessiveness about social distancing and protection may also develop in people [6].

Tips to combat acute anxiety -

- Recognize the fear. Remember that you are not isolated in feeling insecure.
- Planning the daily routines helps in adapting quickly and managing anxiety.
- Divide your time clearly as work and non-work times. Make the same division in your headspace
- Identify an activity/hobby that brings you joy and perform it.
- Working in short bursts with clear breaks will help to maintain your clarity of thought.

Tips to combat loneliness and isolation -

- Several community teams have developed interactive platforms. Be active in groups you like.
- Spend time with loved ones.
- Be in touch with friends, family, and colleagues over social media or the phone.
- Pick a new hobby. Learn something new every day. Keep your mind engaged.

Pen down your thoughts and emotions regularly.

Psychological aspects of undergoing quarantine

Most reviewed studies on psychological effects of quarantine have reported negative psychological effects including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, anxiety, depression and anger. The stress revolved around factors like longer quarantine duration, infection fear, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss, isolation and stigma. Patients need to be psycho-educated about the clear rationale for quarantine and information about protocols, and ensure sufficient supplies are provided. People must appreciate that the benefits of quarantine to wider society are important. Considering the potential risk of agitation in an isolated environment, it is advisable to allow the patient to interact with the family member/caregiver using video/audio call whenever a patient is under quarantine or admitted to COVID hospital [7].

Special Care of children during the Lockdown

Children will have lots of questions about the coronavirus, so it's good to be prepared to answer them. It's not just grown-ups worrying about COVID-19 and the changes happening day by day. As parents it is important that we listen to the questions coming from our children and that we offer clear and honest answers. It's also OK to admit we don't know the answers. Much better to do that, than pretend we know the right response [8].

Certain measures that can be used to manage children include –

- Speak to them calmly and openly. Try not to wrap them up in cotton wool but at the same time choose your words carefully. Saying that it is a 'pandemic never seen before in our lifetimes' does not help to calm your child.
- Encourage them to ask questions.
- Ask them to share with you what they know and what they are worried about. Agree with them if you have the same concerns but also offer reassurance and set up a plan to help deal or cope with that worry.
- Reassure them it's normal to be worried about the coronavirus and that most people feel a little concerned.
- Provide reassurance that as young people, they are relatively safe. The (current) data suggests that while young people have just as much chance of catching the virus, they are unlikely to get very sick and even less likely to be hospitalized.
- Let them know that you will be available to talk to them about their worries whenever they would like to and if they think of questions after your chat, they can just come and ask them anytime.
- Identify some key responsible adults in their life they can talk to if they are feeling worried.
- Let them know what plans are in place to keep their family safe and encourage regular safe contact with loved ones (e.g., video chat with grandparents).

The uniqueness of the lockdown

Currently, an estimated 2.6 billion people, i.e. one-third of the world's population is living under some kind of lockdown or quarantine. This is arguably the largest psychological experiment ever conducted. In short, and perhaps unsurprisingly, people who are quarantined are very likely to develop a wide range of symptoms of psychological stress and disorder, including low mood, insomnia, stress, anxiety, anger, irritability, emotional exhaustion, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Low mood and irritability specifically stand out as being very common amongst all symptoms.

We can already see a sharp increase in absenteeism in countries in lockdown. People are afraid to catch COVID-19 on the work floor and avoid work. We will see a second wave of this in three to six months. Just when we need all able bodies to repair the economy, we can expect a sharp spike in absenteeism and burnout [9].

In general, we know at-risk groups for long-term mental health issues will be the healthcare workers who are on the frontline, young people under 30 and children, the elderly and those in precarious situations, for example, owing to mental illness, disability and poverty.

There is broad consensus among academics about the psychological care following disasters and major incidents. Here are a few things that can be done –

- Make sure self-help interventions are in place that can address the needs of large affected populations;
- Educate people about the expected psychological impact and reactions to trauma if they are interested in receiving it. Make sure people understand that a psychological reaction is normal;
- Launch a specific website to address psychosocial issues;
- Make sure that people with acute issues can find the help that they need

When it comes to offering psychological support to their populations, most countries are late to react, as they were to the novel coronavirus. Better late than never [10].

Management of psychological issues during the lockdown

It is essential to understand that though the lockdown is not a very pleasant experience for many, it is an essential step that is required to be taken in order to maintain the decorum in handling the pandemic. People must be aware of the fact tat COVID-19, though a pandemic is an illness with a death rate of 3%-4% and not everyone infected will succumb to death. A vigilant practice of maintaining hygiene, practicing physical distancing and taking care of own health are some important ways to keep oneself protected and healthy. Some other ways of taking care of one's mental health amidst the pandemic are as follows: [11]

- 1. **Ensure correct intake of information:** Don't only focus on COVID-19 related news 24-hour on news or social media as these updates can make you more worried. Set specific times in the day to check news, maybe 3-4 times in a day.
- 2. **Get the facts right:** Gather high-quality information that will help you to accurately determine your own or other people's risk of contracting coronavirus (COVID-19) so that you can take reasonable precautions. Trust the government and WHO websites only.
- 3. **Do not fear COVID-19:** there is a need for everyone to stay updated with the right information about COVID-19 and understand that there isn't a need to worry or feel fearful about the disease as far as one is keeping hygiene and protective measures in place.
- 4. **Distancing:** Physical distancing but no emotional distancing: one must be aware to maintain physical distancing among public places but stay connected with near and dear ones in all possible ways.
- 5. Acceptance of a changed way to life: we will have to gear up to accept and embrace a changed way of living where wearing masks and practicing physical distancing will be mandatory for some months from now. We must not forget that the lockdown may end however measures may have to be in place to ensure the health of everyone.
- 6. **Balancing health:** the lockdown has alerted a need to balance work with health and people must continue to do so post lockdown as well. The time off from work, in the beginning, did give many people a chance to think about focusing on healthier lifestyles as well and this must be ensued regardless of work resuming soon after lockdown. A lot of focus was also to maintain one's mental well-being which must equally be carried forward after the lockdown.

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