Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health

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We are all currently navigating the COVID-19 storm and this pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for us. Mankind however has already witnessed and suffered from other coronavirus outbreaks, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002 and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012. During such crises it is natural that people become extremely concerned about their physical health problems and survival, but we cannot underestimate the serious impact on mental health and well-being. Taking care of our mental health is more important than ever in these difficult and challenging times.

In view of similarities between Corona viruses, it is reasonable to inform ourselves of the effects of SARS and MERS on mental health, and anticipate similar consequences. A systematic review showed 42% suffered from insomnia, 35% from anxiety, 32% were depressed, 34% impaired memory and 28 % were confused; subsequently 32% developed PTSD (I. Summer et al, 2020).One study on effect of SARS outbreak on mental health in 2003 showed 30% increase in suicide in those aged 65 and older, and around 50% of recovered patients remained anxious and 29% of healthcare workers experienced emotional distress. Patients who survived severe and life-threatening illness were at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (E. Holmes et al, 2020)

80% of people with pre-existing mental illness had felt worse due to the current crisis with increased levels of worry and anxiety

Discussion

It is well known and accepted that isolation, loneliness, stress, health anxiety and economic downturn harm mental health and wellbeing. The COVID 19 pandemic has been an unexpected, extremely scary and traumatic experience for mankind across the globe, affecting 215 countries to date with 14 million cases reported. Mankind has appeared vulnerable and overwhelmed especially those with a history of trauma, mental illness, long-standing health conditions and elderly population. The implemented lockdown, quarantine, social distancing have been a traumatic experience for a large proportion of the population. Many of the anticipated consequences of lockdown, quarantine and social distancing measures are themselves strong risk factors for mental health problems like self-harm and suicide, alcohol and substance misuse, domestic abuse, relationship breakdown (E. Holmes et al, 2020)

Mental health foundation, UK has conducted regular online surveys in adults in the UK and found that people are struggling with strain on mental health and well-being, suicidal thoughts, stress , inability to cope and worries about finances and debt; unfortunately people with less economic security are disproportionately affected more. Rethink mental illness survey in April 2020 showed that 80% of people with pre-existing mental illness had felt worse due to the current crisis with increased levels of worry and anxiety. Young minds survey in June 2020 showed that 80% of young people had been affected badly and their mental health had been worse with feeling lonely and isolated, with increased anxiety and loss of motivation and coping mechanism. Recent Office for National statistics(ONS) survey has revealed a high level of anxiety due to the current COVID-19 crisis in the general population particularly among elderly aged over 75 years and people with disabilities.

A longitudinal population study using data from 2017-2019 and April 2020 involving more than 12,000 adults aged between 18 and 92 showed that mental health problem rose by 13.5% during the COVID 19 pandemic (M. Daly et al, 2020)

On a positive note, a more recent study by Mental Health Foundation UK showed a decreasing trend of people being anxious or worried due to easing of lockdown. As of the third week of June, 49% of the population had felt anxious and worried in the past two weeks due to pandemic, down from 62% in mid -March.

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Coping with COVID-19 (National Institute of Mental Health)
- Take breaks from the news
- Take care of your body
- Make time to unwind
- Connect with others
- Set goals and priorities
- Focus on the facts

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic has induced not only considerable amount of fear and stress but onset or relapse of mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, OCD, PTSD, grief disorders and sleep disorders in the population , particularly among vulnerable groups such as those traumatised or bereaved by COVID-19, the elderly , those with long-standing medical conditions and frontline health workers. We can't deny that we're in this together and it is crucial that the vulnerable groups and the frontline health workers must be a priority for support and research in terms of meeting their mental health needs and well-being.

In the UK recent easing of lockdown has presented people with both the opportunities and challenges. Unfortunately, the economic fallout, uncertainty of the effective vaccine, the possibility of the winter surge, and continued local lockdowns are likely to maintain or increase fear, stress and onset or relapse of mental illness.

It is , however, very important to remind ourselves that it is normal to feel stressed and sad during a crisis, and most of us will find strategies to deal with our difficult feelings. It is also crucially important to seek help when needed. It would be extremely beneficial to stay socially connected with friends and family, take regular physical exercise, stay positive, practice mindfulness, and avoid alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs. There are excellent resources available online provided by NHS, Every Mind Matters, Rethink Mental illness, Royal college of Psychiatrists, and Public Health England on impact of COVID-19 on mental health.

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