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**MENTAL HEALTH AND  
PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT GUIDELINES DURING  
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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## **Mental health and psychosocial guidelines during COVID-19 outbreak**

National Institute of Psychology, Quaid-i-Azam University has developed the mental health and psychosocial support guidelines in response to outbreak of new coronavirus disease, COVID-19. WHO has declared public health emergency as it is rapidly spreading and has effected more than 188 countries across the globe. In March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic.

Though numerous efforts are being made to contain and limit the spread of this virus, but it is generating considerable amount of emotional reactions including distress, panic, fear and anxiety among various populations. This highlights the fact that along with physical efforts to manage this disease, managing mental health and psychosocial wellbeing is equally important. These guidelines have been prepared keeping in mind the unique psychological needs of different segments of population. Considerable amount of information has also been taken from international documents available.

### **Guidelines for general public**

Hearing about the outbreak and spread of COVID-19 from different sources like television, social media, newspapers, family and friends can lead to significant amount of distress, fear, panic, depression and anxiety among general public. It is important to understand that all these feelings are normal reactions to this abnormal situation. Many people in the world are thinking, behaving and feeling same as you might be feeling under these circumstances. It is important to

- I. *Be aware of your feelings and reactions.* Try to understand your feelings by educating yourself more about fears, stress and ways of dealing with it. Try to educate yourself about the virus and do not believe in rumors, try to find factual information through reliable sources that might include information shared by government officials, relevant health care department, or international health organizations.
- II. *Seek social support.* Though this pandemic is restricting access to social support structures, such as family, religious places, workplaces, and friends, it is important to think of alternate ways of staying connected with these support networks. As this can help you stay calm and positive. Talking to trusted sources about your fears and worries can help you handle this

isolation and emotional distress. Remember, verbalizing your fears and worries is not a sign of weakness.

- a. Seek support from your family, friends and spiritual/religious leaders.
- b. Talking to them can help you deal with your fears, anxiety and boredom. It may also help you to develop this understanding that they are also experiencing similar reactions.
- c. Physically accessing them is not safe, so think of alternate ways of connecting with them via phone, email, video chats or text messages.
- d. You may document you feelings and experiences and share it with others through social media.

III. Feeling uncertain about the situation and getting apprehensive are absolutely normal reactions to stress. It is important to remind yourself that these fears are normal. For you it is important to be aware of your emotional reactions. Do not try to suppress your feelings, thoughts and emotions. Keeping hope alive during this period is extremely important. For dealing with this, it is important to educate yourself about healthy and unhealthy ways of coping.

- a. Healthy ways of coping include maintaining a basic self-care routine as this will give a sense of control. It might include maintaining a schedule for daily activities, eating healthy, engaging in physical activities like exercise, modifying your existing plans and setting attainable and achievable goals, redefining your strategies that are not working, revisiting your plans on day to day basis, being flexible in your way of thinking, documenting your small successes, identifying your negative thoughts that trigger distress and replacing them with more positive ones, giving oneself positive self-statements like I can cope with it or I have done well so far, relaxing body and mind by deep breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation, prayer, music, reading, or any other healthy activity.
- b. Unhealthy coping strategies that need to be avoided might include excessive use of tobacco, drugs, constant worry and thinking that situation

will never get better, constantly talking about your fears and worries to others so that it aggravates your fears, acting without thinking, getting involved in high risk behaviors, getting abusive or rude towards your family members, friends, colleagues or others. It is important to identify these signs at the earliest and seek professional help if needed.

- IV. It is important not to attach this disease with any particular country, ethnicity, religious group or any other group of individuals. It is high time to acknowledge the fact that everyone is equally susceptible to it and no one is spreading it intentionally. Being kind, compassionate and empathetic towards others is need of the hour. The way you need support and want to be heard, others want it too. People who have caught this disease have not done anything wrong and they should not be judged, hated or abandoned.
- V. Try to avoid sensational news and media coverage regarding disease. Do not believe on anything that you hear or read on social media or television. Try to limit your and your family's screen time especially before going to bed. Try to educate yourself about disease by sticking to information provided by responsible authorities. Also, do not spread any news related to COVID-19 further without confirming it. This might include forwarded text messages, information received through WhatsApp, viber, facebook, Instagram, twitter or any other social media.
- VI. Keeping hope alive during this period is very important. This can be done by looking for stories of people who have survived. One can get hope by taking social responsibility and helping others in need. This can include involving yourself in safe voluntary activities like helping needy in your neighborhood, providing financial assistance if possible to daily wagers, small entrepreneurs, street hawkers, domestic workers or any other needy person. You can also provide assistance to older people living in your neighborhood to do grocery or other thing which they need so that they do not have to go out to purchase these items. Remember, even listening to those who want to share their feelings and validating them in a non-judgmental manner is also a kind of support.

- VII. Acknowledge the role of health care workers, law enforcing agencies, and volunteers in your community. They are doing their best to make sure that you and your loved ones are safe.

Remember, mostly COVID-19 cause mild symptoms and in such cases only social distancing for a period of two weeks can help to improve the symptoms. Every person is not likely to be hospitalized because of it. Only people who have breathing difficulties need to be admitted to hospitals. 90 to 95 % of people who catch this virus recover. Further staying at home and maintaining social distance can reduce the likelihood of catching this virus. Try to stay positive and reject the rumors.

### **Guidelines for dealing with children**

The stress of parents and family members can directly or indirectly effect children. As they are likely to see the world and make sense out of things by observing adults. Getting insecure, remaining silent, clingy behavior, crying for no apparent reason, nightmares, complaints regarding pain in different body parts, fatigue, either not eating or eating too much, asking too many questions, frequently inquiring about their own safety and safety of others family members, frequently requesting parents not to go to work, repeatedly asking for reassurance, asking whether their friends and relatives are at risk or not, asking questions regarding when this situation would be over, difficulty in falling asleep are all common reactions and questions that your child is likely to ask you. Present circumstances for them are stressful and they are perceiving it and thus reacting to it as well. It's important to acknowledge that children are also upset about this situation. Following strategies might be helpful

- I. Try to develop an understanding of what your child is thinking and how he /she appraising the present situation. Let them talk freely so that they can express themselves and listen to them. Spend more time than usual with your children.
- II. Age appropriate information is important. Before answering any question that your child asks make sure that information you are providing is tailored as per age. Be truthful as hiding information or making false promises that situation will get better when you wake

up, or in a day or two might not help to lessen the child's anxiety. Rather it will enhance your child's distress and will negatively affect your relationship with child. As he/she might not perceive you a trustworthy source of information.

- III. Help the child to deal with isolation by getting involved in activities that your child enjoys. If your child is of school going age explain the child that schools are closed for the sake of protection. Assure your child that once the situation gets better you will rejoin your school and will be able to meet your friends and teachers again.
- IV. Being supportive is important. Your child might be afraid, depressed, or fearful. Help him understand that these reactions are normal reactions. Give them space, so that they can give voice to their feelings. If they are unable to express their feelings assist them in the process by being empathetic and available.
- V. Try to maintain a routine for the child. The forced isolation which children are facing is disturbing normal routine. Make the child an active partner in process of setting routines. This will lead to healthy discussion and will help you answer many questions which your child might be reluctant to ask otherwise. Maintaining proper mealtime, sleep time and time to play together can be helpful.
- VI. You might help your child write a letter or paint for a friend or relative during this period. You can tell your child that he/she can give it to the concerned person once the situation gets better.
- VII. Help your child understand that COVID has nothing to do with the way someone looks, from any geographical area, from any ethnic group, or any language. Educate your child that it's important to be compassionate to people who are sick and those who are taking care of them as well.

#### **Guidelines for older adults, people with underlying health condition**

Older adults with or without an underlying health condition, might feel more helpless, anxious, stressed, agitated and withdrawn. Dealing with isolation can be tougher for them as it can aggravate all the above mentioned emotions. Following steps might help to manage:

- I. Ensuring emotional support through families and health care providers is extremely important. If there is an underlying health condition, and regular visits to doctor is not possible make sure the E-services of online doctors that are being introduced by government are being used. Ensure that they have all the medicines which they are taking for at least next two weeks.
- II. Older people find it more difficult to stay connected via modern technology like video calls, chats or even phone calls. If that's the case, assist them in this process in a calm and respectable way.
- III. Educate older people, the importance of self-isolation. Explain them that as they are at risk of being effected by virus for this reasons other people have limited their interaction with them in order to protect them. Keep on reminding them that it is for their protection. They are not being abandoned. Try to keep a connection with family and relatives who are living at a distance via phone calls or video calls.
- IV. Share information regarding COVID in as simple manner as possible. Repeat the information when necessary. Educate them repeatedly about what needs to be done e.g. hand washing, staying inside to minimize the risk. Information needs to be concise, clear and brief. It should be provided in patient and respectful manner.
- V. In case if there is cognitive impairment, displaying in writing or pictures about what needs to be done can be helpful. Using digital reminders like it is time to wash hands, or it is time to call a family member might be helpful.
- VI. Limiting access to news, radio shows, talk shows, is very important. This might trigger anxiety which can be difficult to handle.
- VII. Encourage family members who are at a distance to call them regularly and talk to them. This can provide them a self of reassurance that they are being taken care of properly.
- VIII. Make sure that they have the emergency contact numbers and details with them. Moreover, they are aware of whom to call or contact in case of any emergency.
- IX. Maintaining a routine or schedule is extremely important. Make sure that they are not bored or feel being left out. You can help them in doing things that they like i.e. reading books, arranging their things, painting, daily chores, calling family members, etc.

Remember older people are likely to be apprehensive. As a consequence they might repeat what they are feeling. They are likely to exhibit a strong emotional reaction that may vary from complete withdrawal to being aggressive for no apparent reason. Try to spend more time with them and explain them reasons for the way they are behaving. Be very vigilant of these reactions and seek support if needed.

### **Guidelines for media**

Media is a primary source of information in modern world. Following steps need to be taken by media to responsibility provide information that does not aggravates anxiety and distress related to COVID-19.

- I. Focus only on the facts and do not sensationalize the news as its going to add to fears of people watching it.
- II. Use terminologies very carefully. Commonly used terminologies for people with COVID 19 are “COVID 19 victims”, “COVID families” or “COVID 19 cases”. These need to be replaced with “people being treated for COVID 19” or “people who are recovering from COVID 19.”
- III. In order to inculcate ray of hope among people report in terms of number of people who have recovered from the illness first than number of people who are dying because of it.
- IV. Do not show the pictures of patients who are in critical conditions as this might be distressing for general population.
- V. Do not disclose the particulars and pictures of individuals tested positive for COVID-19. As it is against the basic privacy rights of the individual.
- VI. Highlight the case studies and strategies used by people who have recovered successfully from COVID 19, so that people in general can develop a thorough understanding healthy coping strategies.
- VII. Invite people on different forums who are competent enough to talk on the basis of scientific and valid information rather than personal likes and dislikes.



- VIII. Value the services that health care providers and law enforcing agencies are playing in the current situation by recognizing their work so that they feel that their services are being recognized.
- IX. Invite the persons who have recovered from COVID-19 to share their experiences of recovery with general public.

### **Guidelines for people in Isolation / Quarantine**

People are put into quarantine/isolation for two basic reasons. If they have a travel history and there are chances that they might have caught the disease, they are put in isolation to see whether they develop symptoms or not. Similarly, those who had a contact with a person having COVID-19 are also put in isolation to see whether symptoms appear or not. In second case, people who have milder symptoms with no complication are put into self-isolation. In both cases, typical reactions include worry, anxiety, fear regarding their own health and also about whom they interacted with. They also might have pressures like financial constraints, job security, and attitude of other people towards them, loneliness, boredom, frustration, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Following strategies might help to with these emotions.

- I. Providing them accurate information regarding COVID-19 might help to deal with uncertainty. It also includes provision of details regarding duration of stay.
- II. Acknowledging their fears as normal reactions and helping them learn ways to deal with stress during this period like praying, meditation, deep breathing can be helpful.
- III. Seeking social support from family via telephone, email or video chats can help them share their feelings and experiences.
- IV. Encourage them to develop a schedule and try to follow it in order to deal with boredom. Getting involved in healthy activities like prayer, meditation, book reading, indoor games can help an individual deal with feelings of isolation and boredom.
- V. Address the fears and reassure that they can have a normal life once they go back.
- VI. Once the quarantine/isolation period is over, and no symptoms are apparent do not hesitate to go back to your family thinking you might make them ill.

VII. You are likely to experience feelings of guilt and depression thinking that you were not able to take care of your family during that time. If any of such symptom prevails contact a mental health professional.

### **Guidelines for people with mental illnesses and caregivers**

People with a history of mental illness are likely to be affected more by uncertain situations like COVID 19. Stress, fear and uncertainty may worsen their previous mental health condition. Social isolation is likely to make them more anxious and withdrawn. They might refuse to take medication or even counseling. Under these circumstances immediate steps need to be taken by family members and psychiatrists and psychologists should be contacted without a further delay.

Similarly, people can also develop mental health problems during these conditions. The warning signs that should be considered alarming include:

- I. Major difficulties in work and family life
- II. Recurrent thoughts of death and suicide
- III. Repeatedly abusing medicines and drugs
- IV. Inability to fall asleep
- V. Difficulty in concentration

All these patterns should be taken as a warning sign. If the individual realizes any of these he/she should contact a mental health professional. If the individual is not able to recognize any of these, than the role of family members and friends become crucial. They need to educate the person and consult as early as possible.

Similarly, caregivers of people with mental health problems are likely to experience more stress as well during this phase. As in addition to different other constraints like financial difficulties, difficulty in managing work and home, working from home and taking care of other family members can be highly demanding. Under these circumstances, it is important to take care of one's own self as well. Following steps might be helpful for caregivers

- I. Dedicating some time of the day to your own self, taking a break and spending it the way you like is important. It is important to identify what you like to do. This would help to deal with feelings of overburden.
- II. Do not feel guilty for not being able to manage each and everything. As situation is demanding so some days can be highly productive others may not be. Give yourself that margin and be flexible to accept it.
- III. Your environment might not be supportive as you are dealing with a person who is having trouble dealing with his/her emotions. So, that much needed recognition and appreciation can be missing from environment. Under these circumstances, try to give yourself positive messages like you are trying to do your best and have done well so far.
- IV. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations are arranging online support forums which include webinars, online support groups, email and telephonic counseling. Try to find these avenues to give vent to your feelings.
- V. Seek support and talk to a mental health professional if at any point you feel that you are not able to manage yourself properly.

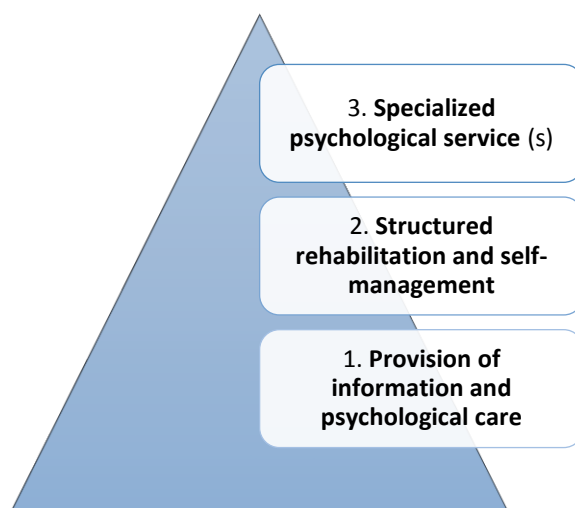
### **Guidelines for people recovering from COVID-19**

As COVID-19 is a novel virus so limited data is available regarding psychological, emotional and cognitive needs of people who are recovering from this illness. However the common emotional reactions might include presence of anxiety, irritability, low mood, oversensitivity or hypervigilance regarding bodily symptoms, somatic complaints, nightmares, sleep related problems, memory impairment, denial, poor mental processing paired with decline in areas of executive functioning i.e. thinking, reasoning and judgment, apprehensions regarding recovery as well as fear of stigma and abandonment. While physically managing the problem, these psychological aspects are critical as they determine the outcome of treatment. In case of hospitalization, following factors add are an additional threat to wellbeing of individuals.

- a. Physical barriers that hinder communication with staff because of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- b. Isolation from family and loved ones

- c. Environment of hospital that might include noise, alarms, lack of day light, disturbed circadian rhythms (especially for those who are in Intensive Care Units).
- d. Seeing other patients on ventilators or deaths
- e. Concerns regarding delays in checkups and lack of staffing and equipment

Keeping in view all these factors, the psychological rehabilitation needs to be designed very carefully focusing on the above mentioned facts. As a general guiding principle, it can be planned at three levels.



### **1. Provision of information and psychological care**

This component can be further divided into two facets one focusing on what needs to be done at the time of discharge and second regarding follow up sessions after discharge.

#### **a. Before discharge**

- I. Before discharge it is important that detailed debriefing sessions are held with all patients who have recovered from the illness. A team comprising of psychiatrists, psychologist and counselors could help patients understand their emotional reactions.
- II. The team should brief them about any potential physical and psychological symptom that patient might experience later on. It is equally important to explain reasons that why the

patient is likely to experience these symptoms. During this phase it is important to encourage patients to ask questions so that their queries are addressed by a reliable source.

- III. Similar information and reading material that has been verbally shared with patient should be provided to patient in written form. It might include informative and educational brochures regarding recovery process, success stories, potential sources of referral who can be contacted later on if needed etc. so that he/she can consult it later on and share it with family members and other members of the community.

#### **b. Follow up sessions**

- I. Early follow up sessions are recommended after discharge to assess both physical and psychological wellbeing. It could be planned within a month or two of discharge. This can include in person visit by person and family who has recovered, video or on call inquiry by team of professionals working with the person as well.
- II. Brief psychological assessments involving questions related to sleep wake cycles, cognitive functioning, adjustment after recovery, relationship with family members, experience of being at hospital, any memory of thought that patient find hard to forget, any aspect of illness that is still bothering the patient or family, reactions of society towards the person and family, post-traumatic stress symptoms and cognitive functions are essential for follow up sessions.
- III. Support groups can be held where patients who have recovered are brought on a single platform and under expert supervision of psychologists they can share their experiences which helped them cope with this illness. Mere listening to experiences of others will help the individual to develop an understanding that he/she is not the sole one going through it. There are many others who have gone through similar emotional reactions. Similarly experience sharing regarding which coping strategies helped them and which did not work can also provide useful insight.
- IV. It is important to realize that caregivers (including family members, spouse, children, or any significant other) are also susceptible to develop emotional and psychological reactions. Addressing their queries and problems they are facing (if any) is equally

important. So, it is important to involve them in the process of psychological rehabilitation. Remember, their reactions are not only going to effect the patient's recovery but also their own wellbeing.

## **2. Structured rehabilitation and self-management**

There will be few patients who might experience significant psychological, emotional, cognitive and functional impairment following hospitalization. A more structured rehabilitation comprising of multidisciplinary team including psychologists, psychiatrists, physiotherapists, speech language therapist, occupational therapist, nurse and doctors is needed as per the requirement of each individual is needed. At this level they areas that are likely to be addressed include:

- I. Psychoeducation- extensive sessions focusing on the reasons why individual is facing a particular problems and what can be done about it
- II. Supporting patients who are experiencing emotional distress
- III. Counseling on issues related to self-esteem, fears, perceived anxiety that might help patient to resume normal day to day activities.
- IV. Peer and family involvement to help address the reasons and design strategies to deal with problems that individual is facing after recovery.

## **3. Specialized psychological services**

There will be some individuals who after recovery from COVID 19 might experience continuous anxiety, distress, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, problems related to substance abuse despite of early interventions given to them. Such individuals should be referred for intensive psychotherapy. Similarly individuals with cognitive difficulties should be referred further for neuropsychological services.

To sum up it is important to take care of one's own self and provide support to others as well during this pandemic. Not associating any stigma with person who is being treated for COVID-19 is equally important. Without any discrimination, it's crucial to accept and welcome people back to community who are recovering from this disease.