Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on persons with psychiatric disorders

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From the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, concerns have been raised about its effect on mental health and on patients with psychiatric illnesses. A few reports suggest that patients with COVID-19 have increased symptoms of anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, increased substance use, and insomnia. There is an increased trend seen in flare-up of psychotic symptoms and new emergence of psychotic symptoms in previously healthy adults. There is extensive research available on the impact of COVID-19 on physical health, but there is a paucity of studies on the effects of COVID-19 on psychiatric illness.

Keywords: Anxiety, COVID-19, depression, psychosis, substance use disorders

Pandemics have shaped the psychology of humanity since times immemorial. The black plague pandemic, starting in 1345, claimed up to 100 million lives and is a topic of interest and research till this day. COVID-19, the infection caused by the novel coronavirus detected in December 2019, is now affecting more than 250 countries, raising concerns of panic and anxiety in individuals subjected to the real or perceived threat of the virus. The imposition of strict infection control measures like national lockdown has affected the daily activities, and livelihoods of the general population. This has resulted in increasing depression, harmful alcohol, and drug use, and self-harm behavior, aggravation of preexisting psychiatric illnesses, domestic abuse, and marital conflicts are also expected to rise.[1,2]

Effects of COVID-19 on Anxiety

In an attempt to halt the spread of the global pandemic, various measures have been introduced, mandatory quarantine being one of them. Numerous studies in the past have shown the impact of quarantine on mental health during crisis situations.[3] A study among hospital staff that might have come into contact with severe acute respiratory syndrome found that the most prominent reason for their anxiety then was quarantine.[4] In a recent KFF poll, nearly half (45%) of the adults in the United States reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the pandemic.[5] In view of awareness, anxiety, and perceived mental health-care needs in the

Access this article online
Quick Response Code:
Website: www.industrialpsychiatry.org
DOI: 10.4103/0972-6748.328832

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How to cite this article: Sowmya AV, Javadekar A, Menon P, Saldanha D. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on persons with psychiatric disorders. Ind Psychiatry J 2021;30:S288-90.
community during the corona pandemic, an online survey in the Indian population showed that more than 80% of the participants were preoccupied with the pandemic. Approximately 40% of the participants were preoccupied with the thought of contracting the coronavirus infection. Worry about themselves and their close ones was reported by 72% of the participants. Approximately 12% of the participants had sleeping difficulty due to being worried about the pandemic.[6]

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE DISORDERS

COVID-19 pandemic presents difficult challenges to people with substance use disorders (SUDs) and those in recovery. People with substance abuse disorders are difficult to reach population living in crowded areas with lower access to health care. They usually suffer from weaker immune function, chronic infections, as well as various issues with physical and psychiatric comorbidities. Consequently, they have a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and its transmission and adverse effects.[7] Trademark risk factor for alcohol misuse and alcohol use disorder is impulsivity. Impulsivity not only tempers stress-induced alcohol consumption but is also linked with relapse in alcohol-dependent individuals. The current period of isolation might lead to an increase in alcohol abuse, relapse, and potentially, development of alcohol use disorder in at-risk individuals, therefore, placing a further burden on drug and alcohol services, and the health service in general, during and after the pandemic.[8]

Among the vulnerable populations are people who smoke or vape, use opioids, or have a SUD. Data from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention have suggested that COVID-19 has a case fatality rate of 6.3% for individuals with chronic respiratory disease, compared with 2.3% overall.[9] People who are isolated and frequently stressed turn to substances to alleviate their negative feelings. Those in recovery might face heightened urges to use substances and will be at increased risk for relapse.

Exact data connecting the impact of COVID-19 and SUDs are not available yet. In India, in the state of Kerala, seven deaths have occurred due to patients committing suicide due to alcohol withdrawal, psychiatric clinics and de-addiction centers are experiencing a surge of patients experiencing withdrawal symptoms.[10] “This just being the tip of the iceberg, illicit sale of substances, especially alcohol, reduced social support, isolation, uncertainty, financial crisis, and stress are all posing a great threat to SUDs worldwide in general and India in particular.

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON PSYCHOSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic affects mental health, both from health-care settings and also from the broader perspective of society. An area of key concern is the potential of the current pandemic in exacerbating existing psychiatric conditions and influences the manifestation of their symptomatology. A recent case report revealed that a 43-year-old patient with paranoid schizophrenia developed a delusion that a Chinese WhatsApp message had infected him with COVID-19. This case report highlights the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the psychopathology of a patient with paranoid psychosis leading to the outbreak of a psychotic phase with paranoid-hallucinatory experiences and unrealistic concerns.[10]

Patients with schizophrenia have also been shown to be less willing to get vaccinated and adhere to social distancing. More than 70% of all schizophrenia patients also have one or more clinical conditions, including diabetes type II, pulmonary chronic kidney disease, and hypertension/ coronary heart disease, all of which are well-known risk factors for mortality in the current pandemic.[13] Lower access to adequate medical care, difficulty in early identification and assessment of symptoms, and superimposed substance abuse can all pose a greater threat in schizophrenic patients.[14]

CONCLUSION

The global COVID 19 pandemic has taken its toll on the world’s population in numerous ways, ranging from physical to psychological to financial. Its severe adverse effects on mental health are pervasive and potentially long lasting.

Financial support and sponsorship
Nil.

Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.

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