

COVID-19 Pandemic: Inducing Pan-Hysteria and Panic Disorder; An Overview

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Abstract

Summary: Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, China, gave an account of a few cases of pneumonia which were later established as cases of the Novel Coronavirus Disease by the end of December 2019. By 4th of January, WHO reported these cases on social media and by the beginning of March WHO had declared it as a pandemic which was preceded and followed by lockdowns in various countries and had led to a scenario of fear and panic amidst the minds of all.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has challenged the society in many aspects, one of them being the psychosocial aspect. The stress due to the pandemic could produce worry and fear about health for oneself, family members and friends. Even changes in sleeping or eating patterns, the worsening of chronic health problems, unavailability of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs in the market due to shutting down of manufacturing units and problems in concentration are among the possible etiologies of a precipitating panic disorder. Containment measures such as lockdown and isolation can also precipitate psychiatric illnesses and morbidities such as panic disorder, depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies. COVID-19 may cause or exacerbate even the existing psychiatric illnesses or existing panic disorder in individuals which could lead to physiological symptoms like palpitations, sweating, shortness of breath and a decreased sense of wellbeing. It gives a feeling of impending doom or danger and is followed by intense fear which can all take place when one is facing such a pandemic.

Conclusion: The COVID-19 pandemic has not only had physical but even mental and psychosocial impacts. New mental health challenges may arise owing to this pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Panic Disorder, Anxiety Disorders, Psychosocial, Novel Coronavirus.

Introduction

In December 2019, a life-threatening disease, the Novel Coronavirus disease 2019 came into play, which has now become a massive global health concern. It had commenced in Wuhan, China and has now escalated and

taken almost every country under its wing. It has affected nearly 10 million people till date and has taken the life of approximately 500 thousand people across the nations. Not only has it affected health physically but mentally as well. It has gripped the mind of every human with fear, anxiety and panic. From the moment of declaration of this as a pandemic, to lockdowns being imposed, all of it has seized people with hysteria and panic attacks. [2,8] The psychosocial impact of this whole pandemic is huge and could lead to various disorders that could be short term or long term like anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, mysophobia, acute stress disorder, panic disorder etc. [1,2]

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Panic disorder is classified under anxiety disorder and it is characterized by repeated and unexpected panic

attacks. During this, a feeling of terror develops and may trigger severe physical reactions combined with alterations in behavior or persistent worry over having further attacks. The fear of an impending panic attack can hamper routine day-to-day life. Panic disorder is more common in women as compared to men and thus women are more susceptible to such an attack. It could also possibly lead to Agoraphobia, which is a fear of going into places that are crowded. This is because it can cause an individual who has already had a panic attack to circumvent from places and situations where an attack has previously taken place because the individual experiences anticipatory anxiety. Diagnostic Criteria of Panic Disorder [300.01 (F41.0)] is given under DSM5 and says that at least 4 out of 11 physiological symptoms need to be present for an attack to be categorized as a panic disorder. Even though these anxiety symptoms may not be advanced enough to cross the diagnostic threshold of DSM-5, assistance and comfort from experts and specialists may help the people to get over their current anxieties.^[1]

Literature Review:

Panic Disorder Correlated to Pandemic: As COVID-19 was spreading across the nations, the people of these countries were mostly not aware of coronavirus and so ignored it. As soon as it was declared a pandemic, reality came crashing down on everyone as they realized there is no more escaping and ignoring what is going on around the world. The countries that had already been affected and had an increased number of cases had already gone through the realization phase, but knowing that almost all countries are affected by the same was still harsh on them as now they could see the same helplessness everywhere.

The disease was not known to many at the time as to what it was, how it spread and why it was the cause of death for many which thus created fear and panic amongst everyone. They did not know who to approach, who to ask and were completely ignorant on the topic. Non-availability of vaccines and uncertainty at the time regarding the treatment further aggravated the problem.^[1,3]

All individuals who were quarantined for 14 days post-travelling and those who were contacts and contact of contacts were also very scared as they feared the outcome of their test results. They had to wait for a period of 14 days where they were completely isolated

and had to stay without their family, after which testing was done one final time before releasing them from the quarantine facilities. This caused unease and increased panic.^[1,3]

Cases of stigmatization, racism and xenophobia against targeted communities were also being highlighted in the news across the globe. WHO highlighted in their mental health outline that beratement and victimization of individuals affected by the disease, frontline health care professionals combating the disease and government officials is a predictable occurrence in epidemics and tragically this trend is still alive during this ongoing pandemic of COVID-19, which has caused stress among the individuals affected by the disease as well as among the healthcare professionals which could precipitate in even them having panic attacks. The healthcare professionals are already under stress due to the increasing cases of COVID-19, increased working hours, less rest when they are relentlessly working, which leads to an increase in their exposure towards the disease. This means that they do not get to spend much time with their family, worrying about them while at the same time trying to efficiently work with reduced resting period. Even for those who are affected by the COVID-19, it is very difficult to cope as they are internally panicking. They get respiratory symptoms which they don't know much about and wonder what is happening to their body. They can't meet their family and are completely isolated which further aggravates the fear and anxiety already brewing in them.^[1,3]

Hence, it is very important for the mental health professionals to take an initiative and educate the public so as to decrease their fear and stigma and counsel those affected by COVID-19. Certain psychosocial guidelines were also delivered by the WHO for diminishing the increasing stigma against COVID-19.^[3,4]

Panic Disorder Correlated to Social Media: Over the last few years, social media has proven to be a platform for circulating awareness and imparting knowledge regarding health. But, misuse of social media has also been done time and again. In a time like this, where already very little was known about the Novel Coronavirus disease, misinformation spread like wildfire all across the social media platform, from supposed cures to false information about the spread of the disease and gave rise to more panic and anxiety. This fear and anxiety could lead to people trying various supposed cures which could be life endangering. Social

media also became a platform where fake sanitizers and N95 masks were being sold and since the people were going through so much at the time, they were vulnerable and so fell for such schemes.^[5,6,7]

Panic Disorder Correlated to Lockdown: As the cases kept rising, countries with so many cases eventually had to declare a lockdown to contain the spread of the virus. In the past outbreaks, we have seen that quarantine, lockdown and isolation has had a psychosocial impact which varies from overnight and concerning effects like agitation, worry over acquiring the disease, worry over transmitting the disease to members of their family, anger, panic, denial, loneliness, despair, anxiety, insomnia, depression, hysteria, to extreme effects like suicide. It has also affected individuals into over thinking the entire pandemic situation and has led to mysophobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder resulting in the individuals feeling a constant need to use a sanitizer and washing their hands.^[1]

The lockdown was a very unforeseen, but necessary event. When the lockdown was announced, it created panic among the people as they realized that it's better to stock and pile up on household items to avoid going out for fear of contracting the virus. Thus, began the panic buying all across the globe as countries started going under lockdown. Not just food but even sanitizers and masks were soon out of stock as people began hoarding these up and the manufacture had to be boosted to get them back in stock as soon as possible. Even repeated reassurance to the people that there were enough supplies did little to soothe the minds of the people and lead to empty isles in the markets which further aggravated the panic and motivated panic buying.

All the people hailing from various countries who had gone elsewhere for studying and work purposes got stuck in the lockdown and could not go back home to their families and were constantly worrying for their family members. The students who had been preparing for years for various exams are unable to give it and time is slipping away which could potentially lead to anxiety.

Lockdown created a crash in the economy and further the shutdown of manufacturing units and non-essential commodity related trades has led to lack of income in a lot of economic sectors. It means that there is a feeling of insecurity and powerlessness due to the lockdown. We need to understand that poverty is dependent on income, which is important during emergency lockdowns. Poverty means reduced capacity of these individuals to

effectively participate in society. Feeding and providing a roof over the head is not enough, but also increased access to school or clinic, land for growing food, even a job is equally important. Poverty means, one is living in a delicate environment, without access to clean water or sanitation.^[8]

Not just the poor but it created confusion even amongst people who had small-businesses, artists and everybody who did not have a steady income and job. They did not know how to deal and process the lockdown as there was too much uncertainty of what the future held. This again led to anxiety and panic regarding how they will feed themselves and their families and maintain a roof over their heads while their sources of income were cutoff and they were being forced to stay at home. In the job sector, people are being laid off by the companies that can no longer support as many employees due to losses during the lockdown and there is an air of panic amongst the employees owing to the uncertainty.^[8]

Methodology

Literature review is a review that is more than just the analysis of findings from primary studies, rather it also allows researching in other dimensions. Thus, Literature review helps to develop an overview regarding a topic from secondary data. Literature reviews concentrate on gathering knowledge about a certain topic under study and allows the formation of a summary of the available data on a topic such as "Covid-19 Pandemic: A source of pan-hysteria inducing Panic Disorder". It grants generic conclusions on a research topic while answering a targeted question, which we know based on other articles and highlighting the key points. Thus, once the question is framed, data cumulation for the literature review would be defined. In this study, the topic "Covid-19 Pandemic: A source of pan-hysteria inducing Panic Disorder" has been investigated to identify and highlight this problem.^[8] The guiding query of this literature is "Covid-19 Pandemic: A source of pan-hysteria inducing Panic Disorder". Crossetti (2012) had proposed an integrated review method which has been used to construct this review. This method allowed the formation of a thorough assessment of the literature in qualitative and quantitative aspects. Thus, it completely assesses the research question or topic which is being addressed. A literature search was done on this topic using the following electronic databases: Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus etc. Keywords were utilized to search for the relevant articles for the same.^[8]

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only had physical but even mental and psychosocial impacts. Thus, psychological and social wellbeing during such a time carries universal importance. Paranoia and hysteria as a result of the pandemic could lead to panic disorders. COVID-19 may cause or exacerbate the existing psychiatric illnesses or existing panic disorder in individuals which could lead to palpitations, sweating and a decreased sense of wellbeing. In a pandemic such as this, which has affected so many and taken so many lives, psychosocial impact could take a backseat especially in developing countries and thus, it is very important to shed light on this topic. This is now our new normal and we need to build our strategy to combat this pandemic while keeping this in mind. The COVID-19 has impacted both developed and developing economies, manufacturing units were shut, a significant reduction happened in the agricultural activities, tourism, trade and even in the travel industry. In developed countries for example Europe, the panic and fear are more regarding the consequence of the pandemic leading to loss of jobs. The European Commission took steps to help make recovery guidelines for the problems due to COVID-19 outbreak.^[8]

The government should focus on the mental wellbeing and also the related comorbidities of COVID-19 and evaluate the mortality associated sequelae. Beratement and accusations which are addressed to a certain section of society hit by the pandemic, may hamper global trade, relationships, finances resulting in further havoc. Thus, there is a need to eliminate the discrimination against those associated with the disease and racism. The mental health impact on those suffering such discriminations is eliminated by counselling with specialists and healthcare professionals and building a team of healthcare professionals who are directly a part of healthcare delivery systems.^[8]

To manage the economic crisis, countries need to aspire to reduce the adverse effects of COVID -19 by focusing on the communities that are underprivileged. This is because, in such situations, the underprivileged and the poor communities suffer the most. They get neglected, which gives rise to starvation, health deterioration, low quality of life and even deaths due to improper hygiene and starvation. Thus, separate measures for lockdowns should be made to make sure it addresses the needs of the less privileged in the future.

The Officials of such countries and the WHO should make sure that the underprivileged do not have to worry about food or whether they will be able to survive the lockdown before surviving the pandemic. It highlights the need for constructing more powerful health systems for the underprivileged so that we can help the underprivileged communities to live in a healthy manner. An example for this kind of a model is the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS), where there was an instant expansion and redistribution of the income amongst the Bolsa Familia. This model gave way for expansion and urgent payments for everyone who had informal jobs or for those who were unemployed.^[8]

Regarding control of Misinformation: Social media needs to be used responsibly so that people know what the disease is, how it is transmitted, what are the signs and symptoms, what can be done to avoid it and when to reach out to a consultant. To protect social media from misinformation regarding COVID-19, strict government laws need to be implemented against fake news, rumors, misinformation.^[5,6,7]

Thus, it is very important right now to harness social media platforms to spread accurate information regarding all aspects of the disease and how to avoid it. We need to battle against the social media pandemic. We need to rapidly identify and provide an answer to the fake news, rumors, behaviors and various perceptions around COVID-19 and how we can control and eliminate the misinformation that has been and is still being spread.^[5,6,7]

The most important element for the beneficial impact of social media during the pandemic is focusing on making accurate data available to the public so that the public is well informed and thus, can help to stop the transmission of COVID-19. Moreover, some experts had suggested that a digital tool can be built. Keeping this in mind, WHO made a webpage to set forth right information and also to correct misinformation that was being spread about COVID-19. The social media pandemic can only be eliminated with accurate information. Social media needs to be used wisely, for example, using social media to communicate and keep in touch with what is going on across the globe, for conveying the importance and cause for quarantine and also in providing relief to the pre-empt panic and misinforming rumors.^[5,6,7]

Conclusion

Constructing a plan of action on how to deal

with mental health issues and making mental health organizations specific for pandemics can be the first step to approaching the problem. Arranging awareness programs regarding this at personal as well as community level is very important. Building websites and toll-free helpline numbers for the people for easy access to psychologists for communication and assistance during this pandemic when faced with such situations of panic is also something that can be promoted.^[1,3,9,10]

First thing to focus on can be to change loneliness to solitude. Loneliness is an emotion that is filled with fear and dejection. To gain mental strength to combat and overcome it is to engage in hobbies, focus on neglected passions, cherish bonds that we have with our friends and family. Great works of philosophy, literature and even great works of arts have been achieved from solitude and thus can be used to motivate others.^[11-12]

As mental health professionals, it is important that we are sensitized to the needs of those who are in quarantine and are able to address those needs. Their psychological and even personal needs should be addressed. Digital communications with their loved ones need to be arranged and encouraged. Similar protocols were followed in China in the first stage of the disease and it was seen that it had significantly impacted the quality of life of those who were quarantined. Also, in a research it was seen that even weekly counselling sessions over the phone can help reduce fear and stress during such times. These sessions should be brief and should focus on the solution. Social integration is another significant aspect, in which integration of individuals around us matters. Caring and looking out for the household helps, security guards, vendors, etc. is important in such stressful times. Amere greeting to neighbors or even passersby can strengthen the feeling of unity that we are all in on this together. The pandemic will in the end teach us two important lessons: preparation for solitude during a crisis such as this and that the physico-psychological well-being forms the cornerstone of public health.^[11]

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