The Imminent Mental Health Crisis and the Role Psychologists Can Play to Improve Occupational Health in Times of Coronavirus Pandemic in Pakistan

Hifza Rabbani[1], Yasir Masood[2]

ABSTRACT

As expected, the uncertainty of the novel coronavirus has had a major impact on the mental health of the entire population of the world, whether it is in fear of contracting the virus, being stuck at home or being actually infected by it. This much has been proven by research as well but what can mental health practitioners do to combat this imminent threat on a large scale? To name a few, mobilizing their community to bring awareness to the general public and making mental health care easily available for the larger community can be done. The entire mental health community has to come together to bring about a massive change to tackle the crisis of mental health disabilities surging in a post COVID-19 world.
Keywords: COVID-19; Mental health; Crisis; Awareness; Mental health practitioners

[1]Coordinator, Trainings & Outreach, House of Wellness, Islamabad.
[2]Managing Director, House of Wellness, Islamabad.

Corresponding Author Email:
hifzarabbani979@outlook.com

Pandemics create an odd, unpredictable kind of crisis with a lot of confusion about the disease, its spread, and its impact. Similarly, the novel, and by extension, unknown coronavirus has understandably had an effect on people's emotional, physical and mental health even among those who have not been directly exposed to the virus itself. An overview of the literature present about coronavirus and its psychological impacts on individuals and societies has shown a significant mental health burden, for example this particular study by Huang and Zhao found that in the Chinese population during the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers, young people, and people overthinking about the pandemic are at a higher risk of exhibiting symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, depressive symptoms and overall low sleep quality (Huang & Zhao, 2020). This is only one of the many impacts that coronavirus pandemic has had on the mental health of the entire world's population.

As higher authorities in public health are trying to restrain the virus and reduce the harmful effects on worldwide population, another menace is upon us: media exposure to the virus on a global scale. Research has suggested that frequent media exposure to a common crisis may lead to a rise in anxiety and stress responses that can further aggravate obvious negative effects on health causing mislead in help-seeking and protective behaviors that may overburden healthcare facilities. As important as conveying urgent information to the public on part of healthcare workers and public health officials in real time is, it is also equally important to temper unanticipated media exposure that may lead to traumatic stress responses and other related issues (Garfin et al., 2020). Another study found that there is a prevalence of mental health

problems positively relating to frequent social media exposure during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings should be enough to urge mental health practitioners to pay more attention to mental health among general population in the midst of the fight against COVID-19. While combating the pandemic, another step to be taken by the government is to combat the *infodemic* by monitoring and filtering false news meanwhile encouraging valid information (Gao et al., 2020).

When psychologists talk about the basic ways of coping with stress during an infectious disease outbreak, what people should be aware of is that when we hear, read, or watch news about the virus, we may feel stressed or show some symptoms of anxiety but these manifestations are very normal. Psychologists suggest we keep an eye on our own physical and mental health, notice the signs of stress in ourselves and our loved ones, educate our self on how to relieve stress and if required, when to seek professional help. The signs of stress can manifest in a couple of ways, being educated about them can help us cope with the symptoms effectively. These signs can be physical (for example, stiff neck, appetite changes etc.), cognitive (for example, negative thoughts and feelings etc.), behavioral (for example, aggression, isolating yourself from people etc.) or emotional (for example, feeling irrationally scared etc.) A few tips to stay calm and stress-free is to again educate our self, keep a positive outlook, try not to increase the risk irrationally, take precautions, stay home if we feel sick, avoid people who are presenting with flu-like symptoms, maintain regular health routines, stick to a strict sleep schedule, stay connected with our loved ones and finally seek extra help if we require it.

For businesses asking their employees to return to their workplace during the pandemic, a research conducted in China shed light on the need for governments and businesses to be conscious of the severity of the factors associated with mental health issues among employees. The experience from China exhibits that personal prevention measures including the frequent hand washing ritual and wearing face masks as well as measures being taken at the workplace because of concerns from the company about physical health of their employees is associated with fewer psychological issues in employees (Tan et al., 2020). According to another research conducted in America, 88% of workers said, they experienced moderate to extreme stress over the past 4 to 6 weeks. Among these workers, 62% noticed at least an hour a day of loss in productivity and 32% noticed at least 2 hours a day due to COVID-19 related stress (Gavidia, 2020). So what businesses can do for their employees is to provide them with information from reliable sources. Secondly, ensuring employees are well informed about the preventative protocols and the seriousness of seeking medical attention if they get sick and providing access to said preventative measures within the work environment. Furthermore, being thoughtful and encouraging workers to stay home if they are experiencing symptoms and whenever possible, accommodating those who may be able to work remotely will go a long way for the mental health of employees. For all this to effectively take place in a work environment, businesses need to make sure they are efficaciously communicating with their employees just like plain and caring messages from all levels of leadership are supportive and they reduce fear and uncertainty in the workplace in any situation. Even then for many people, especially the ones with pre-existing mental or physical conditions, the emotional impact of the uncertainty of COVID-19 may become so much that it is unbearable so businesses should ensure employees are aware of how to

access mental health resources or if feasible, make them work from home. A few tips to make the transformation of working from home for employees is to maintain a routine, plan their meals and eat healthily, create an office space at home if they are able to, avoid distractions, make a plan and set deadlines for themselves.

With that said, mental health practitioners may find themselves facing huge practical, social and mental health challenges within the workplace so much so that this profession can end up completely overwhelmed so what they can do in a time like this is to first take good care of their own mental health, then educate masses about the common adverse psychological consequences of the pandemic remotely, encourage health-promoting behaviors, integrate the available health-care system and promote self-care of health-care providers (Banerjee, 2020). Moreover, they can also provide empirical data to combat misconceptions that reside among the general public in the form of conspiracy theories, misinformation and superstitions. It is also the duty of mental health practitioners to strive towards normalizing mental health issues and making mental health care easily available in a country like Pakistan where mental health is not readily accepted by most communities (Mukhtar, 2020).

But with the expected increase in the appetite for mental health care in the population in a pandemic crisis where levels of stress are expected to rise, both because of direct causes (like fear of contracting the virus and the stress, grief, and depression associated with it) or indirectly (like from thinking about the ramifications of the economic and social turmoil that is happening on individual and societal levels), many mental health practitioners in afflicted countries are currently trying to replace face-to-face therapy contacts with digital therapies (Wind et al., 2020). This *black swan* moment (an unpredictable incident that defers everything according to Blumenstyk (2020) is expected to lead to a lasting shift in mental health facilities with respect to online care in the future. The obvious solution to providing these mental health facilities in the current times is to carry them out at a reasonable distance by video-conferencing counseling and psychotherapy and other therapist-guided internet interventions. According to research, videoconferencing counseling and psychotherapy has shown favorable results especially for mood related disorders and anxiety (Berryhill et al., 2019). Moreover, the proof for therapist-guided online interventions is even better (Karyotaki et al., 2018; Andersson, 2016). This *black swan* moment should serve as a guiding post for mental health practitioners to quickly adapt to holistic care models (Kooistra et al., 2019; Van der Vaart et al., 2014). Flexibility and resilience is one of the most crucial skills for 21st century businesses anyway but that stands even more correct when such unforeseeable factors like viruses that disrupt entire countries and calamities steered by climate change are even more likely to happen in coming times. So this is a call for action for mental health practitioners and people in related fields to swiftly start adopting these online apps, both as a means to resume therapy for current clients and as a type of intervention to cope with the inevitable rise in mental health symptoms because of the COVID-19 pandemic. That being said, it is equally crucial, nonetheless, to keep reminding ourselves during these upsetting times that some amount of stress is part of the human experience and that this too shall pass.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
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