

COVID-19 pandemic and women mental health

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Since last eighteen months, the world is trying to escape from the tight paws of Corona-19 virus. This tiny virus has changed the total perspective of the life of the human being. Covid-19 pandemic has motivated the world to rethink about the human life and its personal, familial, social, economical as well as political dimensions. It has also made the people on this earth to audit the concept of 'HEALTH' and the various health systems created by them. We need to relearn the definition of 'HEALTH' proposed by WHO long back in 1948. What is this definition? Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health is also a fundamental human right of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economical and social condition. There is no change in this definition ever since WHO proposed this on 7th April 1948!

Mental health is another neglected part of the health just like social health. Since 1999, WHO took mental health issues on its agenda. Since last decade the global disease burden of mental ill-health is continuously increasing. It has become so alarming that the health care experts fear that till 2030 untreated mental illnesses especially depression will become the first cause of mortality and morbidity. The women experience low preference in mental health too just like physical health. So WHO has taken women mental health as its priority. COVID-19 has given rise to another pandemic in the world - Mental ill-health pandemic! This article discusses the ill effects of COVID- 19 pandemic on women mental health, causes, psychological management and prevention.

Anxiety, depression, Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Eating disorders are almost two times more prevalent in women than men. Emotional disturbances lie in between the spectrum of stable mental condition and psychiatric illnesses. If the negative and harmful emotions like anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, shame, hurt linger more in intensity, duration and frequency, they can interfere with physical & mental health of a person. They can interfere badly with his day - to - day life also.

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lives of most of the women drastically. They are struggling hard for managing various roles now a days. E.g.- loss of jobs/ small scale businesses, reduced monthly income due to loss of the jobs of the family head, responsibilities of children and old family members, taking care of COVID positive family members, managing hospitalisation of COVID positive family member, managing vaccinations of family members etc. Most of the women neglect their physical and mental health as they used to during pre - COVID era. COVID pandemic has brought the sudden & intense changes in the life of most of the women by bringing-

- 1) Economic crisis
- 2) Uncertainty about earning
- 3) Reduced access to food & health care system [1].
- 4) Disturbed interpersonal relations due to imposed lockdowns
- 5) Increased rate of domestic & sexual violence (25-30% rise during pandemic [2].

- 6) Increase in addictions in the men in the families
- 7) Reduced access for meeting relatives and friends
- 8) Health complications or death of dear ones due to COVID-19 infection.
- 9) Mismanagement of the imposed empty time.
- 10) Sudden and intense uncertainty of life.
- 11) Fear of getting COVID-19 infection [3].

There is remarkable increase in anxiety, depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Eating Disorders, Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder during COVID period. The women already suffering from psychiatric disorders suffer exacerbation of the psychiatric symptoms.

Almost 70% women health care workers are suffering from burn out. Burn out rates among women jumped from 34% in 2019 to 75% in 2020 as compared to 59% in men [4]. One survey by statistical department reveals that almost 42% women in India reported challenges in their mental health during lockdown [5].

More than 65% persons in the age group 18 - 24 years are suffering from depressive disorder. An international survey containing more than 10,000 participants from 40 countries reveals that 27% women had reported increases in mental health challenges as compared to 10% men. Women who are pregnant, postpartum, miscarrying or experiencing intimate partner violence are specially high risk for developing mental health problems during pandemic [6]. Even before the COVID -19 pandemic, it was predicted that India might lose 1.03 trillion USD (68 lakh crores INR) due to mental ill- health. Pandemic has added more burden to it [7].

India might become the capital for depression by 2030. But these scary figures are not enough to motivate our systems to improve our mental health services. India is not sensitive enough about mental health on government, social as well as personal level. There is a huge gap between demand and supply of mental health services. The number of psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric social workers, counsellors, psychiatric nurses, rehabilitation centres are too inadequate to fulfil the need of the society. If we are not aware enough about this tsunami of mental ill- health, India may go back by 10 years

in the terms of economy, social development and human resources. Here are few things for managing women mental health.

Accept your emotional distress and decide to take firm steps to manage it.

- 1) Adopt healthy life style. Regular exercise, healthy food, adequate sleep and hydration are very important.
- 2) Stay away from addictive substances like tobacco, alcohol, weeds etc.
- 3) Restrict your screen time to two hours per day.
- 4) Do not watch/ read TV channels, social media posts regarding COVID frequently.
- 5) Try to do your at least one favourite activity daily at least for half hour. (Reading, singing, gardening, writing, painting, sewing etc)
- 6) Involve your family members in the household chores. Communicate with them firmly and kindly without anger and resentment.
- 7) Be grateful to your life and the people in your life.
- 8) Stay virtually connected with your relatives and friend circle through video calls etc.
- 9) Identify your negative and unhelpful emotions like anxiety, depression, anger, hurt, guilt, shame. Accept that they are your goal blocking emotions. But do not struggle to get rid off them. Understand that these emotions are mainly arise from your thoughts about your situation and not from the situation itself.

Eg- A thought like 'If my family member or me get infected with COVID, we may not get bed in hospital and it will be a disaster!' can create anxiety. Identify your extreme and rigid thoughts when you are emotionally disturbed. Ask yourself following questions -

“Is my thought true? Is my thought useful for me to achieve my goal? Is my thought is helping to keep me emotionally and physically healthy? Is my thought helping me to maintain my interpersonal relations healthy? “

Accept only those thoughts which are useful and true. Practise this worldwide

accepted method used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy regularly.

- 10) Think for the best and prepare for the worst. Don't take COVID-19 lightly. Accept and practice new normal life style without whining about it.
- 11) Practice deep breathing, mediation or pranayama.
- 12) Practice effective time management.
- 13) Try to use new and effective communication tools like Tele Consultation app to consult your doctor.
- 14) Use helplines for prevention of domestic violence, severe emotional disturbances or suicidal thoughts. Join women support' groups. They proved to be very effective [6].
- 15) Seek authentic information about health from scientific sites like WHO, CDC etc. Do not believe blindly on social media forwards.
- 16) If all the above self -help measures are not effective in allaying your emotional

disturbances, be open to seek help from psychiatrist. It may be a life saving move!

Remember mental health is a very important aspect of our life. One study in USA reveals if we spend one USD on the treatment of psychiatric illnesses, we gain 5 USD. If we spend one USD for prevention of mental ill-health, we gain 37 USD! According to Indian context, the figures may vary but the principle will be the same. Massive economic steps are also necessary for women's financial security. We should consider this pandemic as an opportunity to build a better, more resilient societies that could bring relief and hope to the mankind on the Earth. If the readers understand the importance of mental health, the purpose of the article will be much served!.

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