

## COVID 19 Pandemic Anxiety and its Management

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The new decade brought with it the first pandemic of the social-media age - Coronavirus Disease 2019, popularly referred to as COVID-19. Despite similarities with the 2003 SARS pandemic, COVID-19 has much higher infectivity but lower mortality than SARS. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a total of 8422 people worldwide were affected with SARS, with 916 deaths. COVID-19, on the other hand, has already affected more than 10 million and had over 500,000 deaths.

The sudden outbreak of a serious respiratory illness in China followed by rapid spread to other parts of the world prompted researchers to study the disease and to isolate the virus without much delay. We now know that the disease is caused by a previously unknown virus: 2019-nCoV or SARS-CoV2. Being a new virus very little was known about its nature. The resulting vagueness about the illness resulted in excessive psychological stress on people. With the WHO initially delaying and then declaring it a pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, there was a swift rise of fear and anxiety among the general population [1,2].

The COVID-19 Pandemic is likely to evoke questions within the minds of a vast number of individuals across the globe due to its high degree of communicability and an apparently greater fatality rate compared to many other flu-causing viruses. No specific medications against COVID 19 are available presently. A vaccine against it has also not been developed thus far. The only known methods to prevent the disease are non-pharmacological measures like avoiding contact with infected person, social distancing, use of face masks, through hand-washing with soap and water or alcohol based sanitizers, etc. These measures would help to prevent the

spread of infection to a great extent. However, many people would start “worrying” if they would contract the illness; a common scenario that can occur in infectious outbreaks when people experience heightened anxiety but are still managing to carry on [3].

The symptoms of anxiety include:

- Worry, anxiety or sadness of mood, fear of contracting an infection.
- Persistent preoccupation with illness worry.
- Feeling distressed, tearful, and sad. Disinterest in activities that one used to enjoy.
- Above symptoms may be associated with truancy or oppositional behaviour in adolescents, persistent nervousness, tension.
- Restlessness or feeling on edge
- Irritability
- Muscles feeling tense and tight
- Poor concentration
- Sleep and Appetite disturbances.
- Physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, excessive sweating, feeling light-headed, stomach upset and fatigue [4,5].

During an epidemic of an infective disease, the mental state of the people have an important role in determining not only the extent of the epidemic but also the incidence of psychological distress and disorder during and after the outbreak.

## Management

Living during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a stressful experience. In these circumstances feeling anxious and fearful about the disease is normal. However, at times the fear and anxiety can be overpowering and cause intense emotional reactions in adults and children which can be managed by non-pharmacological and pharmacological measures.

### Non-pharmacological measures:

- Knowing how to relieve stress one can manage and alleviate your stress by taking time to take care of oneself. It is normal to have anticipatory anxiety. Commonly we worry about the worst that can happen. Combat this by thinking about alternate scenarios that can also happen viz. having mild symptoms that produce discomfort but are not life-threatening.
- Establish daily time periods (about 15 minutes) to be spent on worrying about the COVID 19 pandemic. Talking about or writing down your fears and emotions during this period is a good way to externalize anxious mood. Thereafter you must continue with your daily activities for the rest of the day. When the anxious thoughts recur do not suppress them, allow them to do so, but keep reminding yourself that I will deal with them during tomorrow's time period.
- Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the outbreak. It is quite normal to be concerned about the spread of the effects of the covid pandemic, especially if your loved ones reside in a hotspot. However, one must appreciate that following the news continuously does not have any advantages. Apart from hearing the news once or twice a day, focus on the here and now. Try to do as much of your normal activities as permitted.
- Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Depend on them for information about the pandemic and personal protective measures against the infection. You may turn to your family doctor, a state or local health department, government agencies, or an international organization. Do not depend on social media advice.
- Maintain connections with near and dear ones. Love and support from near and dear will improve our morale and help us deal with the problems. Discussing our fears and emotional state with family and friends can help us in finding ways to deal with the stress.

- Eat healthy foods, and drink water, get adequate rest and sleep, do some physical exercise. Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine. Stop or curtail use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.
- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you-take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies. Take some time to meditate [6,7].

### Pharmacological management

Handling anxiety during isolation and quarantine requires a multipronged approach that rests on support, reassurance, providing useful information, and solving practical issues for patients and that utilizes medications when necessary. Individuals having no past history of psychiatric disorders, who develop anxiety not responding to nonpharmacological measures may respond well to a short course of benzodiazepines. The choice of particular benzodiazepines is based on the duration of action. Short half-life medications such as alprazolam may be helpful in panic attacks or panic-like anxiety spells, while longer-acting medications, such as diazepam or clonazepam, may be better suited for persistent anxiety. Lorazepam is a shorter-acting benzodiazepine that is available in oral and injectable forms and is metabolized in a simple fashion by direct glucuronidation, so it may represent an optimal choice for "as-needed" use. For patients in isolation who are severely ill, the use of benzodiazepines should be critically assessed, as they may contribute to delirium. The use of benzodiazepines may be particularly problematic in patients with compromised respiratory function [8].

### Conclusion

Facing a pandemic of a new infective agent is an extremely frightening situation. The absence of information or contradictory information leaves us confused and we often tend to believe in worst case scenarios. Guard yourself from such catastrophic thinking. Remember, this is neither the first nor the last pandemic, and this too shall pass.

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