

Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Relationships

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Coronaviruses comprise a large family of viruses, many of which cause illnesses in humans and animals. The coronavirus responsible for the current pandemic SARS coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) started in Wuhan, China, and then spread worldwide. In a few weeks, more than a hundred thousand cases and deaths were confirmed globally and these numbers kept increasing exponentially. The WHO on March 11, 2020 declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Worldwide, nations tried to halt the pandemic by testing, tracing contacts, limiting travel, quarantining, cancelling large meetings and events, and most importantly, imposing lockdowns [1]. Lockdown refers to government-placed and government-enforced restrictions on the movement of citizens, outside their houses. A total lockdown was imposed in India on March 24, 2020.

A lockdown, where people were living within the same boundaries with no avenues of interaction with the world outside, came with various implications - isolation, contact restriction and an eventual economic slumping, to name a few. A combination of these factors resulted in a drastic and acute alteration of the psychosocial environment worldwide. It affected relationships between partners, children or adolescents with their parents and other familial dynamics, in an exceptional way - it caused reorganisation of everyday life.

Every individual had to cope with the stress of lockdown and social distancing. Family connections and supports were disrupted. Fear of losing family members who belong to high-risk groups was palpable. In cases of deaths, the process of bereavement was marred.

Moreover, the pandemic had major adverse economic effects and put financial pressures on many families. Incidence of substance abuse increased, out of stress, amotivation or sheer boredom [2,3]. Taking into account the relationships between couples, a total lockdown forced couples into a prolonged and inescapable proximity. For some couples, who worked from different cities or at different hours, this became a favourable opportunity at improving the quality of marital and sexual relationships, resulting in a spurt in the rates of pregnancy and abortion. On the flip side, imperfections and interpersonal frictions found a breeding ground during the lockdown, because couples had ample time and opportunity to observe weaknesses in each other and in their relationships, resulting in quarrels, marital disharmony, reduced attractiveness and partner-specific sexual dysfunction. A hike in the divorce rates and intimate partner violence, was also observed [4]. Research shows that continual close contact under stress is a risk factor for aggressive behaviour and violence [5]. Additionally, in economic recession, there is an increase observed in incidences of domestic violence [6]. A decreased freedom and privacy, combined with high levels of stress, can culminate in domestic violence in many cases. Exposure to perpetrators was increased and the possibilities of victims to temporarily escape their abusive partners was reduced. With all these put into a continuum, there has been a significant increase in domestic violence in the duration of the pandemic, by as much as 40 - 50% [5].

Cumulative stress also has a pivotal role to play in child-maltreatment. An accumulation of stressors due to COVID-19 resulted in higher parent-perceived stress - cognitive, emotional

and physical fatigue - placing undue strain on the parent-child relationship. With kindergartens and schools being shut, social contacts limited and outdoor activities cancelled, parents were having to support their children with home schooling, while simultaneously working from home. Some families experienced more financial strain as a result of the changing economy and increasing unemployment. The stresses of poverty and unemployment have long been associated with increased risk of child maltreatment [7]. Although the lockdown and its accompanying stressors, in general, mostly lead to child maltreatment, findings also indicate that some parents reported benefits as a result of the restrictions, as it corresponded with more time spent with their children, which their normal schedules wouldn't have allowed so easily [5].

Further evaluation and research is needed for arriving at a definite conclusion about the ways in which relations were affected from a total lockdown. Based on which, adaptive coping strategies and supportive family environments can be implemented, which may help to serve as a protective factor for overcoming the vices which the lockdown brought about in familial relationships.

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