

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF INCREASING SUICIDAL TENDENCY IN PRESENT SCENARIO OF COVID-19 CRISIS

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In this medical emergency of COVID-19, increasing suicidal tendencies all over the world can be considered a mental health emergency. The speed at which suicide cases shoot up is alarming. Now COVID-19 will not be just a medical phenomenon. Day by day, it is adversely affecting people not only physically but also mentally as well as emotionally. Maybe its impact and consequences vary from person to person, but we cannot deny that, due to this outbreak, everybody is feeling stressed and having anxiety. In this situation, when a person is already emotionally unstable negative thoughts can dominate him easily. Mental health can be ensured when we are vigilant about the emotion, thought, and behaviour of others and ourselves. The present study aims to provide a picture of increasing suicidal tendencies among individuals in the present scenario of the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: Suicidal tendency, mental health emergency.

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus strain. The virus is now known as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Coronavirus is zoonotic, that means they pass from animal to human. Researches show that there are a number of coronavirus circulating in animals. Some of them had infected humans, but some have not yet done so.

We can see some common signs of infection with this virus as cough, running nose, stuffing nose, sore throat, fatigue, headache, body ache, fever, breathing problems, sore, pink eye, some less common symptoms as vomiting, diarrhoea, rashes on the body, etc.,

and some severe symptoms or consequences as lungs infection, Pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure, and even death. Older people and people who have some chronic medical conditions like cancer, heart disease, kidney problems, weakened immune system, etc., have a higher risk of serious illness.

Along with medical and physical problems, the COVID-19 pandemic caused many mental health-related problems like anxiety, depression, mood disorders, etc. It has brought several changes in our lives, like our daily routine, work style, financial pressure due to loss of a job, social isolation, etc. As this situation is full of negativity and uncertainty, people are worried about how long this condition will continue. The feeling of helplessness in this scenario is leading them towards fear for their future.

The active cases, especially death cases due to this disease, are continuously spurting up worldwide at a very high speed, and some misinformation about this disease is getting spread at even higher speed. In this condition, people with low willpower cannot cope with their fear and anxiety about the pandemic. It is increasing suicidal thoughts and the risk of committing suicide for many people.

Suicidal thoughts are as poisonous and dangerous as doing suicide itself. Once depressive and suicidal thoughts start striking one's mind, he/she needs intensive psychological care and emotional assistance. In the absence of the same, the depressive and suicidal thought can capture an individual's mind in a multiplying way that will lead them towards conclusions like: "My life is worthless." "I am helpless". "Nobody likes me". "Why to live such an unsuccessful life?" "I am not fortunate". "There is no other option left except suicide to get rid of problems of my life". "There is no light of hope for continuing life". "The circumstances have been completely changed, so no hope is left in favour of me," "My life is only a burden for others and me as well," ... and so on.

Increasing number of reported suicide cases worldwide during this pandemic crisis shows that COVID-19 will not be just a medical phenomenon. It is not only taking lives but also killing our willpower and enthusiasm towards life. In many of us, this fatal thought process is affecting us like a slow poison and, day by day, decreasing our mental, emotional, and physical strength and is working as life-threatening and death-dealing.

Some Reported Incidents of Suicide due to COVID-19

We can see several examples of death during this present scenario, not because of contagious disease but because of fear from this disease. There are several examples of suicide cases just because of the trepidation of being infected with the coronavirus. For example, an Italian nurse, aged 34, who was working at the intensive care ward, was under heavy stress, and then she committed suicide after testing positive for coronavirus. She was deeply upset by what she had seen on the front lines of the battle against the virus (Rome, N.K., *The Telegraph*, 25 March 2020).

An Indian father of three children, aged 50 years, who belonged to the state of Andhra Pradesh, took his own life, convinced that he had contracted coronavirus. He was terrified of infecting his family. According to his son, he watched coronavirus-related videos most of the time for many days prior to taking his own life (Sandeep Raghavan, *The Times of India*, 11 February 2020).

A 35-year-old man, suspected to be a coronavirus patient, committed suicide by jumping from the 7th floor of Safdarjung hospital, Delhi. He had returned from Sydney, Australia, and had complained of a headache. (*India Today*, 18 March 2020).

Finance Minister of Germany, aged 54, died by suicide. He was reportedly concerned about the coronavirus pandemic and its effect on the economy. "...after becoming deeply worried over how to cope with the economic

fallout from the coronavirus, State Premier Volker Bouffier said Sunday. He had been working day and night to help companies and workers to deal with the economic impact of a pandemic" (*The Economic Times*, World News, 30 March 2020).

An IRS officer, aged 56, reported drinking an 'acid-like' substance in his car in Delhi (India). The suicide note found in his car showed his fear that he might spread COVID-19 to his family (*India Today*, 15 June 2020).

A coronavirus patient aged 50 years (India) jumped off a hospital building (Sharan Poovanna, 27 April 2020: live mint e-paper-paper).

An Italian manager, 28, murdered his girlfriend aged 27 after he suspected her being infected with coronavirus (*The Jerusalem Post*, 02 April 2020).

A 36-year old man in Bangladesh committed suicide due to social avoidance by neighbours and moral conscience to ensure not to pass on the virus to his community (Mamun and Griffiths, 2020).

A girl aged 21 years in Imphal east district, Manipur (India) was tested positive for COVID-19. She ended her life on the last day of home quarantine (*The Hindu*, 29 June 2020).

A journalist aged 37 years who was undergoing treatment for COVID-19 at AIIMS, Delhi, killed herself by jumping off the hospital's fourth floor (*India Today*, 06 July 2020).

The cases mentioned above are just a few examples. It is mentioned in *Business Insider India* news (27 June 2020) "...mental health experts say the pandemic has triggered panic attack among those who tested positive for

the virus, causing bouts of depression and even driving some to the brink of suicide".

Why Suicide Cases are Escalating? — A Psychological Analysis

The question arises why it is going on? Why is this physical disease turning or affecting mentally? Why are we panicking? What will be the long-term consequences of this pandemic on mental and emotional health? Reasons are many; all are interconnected and making the situation more complex. The cause behind these COVID-19 suicide cases can be over-thinking. In most examples, those who committed suicide were analysing the situation in an extremely negative way. Guilt feelings, a pessimistic approach towards their present condition, hopelessness, and helplessness forced them towards suicide. Probably, a person commits suicide, not because of his detachment from life; rather, in my opinion, he loves his life so much that imagining life captured by a horrible disease is his main concern that he opted for such a horrible step.

Behind this dreadful act, other reasons may be fear of being infected, fear of social avoidance, social boycott and discrimination, social isolation, financial issues due to unemployment and poverty, depression and anxiety, lack of on-call-counselling or mental health awareness, withdrawal tendency, less emotional support from family, etc.

"However, most vulnerable are those with existing mental health issues like depression and older adults living in loneliness and isolation. Such people are self-judgemental, have extreme suicidal thoughts." (Thakur and Jain, 2020). Suicidal thoughts and behaviours

are associated with social isolation and loneliness (Van Orden, et al., 2010).

Withdrawal tendency and fear of death can be seen in coronavirus patients. One patient illustrated the psychological toll of COVID-19 symptoms when he told his clinician, "I feel like [you] send me home to die." (CBS News, 19 March 2020).

Decreased religious supports may also cause frequent suicidal cases during this medical crisis all over the world. "The effects of closing churches and community centers may further contribute to social isolation and hence suicide" (Reger, et al., 2020).

Economic downturns are usually associated with higher suicide rates than periods of relative prosperity (Oyesanya, et al., 2015). Because of COVID-19, many sectors have faced adversity, and people are losing their jobs and facing economic stress and emotional disturbances.

Steps for Enhancing Mental and Emotional Strength

Nowadays, along with frontline corona warriors, medical and emergency services staff, mental health professionals' role is also essential and foremost. We must be vigilant about distorted mindset before it becomes poisonous or fatal for our physical and emotional system. We need to divert our negative and self-destructive energy towards positiveness, optimism, and willpower.

We have to realise that stress and anxiety is a normal reaction to the current pandemic crisis and we do not have to let it dominate our emotions and thought process. What we all need to do is strengthening our physical

immunity as well as mental immunity by a positive approach toward life. It is not always a negative story; there is always a positive side as well. As it is mentioned on the website of the University of California, San Francisco (2020), "Our anxiety is helping us cope, bond together from a physical distance, and slow the spread of the virus. Therefore, our anxiety, though uncomfortable, is a good thing right now. Simultaneously, we must effortfully prevent panic contagion by engaging our attention in normal daily activities. Seize opportunities to share lightness and humor".

According to Lt Col. N.T. Ranjan, director of Chennai-based Mastermind Foundation (2020), "From the psychological perspective, we do not find a single human being who is not feeling some degree of stress or anxiety due to coronavirus. The intensity and impact vary from person to person. The situation is serious. There should be counselling at three stages—on coping with a virus, how to face it if tested positive and how to face life once treated and discharged from the hospital".

According to Mitch Prinstein (1 June 2020), Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, "This is a time when we need to be hyper-vigilant about suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Our most serious attention should be on those with prior emotional and behavioural difficulties."

In the article titled, 'Are we facing a post-COVID-19 suicide epidemic? Is the current pandemic putting more people at risk for suicide?' author Romeo Vitelli (2020) mentioned, "...Finding real solutions will not be easy, especially as the coronavirus pandemic drags on. Even with video conferencing and social media to help people

avoid feeling isolated, enhanced suicide prevention services will still be needed along with public education to ensure that people in crisis are aware of what resources are available to them.”

The present time demands to educate our society about the suicide safety plan or techniques so that during the crisis, everybody who is feeling emotional trouble or disturbances due to whatsoever reasons can be optimistic and able to search for things worth living for, in their life.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that COVID-19 pandemic crisis is resulting in a long-term mental health crisis. It is leaving

several people vulnerable to mental and emotional health problems. In this scenario, efforts must be made to mitigate probable undesired consequences on mental and emotional well-being. The speed at which the suicide cases are shooting up due to frustration, economic pressure or fear of social isolation, etc., in the COVID-19 crisis is alarming. Thus, this is the time to reconnect and strengthen social relations so that by sharing experiences, we can support each other emotionally. For this purpose, technology (via video conferencing) might be helpful. We should be ready to take action, backed by vigilance and social connectedness, keeping in mind that withdrawal or suicidal thought is not the solution.

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