

COVID-19 – Our Emotions & Disorders

*Dr. M S Reddy

We are experiencing an unprecedented and extraordinarily excruciating situation along the following dimensions:

1. **Medical Emergency**
2. **Social Emergency**
3. **Economic Emergency**

“Mother of all Disruptions – COVID-19” is shaking up this planet earth – a “Global Anomie”. “Corona” and “Flatten the Curve” are the two words reverberating on everyone’s lips, awake or asleep. The magnitude of the spread of COVID-19 has become an epidemiologist’s nightmare; the economic impact is an economist’s dread. Medical science is at its wits’ end – humidity, warm climate, BCG, malaria linked immunity, HCQ, antiviral therapy, pranayama, herd immunity, and whatnot. 3% mortality is of some consolation, but fatality of about 60% in the elderly is shattering. Supportive treatment stands as the only support; the patient mobilizes his antibodies to defeat and destroy corona.

The lockdowns, quarantines result in alienation and it would be strange if we do not experience strong emotions. We may be at the beginning of a pandemic of emotional distress. It would be an overwhelming task to pinpoint the trail of the emotional impact, but the positive spirit around, and the collective endeavour to fight COVID-19 inspires me to pen down a few points for the medical fraternity to bring awareness and to highlight the required strategies to boost peoples’ mental health:

1. **Emotional Intelligence** is the need of the hour – managing our emotions intelligently, not succumbing to anger, minimizing negative emotions, time management remain the mantras
 - Children are at a loss to accept this isolation – guide them, prevent digital abuse, cultivate hobbies, PLAY with your children.
 - Parents are worried about high COVID-19 mortality – maximize emotional support and respect to minimize physical contact.
 - Last but not the least – be “NICE” to your wife/hus-

band. Please, please and please **DO NOT ARGUE** – Cut Arguments, Create Happy Home (the summary of all therapies – Psychoanalysis, CBT, Mindfulness therapy and so on. Sweet home is the secret of positive emotions and sweeter living)

- Stress-free mind boosts immunity – your protective shield against COVID-19

Sleep good, Exercise well, Eat Healthy, Hobbies help, guide your children, and take care of elders at home. While anxiety and fear are understandable, building up Emotional Quotient is important.

- Identify stress early, Request help earliest
1. **Adjustment Issues:** “No time doctor” was the tagline. Now there is “BLUR between days and dates”. The Lancet’s report found mental health concerns could be inflamed by stressors associated with quarantine such as infection fears, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, lack of information, financial loss and stigma associated with contracting the disease. Difficulty not only for people with pre-existing mental health concerns, but also those in seemingly good psychological health.
 2. **Insomnia:** very common, disturbing and if not taken care can be a precursor for various psychological problems. Exercise, relaxation, regular sleeping patterns, avoiding excess coffee, tea, and heavy dinners, switching off the TV, Mobile and all other “gadgets” at least by 11 pm can help greatly. Follow sleep hygiene rules.
 3. Persons with **anxiety as a distressing emotion** and not as a disorder - Nagging worry about every other object (living/non-living) as a probable transmitter of COVID-19; disturbing statistics of “affected persons and deaths” on a 24/7 basis create a hyper-arousal state, which is a potential breeding platform for heightened anxieties, fears, anger moods, and distress. Be aware, cool down the hyper emotionality.
 4. **Depression and Anxiety Disorders** can erupt, but mostly those with genetic susceptibility and substance abuse risk a higher chance of getting affected.
 5. **OCD:** Needs a special mention. A common symptom of OCD is a fear of contamination and repetitive washing along with extreme steps to avoid contamination. Given the current bombardment on

*Consultant Psychiatrist,
Hyderabad

the risk of “contagion” and medically dictated 20 seconds hand washing, there is a risk of worsening, but can be managed with dose titrations, counseling, and family support.

6. **Substance (Alcohol) Addictions** – We have already witnessed an “epidemic” of alcohol withdrawal delirium states and the overload on the mental health establishments. All of them would have recovered by now from this with “detoxification” and support. The lockdown period of non-availability of substances should be used as a forced opportunity to maintain abstinence. The incidence of depression in the following period can be high and needs to be taken care of.
7. **Substance Abuse – ‘Abuse’ and not ‘Addiction’:** Boredom of staying at home can increase the consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, ghutka and other abusing substances. Please be watchful, overindulgence is not permissible. People need to be extra careful as they are at home all the time and become a “model” to their children to learn drug abuse.
8. **Digital and Social Media Abuse** – We need to tread with caution. Digital platforms and social media are the pillars of our global village. But too much of it does not augur well with physical and mental health. The trillion-dollar question is “how much is too much”; especially in the background of availability of almost all the social media platforms free of cost.

9. **Psychoses, Well Controlled and Stable:** For persons with SMD already under treatment and stabilized, maintenance medication is essential. Chances of relapse with non-compliance is high, more so in schizophrenia. a) An adequate stock of antipsychotic and antidepressant medications be kept b) To relax the regulatory restrictions to enable the patient to get a refill of medication for the next 2-3 months without a fresh prescription from the psychiatrist

10. **Persons with High Vulnerability to Develop Psychiatric Disorders:** Genetic vulnerability (first cause) plays a major role in the development of all psychoses. The current stress may play the role of (efficient cause) precipitating factor in those who already have the susceptibility with the first cause, but not in others. This is the group that, as high-risk individuals, needs to be aware of early warning signs. Focused attention, early evaluation and intervention (medication and supportive counselling) can play a great role in preventing the development of major psychiatric disorders.

11. **Serious Mental Disorders (SMD):**

SMD, Psychoses such as Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder and other psychoses, is less vulnerable to the stress-inducing effects of catastrophe. Stress by itself is unlikely to produce psychosis.

Strengthening emotional investments, insulating negative emotions, and facilitating positive mental health will be crucial to sustain this difficult period.