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YOGA AND MENTAL WELL-BEING STRATEGIES TO FIGHT THE UNNERVING AND UNDERREPRESENTED PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Novel Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) that originated from Wuhan in China has rapidly spanned across borders infecting people throughout the globe. This pandemic has led to a massive public reaction which caught them unawares; and to add on to all of this has been the media- doing the reporting incessantly to keep everyone informed about the pandemic situation. All this has been occurring simultaneously keeping people on the edge. Pandemics have been known to stir up the equilibrium levels of people; and being a constant state of panic has been a common consequence. Sooner or later, the Coronavirus, or the widely known COVID-19 will end, but the bigger question that arises is- Will our lives continue to be normal as before? Or will there be a new normal? If yes, when? In such an exceptional situation, the need of the hour is to develop certain focused physical and mental health; and psychological defence strategies that prevent the occurrence of breakdowns in view of heightened panic and fear; and help in building up a stronger nation that can fight and stand strong even in the post pandemic times. One of the most underrated practices like yoga is what has come to the rescue of humanity worldwide. Yoga is practiced by more than 36 million Americans and by many millions more worldwide. A discipline that is thousands of years old, yoga has spiritual and philosophical roots.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic, Social Anxiety, Yoga, Isolation, Stress, Psychological Intervention, Psychological Defence

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INTRODUCTION

The novel Coronavirus disease or COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared as a Public Health Emergency of international distress by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 30th of January 2020 when all the 34 regions of China had numerous cases of the virus, and the total count of cases exceeded that for the SARS epidemic which had hit in 2003. It is believed to have originated from the wet market (famous for selling fresh and alive animals ranging from a snake and fish to a bat and even a dog!) in Wuhan in late December 2019, and gradually the number of cases started to rise exponentially within and beyond Wuhan, creeping into all the other parts of the world like a web of death.

By the mid of April 2021, COVID-19 had led to nearly 3 million documented deaths COVID-19 MAP, 2021) worldwide. This is a frightening figure, but what is more distressing is that it is even likely that this number is a substantial underestimation of the real number of deaths attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic (Woolf, Chapman, Sabo, Weinberger, & Hill, 2020). Further, the spread of its variants vis-à-vis Omicron and Delta, the scare is growing by the day and so are people's traumatic memories which haunted them for months when they couldn't bid goodbyes to their loved ones.

There is abundant literature showing that post any disaster- whether manmade or a natural calamity namely cyclones, earthquakes, 9/11 attacks, 26/11 attacks, tsunami, Bhopal gas tragedy, etc., people have always found it tough to come to terms with the life that lies ahead owing to the poignant and dreadful memories that get engrained in their psyches draining them emotionally and becoming psychologically encumbering. The COVID-19 is one such disaster that has penetrated and ruptured the deepest boundaries of people's minds ultimately taking a toll on them. Considering the gravity of the situation, the Union Health Ministry launched a toll- free helpline (08046110007) with an aim to address the mental issues that people have been facing owing to the nationwide lockdown. It was mass anxiousness that was witnessed when people waited desperately on the 14th of April, 2020 at 10 am for the Prime minister's address to the nation. This clearly indicated people's anxiety, panic, restlessness, and the feeling of uncertainty that loomed large in these testing times.

FACTORS EMERGING OUT OF THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS

Among the factors that have significantly risen during this time, the ones requiring immense concern are health related queries, home quarantine, financial

crunch and implications, changes in lifestyles; and they have indeed sent a mental shock to people around. An online survey carried out by Roy et.al. (2020) on 662 respondents from across India on the respondents' knowledge, attitude, anxiety, and perceived mental healthcare need during the COVID- 19 pandemic revealed high levels of anxiety with more than 80% of the people preoccupied with thoughts of the pandemic. Further, 12.5% respondents reported sleep difficulties, 36.4% reported having distress related to the social media, and 37.8% of the respondents reported having paranoia about acquiring the COVID- 19 infection. Fascinatingly, the mental health care need was found in more than 80% of the participants!

In a survey conducted in China during the early outbreak of the virus, as high as 53.5% respondents rated the psychological impact of the epidemic as moderate or severe; 16.5% reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms; moderate to severe anxiety symptoms were reported by 28.8% respondents, and 8.1% reported the stress levels to be moderate to severe (Wang et.al.2020).

There has been research done previously which has revealed quite a deep and broad continuum of psychological impact that epidemics tend to have on people. Even the ones who are home bound and are restraining themselves from all kinds of exposure may go through a constant string of fear and anxiety of falling sick or helplessness, thoughts of dying, or the blame that they tend to give the people who are sick potentially leading to a mental breakdown (Hall et. al., 2008).

Certain significant *psychiatric morbidities* were also found to range from anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, panic attacks and post- traumatic stress disorder symptoms to psychosis and even suicide attempts (Hall, 2008; Tucci, 2017 & Muller, 2014) which was also linked to younger age span and heightened self-blame (Sim, et. al. 2010). It has also been found that there's is an association between the anticipated consequences of quarantine (Brooks, et. al., 2020) and certain physical and social distancing norms for being the key risk factors in mental health and well- being issues. These comprise of self- harm/ self- mutilation, suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic abuse, child abuse, and psychological risks (social disconnection, lack of meaning in life, feelings of entrapment, cyber bullying, feeling a burden, financial crunch and stress, mourning, loss, joblessness, and relationship breakdown) (O'Connor et. al., 2014; John et. al., 2018; Turecki, et. al., 2019).

Moreover, talking about the ones who grieve from a loss of a family member or a loved one due to the pandemic, the inability to cope and gain closure since people couldn't even receive the bodies of the deceased and do the last rites can lead to anger and resentment (Shear, 2012). There has been immense meddling from the pandemic in bereavement and anguish after the death of a loved one. Studies have also reported a rise in the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms that were found to be correlated with symptoms of depression (Hawryluck et. al., 2004).

Furthermore, at the *community level*, people started to develop distrust towards other individuals in terms of the disease spread and catching the virus from another person; and the government and healthcare services in terms of their capabilities to contain the outbreak. The pandemic demanded a lot of preparation and instant action so as to control the deadly peaking of the curve, which when failed to show any results, lead to the people doubting the upper levels of authority and the healthcare industry being incapable to meeting the demands and coming to their rescue.

With the community services and industries coming to a halt, it has negatively impacted the economy along with leading to people risking their employment and bearing financial losses since there has been a constant outflow with no inflow. This further intensified negative emotions in the people (Wurie, et. al., 2016)

Now, the way this pandemic has impacted the *work culture* and the working population is in ways more than one. Millions of people who once spent a major portion of their days in their office cubicles/ cabins or workspaces, are now entering their fourth month of full time telework, commuting to and fro from their basements, living rooms, newly found work desk corners of the house, often while also taking care of their children whose schools, daycares, crèches and summer camps are temporarily shut down. Other workers are meanwhile adapting themselves with masks, sanitizers, and social distancing norms and cautiously returning to their cubicles, offices, and workplaces. In addition to being a public health crisis, COVID-19 has proven to be a sudden, unplanned experiment in mass workforce and work-family conflict amidst managing the ever-daggering mental health issues that keep varying in their type and degree with each passing phase.

Amidst all of this, at an *international level*, stigma and blame is being targeted at the countries where the virus is said to have emerged from by the countries which

have been hit bad by the pandemic fueling further unrest. This is seemingly adding and amplifying the already existing depression and anxiety disorders and this might possibly remodel people's behaviors and social interactions with others. This could be detrimental for the developing countries proving a hindrance in their progress and upliftment.

Medical workers particularly the *front-line workers*, healthcare workforce, nurses, ambulance personnel, and paramedical staff have also been found to display heightened stress, fear, trauma, become emotionally traumatized and physically drained, and display higher levels of depression and anxiety (McAlonan et. al. ,2007). Such kind of emotional expressions are expected as the fear of catching the spread is all the more when the risk of exposure is high. Moreover, these people also be experiencing a fear of transmission to their loved ones. The balance between professional call of duty, altruism and personal fear for oneself and towards others can very often lead to conflict and dissonance amongst the health care workers (Tiong et. al., 2013).

Amounting to the risk that these frontline workers go through, it exerts equal or maybe even higher amounts of stress and panic amongst their family members, particularly those families who wait to meet their family members working in these emergency services. In fact, literature has revealed that the health care workers working in the intensive care units, emergency departments and the isolation or quarantine wards are at a higher risk of developing severe adverse psychiatric outcomes than those working in the other departments, perhaps due to their work being highly demanding, and them coming into direct contact with infected patients (Naushad et. al., 2019).

YOGA- ITS THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS AND ABILITY TO INCREASE QUALITY OF LIFE

A 3,000-year-old tradition, yoga, is now regarded in the Western world as a holistic approach to health and is classified by the National Institutes of Health as a form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) (Williams et. Al., 2003). The word "yoga" is derived from a Sanskrit root "yuj" meaning union, or yoke, to join, and to direct and concentrate one's attention (Lasater 1997, Raub, 2002). It is believed that practicing yoga produces a physiological state which is opposite to that of the fight or flight stress response, thereby interrupting the stress response; and thus, a sense of balance can be achieved between the body and mind. (Arora, S. & Bhattacharjee, J. 2008).

NEED OF THE HOUR- PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE

The psychological defense is apparently one of the most crucial factors and defense strategies any nation can adopt in order to make its citizens and workforce all the more resilient amid crisis. With the media updating us regularly about the currently increasing figures of the infected and the death rate having an upward curve, it tends to affect and alter people's reactions likewise. It becomes imperative here to issue certain guidelines to prevent the outbreak and spread of any kind of fake news amidst the already prevalent confusion and chaos regarding the virus getting spread through asymptomatic people too now. The role of psychiatric clinics, counseling helplines, family service counseling cells and mental health helplines becomes imperative now to offer their services in a regularized and periodic manner. Nevertheless, currently there are no specified guidelines focusing on the specific support of the mental health of the citizens during the COVID- 19 pandemic. Six perilous spheres have been identified and put forth here which might work brilliantly for strengthening the mental health sphere of the citizens, which is a neglected and ignored arena as of now. These areas shall be able to address the evident paranoia and hysteria that has started to spread as we enter the community transmission phase of the outbreak.

IDENTIFYING THE HIGH-RISK POPULATION

The health authorities must carry out surveys in the communities and identify the groups/ clusters or categories of individuals who fall under the high-risk banner so that early and timely targeted individualized psychological interventions can be planned and carried out phase wise. Further, the individuals with a travel history or the ones who are under quarantine or isolation at hospitals or various health centers are vulnerable to falling prey to mental health morbidities as a result of their deprived social and emotional support. A study carried out in China on its citizens in the first two weeks following the pandemic revealed that females experienced a higher degree of psychological impact of the outbreak, stress, anxiety, and depression (Wang, et. al., 2020).

Further, the families of the police personnel become another high-risk category as their family members go for work and have the closest exposure. Another strong contender for this category is the senior citizens and the old aged population who already have less social contact, low immunity, less physical activity and deep-rooted fears and insecurities. This makes them all the more susceptible to falling prey to COVID-19 and its novel variants like omicron. Thus, it becomes imperative

for the psychiatrists and the mental health workers to carry out local epidemiological survey to gather the underlying basis for building the appropriate individualized and targeted intervention programs to be implemented.

ENSURING HEIGHTENED SECURITY AND SUPPORT FOR THE FRONT-LINE WORKERS

It is imperative for the governments to ensure the safeguarding of the morale, strength, physical and mental well-being of the health care workers as the taskforce at the forefront needs to be well equipped as it might affect the success of the overall delivery of health care (Low & Smith, 2005). The organizations can consider shorter working hours, rotational duties, regular rest intervals, and the provision of proper PPE kits to its task force deployed at the high-risk areas. It has been witnessed that support from one's supervisors or seniors and clear-cut communication about the precautionary measures aid in the reduction of psychiatric symptoms (Chan & Huak, 2004). Having a sense of confidence in infection- control measures might alleviate and expedite an adaptive stress response (Chua et. al., 2004). Therefore, it becomes all the more crucial for the organizations to train their health care workers on infection control, preventive and curative measures, clear cut guidelines to follow, and the hospital SOPs for COVID-19 should be crisp and concise; and strewn to all the staff.

Adequate preventive measures must be made available to the HCWs to ensure their regularity and they themselves not falling ill owing to the virus while serving the citizens. There should also be a policy formed whereby if a worker gets infected, it shall be treated as work related injury and should cover the medical costs. A team of the superiors can be kept ready as support staff to help their subordinates in need along with an established peer support system which is the need of the hour. An identification of the burnout or psychologically stressed staff also comes in handy, as a timely and appropriate intervention can be provided to them.

ENHANCED AND ADVANCED SCREENING OF PSYCHIATRIC INDISPOSITIONS

Considering the numbered amount of mental health staff, it becomes imperative for all the physicians, specifically general practitioners and the doctors deployed in the emergency duty, to preemptively monitor for the psychological symptoms on the patients who come in for consultations. The study by Wang et al (2020) also revealed that the patients who reported having symptoms of chills, dizziness, sore throat, cough and myalgia and those with poor rating of health status accompanying with some chronic illness history correlated with heightened levels of

psychological impact of the pandemic, stress, anxiety and depression (Wang, et. al., 2020). This is fathomable considering the fact that the symptomatology of COVID-19 is non-specific and grim to tell apart from other viral illnesses (Chen et. al., 2020).

Since the early stages of the virus outbreak, there has been an absolute ambiguity and hardly any clarity about its characteristics, spreading status, mode, and transmission intensity- leading to further anxiety and insecurity. Additionally, screening of the personal psychiatric history and if at all there are young children at home who are vulnerable to the spread would be necessary as they could be at risk for deteriorating mental health. The health care workers could also consider using certain standardized instruments for testing so as to get a broad overview of the spread. Moreover, they can make use of the mobile and internet software to get an accurate and timely reports and assessments of the people under quarantine (Zhang et. al., 2014). The doctors may also consider providing resources to the patients under isolation to give a self-analysis and review about their current mental health status, improvement, physical health issues, if any, and the improvements in their overall well-being.

ADAPTATIONS OF NOVEL MODES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

Amidst this unprecedented situation of the pandemic, the technology clearly needs to be utilized to its complete extent now more than ever. The hospitals and private practitioners have already moved to the online mode for giving out psychological aid through psychotherapy via online platforms like Zoom, Google meet, Webex etc. to curtail the physical proximity aspect which could lead to transmission from the otherwise face- to face therapy. Nevertheless, it shall be of utmost importance to educate people about the various available online routes so as to promote mental wellbeing and initiate psychological interventions (for instance *cognitive behavior therapy* and *mindfulness-based therapy*) through online or *smartphone-based psychoeducation*.

These therapeutic interventions need to be administered to the patients in accordance with the kind of dissonance and issues the patient is going through. With a patient who might amplify the risk of contracting and dying from the virus, a therapeutic intervention like the cognitive therapy might defy their cognitive bias. In contrast, such a person might find behavioral therapy more suitable to his condition as it may teach relaxation techniques to combat anxiety and prevent depressive tendencies. CBT with focus on stress management can also alleviate faulty coping,

such as avoidance, aggressive confrontation, and self-blame. It has been found that maladaptive coping styles were associated with worse psychological outcomes (Sim et. al., 2010, Maunder et. al., 2006).

Another impactful alternative technique is Yoga which gives an overall mind- body fitness involving an amalgamation of muscular activity and an internally directed focus on breath, self and one's energy (Collins, 1998). The techniques of yoga once applied along with the other strategic tools have the power to bring about immense change in the positive direction by reducing the stressors and equipping an individual with the ways to tackle anything that they are faced with. The *four basic principles* that yoga works upon are as ahead:

The *first principle* signifies that our human body is a holistic being that is comprised of varied interrelated dimensions inseparable from one another and an infirmity or wellness in one dimension affects the rest of the dimensions. The *second principle* affirms the individual differences and the fact that each individual's needs are unique and thus should be approached in a manner that is individualized and personalized. The *third principle* is the most powerful one claiming that each individual is his or her own healer; as yoga engages one in the healing process which primarily stems from within rather than from an external source, thereby providing one with a greater sense of autonomy. The fourth principle affirms that its one's state of mind and the quality that is the most crucial in healing. Once a positive state of mind is achieved, healing happens swiftly, while a negative state of being prolongs the process of healing.

The *mindfulness-based meditation practices* focus on fostering an attitude which involves being present in the here and now and being absolutely nonjudgmental; and these have been found to be specifically helpful in assuaging stress in people suffering from physical conditions (Carlson, 2012). The online platforms shall be particularly favorable and advantageous to for patients who are sending their time of illness in isolation (Wang et. al. 2020) and the ones who are home quarantined where they do not have any access to mental health professionals. Another boon that these online services can prove to be are for the support group and peer group network that they shall help in forming which shall further help people see and share the challenges they're facing and winning over. This shall further foster resilience, solidarity and a sense of affiliation and empathy.

OPTIMUM DISTRIBUTION AND UTILIZATION OF THE HOSPITAL RESOURCES TO THE COMMUNITY

The community must designate an authority so as to let the psychiatric wing of the hospitals provide a well-planned and well disseminated mental health program aimed at the quick rescue of the plausible patients. The available specialists must be put on a panel with a dedicated team and wing completely working towards the focus groups. This shall ensure the timely and adequate treatment of the mental health issues that need the maximum attention right now and ironically are the most neglected and least attended to. For instance, there are a number of helplines- both government- run and of groups of volunteers who are available round the clock for the mental health welfare of the citizens. The psychiatric wings of a number of government hospitals are also providing mental health and therapeutic support pro bono which also gives people a boon as they no or low- income group during the lockdown are able to approach them and avail the much-needed help.

The private hospitals are rather offering additional clinic sessions and rendering psychiatric support to patient having issues with emotional support; stress and panic attacks coming through the emergency departments. Nevertheless, in order to further augment the psychological preparedness of the nation, the government authorities need to integrate and bring together the services of the community to offer a more comprehensive and extensive psychological health and well-being to the citizens and making the country better equipped to fight the unforeseen.

CONCLUSION

Considering the current status of the pandemic where we are heading towards the community transmission phase, it becomes alarming to even think of how crucial it is becoming to preserve and care for the mental health of the citizens now, more than ever. It shall thus be worthwhile to have a panel of mental health professionals and psychiatrists have a long-drawn discussion regarding the mapping and developing of a task force for COVID- 19 and its newly found variants which will guide and advice the government on the timely alteration and reconstruction of the psychological plans and policies as and when the situation changes, owing to the extent of uncertainty that is looming large on the country.

Keeping in mind the population of a country like India, where it might become difficult to trace the source or root of initiation if the community spread strengthens, it becomes imperative here that the social service cells, the NGOs and the community

heads work in unison and collaboratively conduct physical fitness trainings, yoga techniques, meditation practices and psychological interventions with complete communication with each other so as to keep a track of the people living on the edge or fighting their own battles and tracking them in the first place. One can't take the risk of wasting the time, energy and resources of the professionals at this hour; therefore, it is important for the hospitals to engage with one another through training and case discussions to align their goals, efforts and plan the strategies effectively and avoid any kind of overlap or missing any kind of information. Another area that needs immediate attention and instant action is the training of the community health professionals which shall in turn help the instant identification and management of the patients' psychological distress. These case discussions will help in the smooth and seamless transfer of the patients across hospitals and their follow ups depending on the severity of their condition.

Even the post pandemic condition needs to be foreseen and planned well in advance as psychological ramifications can be long lasting and ever so damaging. It is thus pivotal that the psychological impact that the outbreak is causing on individuals and the society mustn't be ignored as it could be a major factor for the nation to overcome the crisis. The fact of the matter remains that this pandemic has tested the resilience, fragility and burnout levels of one and all; and brought about the need for a coordinated and specifically designated psychological interventions and individualized programs which cater to one's physical and mental well-being. The suggested strategies mentioned here can be adopted by India and other nations so as to build a nation stronger enough to fight any unanticipated and instantaneous conditions by improving their current intervention system. The only resolute as of now seems to be the strengthening of the psychological defense to fight this pandemic battle and thus predict a better and secure future.

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