

Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

With the enormous impact that COVID-19 pandemic has brought on life, much beyond just the health concerns, coping with this traumatic experience has become an important issue. While people and governments are trying to deal with the situation in their own ways, coping emotionally and finding an effective way out is the question for many. There are many strategies and supports which are known; and many are being tried in this challenging period. However, personal resilience, posttraumatic growth and hope will be key factors for a long journey in the recovery.

Key words

Coping, Hope, Posttraumatic Growth, Psychological Stress, Resilience

The Trauma

The COVID-19 pandemic is an international disaster in recent times.¹ People are going through massive amounts of traumatic experience of: bereavements, risk of death of safe and family, job losses, isolation, lack of accurate information, lack of definitive treatment and so on. It is a disaster that, although mankind knew about its possibility, it appears, it was least prepared for it. The stress and trauma people have gone through is not going to end after the pandemic and in all probabilities the effects will linger on.

The traumatic experiences of the health care professionals were somewhat unique. In the initial phase there was a 'you know that you do not know' situation which was compounded by inaccurate and doubtful information. There was no clarity of treatment modalities and doctors tried everything that may have a possibility to change the outcome. They have gone through moral dilemma about providing the facilities to the patients in really resource-scarce situations; deciding who should get the available service and who should not is a difficult one; and many professionals must have struggled with it across the world. All these are in a background of: threat of death of themselves, colleagues and family, lack of protective equipment and having to work in areas beyond their expertise.²

The Effects

Many studies report increased stress levels in general population during the pandemic. It is clearly evident that there has been major impact of the stress on the mental health of the people.³ There are new onset anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use, and exacerbation of existing mental illnesses in mentally ill individuals. Secondary trauma characterised by the impact on livelihood is also contributing to mental health problems.³ Traumas may also manifest in various other ways, from psychosomatic illnesses to exacerbation of physical illnesses, addictive behaviours, self-harm, abuse, absenteeism, presenteeism, etc. There will be long term consequences as well.

Dealing with the trauma and coping

Dealing with the trauma will need multipronged multidisciplinary, multiagency approach. These challenging times have seen massive international cooperation and development of vaccines at amazingly short period. While the governments, health services, institutions and businesses are trying to deal and cope with the effects of COVID-19 currently and long term; individuals are also trying in their own way to cope. Coping is highly individual and one strategy does not suit everyone. It is important to discuss various ways and means people are trying to cope and how effective coping is so vital.

Observations suggest that people are trying to cope by hoping for the best, remaining busy, having faith in God, trying to deal with the problems, sharing feeling with others and many others ways.⁴ At the same time, avoidant coping has been reported to be associated with distress, impacting upon wellbeing;⁵ whereas cognitive and prosocial coping are associated with less mental health problems.³

Many affected persons will need further help. From informal support from family and friends, to practical support for sustaining the livelihoods, but a proportion will need formal counselling, psychotherapies and even medical attention. Accepting that this is an unusual period and that 'it's ok, not to be ok' in this kind of traumatic period may usher the path of recovery. 'Having a buddy' with whom one can share all and bare all emotions helps a lot. It is important to have a friend with whom one can open up and discuss almost everything. 'Being there' with

people, listening, sharing their woes can work really well, even if they sound very basic suggestions or strategies. It is the 'genuineness' that matters.

Counselling and other psychological support can involve discussing the coping methods that the individuals have utilised in the past during traumatic times. Promoting cognitive coping and prosocial behaviours are expected to be helpful. There are long lists of examples of strategies that people use, which can be shared as examples for individuals may then choose the most suitable ones for them. While most of the time with practical help, many people recover well and fast, it is for many who remain distressed with the trauma who would need further psychological interventions. Technology, online resources and tele-services for assessment and psychotherapy may support people for effective coping during this challenging phase; and these are being actively used.⁶

Health care professionals may have specific issues to deal with and discuss based on their work experience. Sharing, compassion, mindfulness, work-life balance, social connectedness, etc. are some of the key strategies along with peer group support and professional counselling for those who need may be helpful. Many practical techniques and models have been suggested;⁶ and health organisations should provide and facilitate such support.

Following a traumatic experience, the outcomes can be better than bitter. People learn and grow from their experience and that makes them better prepared or ready to prevent such experiences in future. Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is a plausible outcome following the negative experiences during COVID-19 pandemic. It has been reported that positive changes in worldview, life's goals, personal behaviour, relationships, may happen with enhanced appreciation of life itself and stronger sense of spirituality.² It is important to learn from these miseries; traumas can teach individuals to grow and be better human beings.

Resilience is the personal capability of bouncing back or buoyancy; and people are at different grades of resiliency based on how effective their strategies are. Resilience is slightly different from the PTG.⁷ In PTG a person who struggles in traumatic situations gains new knowledge, realisations and then grows out of it, and becomes better. Often it is the less resilient people who are more likely to struggle through this period of trauma and may have PTG. It is important to realise that whatever situation we are in during this COVID-19, it is possible that many will come out better, more prepared, stronger to cope and deal with adverse situations.

Spiritual change is a possibility following adverse experiences and comes as a great realisation to many to appreciate how integrated and connected people are. It goes beyond one's own personal values, religious beliefs, and sociocultural underpinnings to imbibe global, human values. It makes sense to participate, give, share with fellow human beings and strive to make lives more meaningful. That way, tragedies become not only more

bearable but lessons for future growth to higher understandings.

Recovery

Onwards it should be a journey of recovery. With the help of science, practical help from governments and non-governmental institutions, through the individual's own coping strategies and learnings from the trauma, it may be possible for people to cope well and not only regain lost grounds, but achieve greater heights in human success. The process of recovery will take time, adequate preparation and continued effort from everyone; with hope as a key factor in the journey.

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