

Pandemic induced depression through the lens of various psychological concepts

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ABSTRACT

The present pandemic due to its novel nature has posed a major health crisis as it has not only impacted physical health but also mental health of individuals. With its effect ranging from disruption of daily routine to shortage of resources, job loss and instability of future it has caused an increasing number of people to experience negative emotions like sadness, anxiety and apprehension. Given this scenario, people are prone to depression and associated symptoms. The present article aims to understand the phenomenon of depression during COVID-19 through various psychological concepts.

Keywords: COVID-19, Depression, Mental health

With the spontaneous outbreak of COVID-19 since December 2019, a large number of countries are now facing its deleterious repercussions. With the rise in the number of cases and surging death rates, the rapid spread of this infection has led to social, economic and psychological crises. Moreover, due to its novel nature and absence of vaccination, it has posed a massive challenge. To combat this pandemic, various countries have undertaken strict measures of social distancing, quarantine and lockdown. Although these measures are for the benefit of the community at large, its psychological effects on people cannot be overlooked. With the imposed lockdown and the subsequent restriction of mobility an increasing number of people are now reporting depressive symptoms, anxiety and increasing levels of stress (Hasan and Kazmi, 2020). Mobility restrictions due to lockdown has not only contributed to emotional isolation but has also deprived people of touch sensations thereby increasing their chances of depression (Solomon, 2020). Moreover, persistent stress, grief reactions, lack of coping mechanism act as significant predisposing factors towards development of depression.

Operant conditioning

In behaviorist perspective environmental conditions influence and shape the behaviour of the person and depression depends on the person's interaction with the outside world. From

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Received: May 19, 2020; Revision Received: June 7, 2020; Accepted: June 25, 2020

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the view point of operant conditioning, removal of positive reinforcement from the environment such as loss of job deprives a person from meeting their ally which serves to reinforce maladaptive behaviours like social isolation and avoidant coping and is considered a leading cause of depression (Lewinsohn, 1974).

With the on-going pandemic, students are facing uncertainty over studies and tests. Entrance exams for various higher education institutions and recruitment have been indefinitely postponed. This may decrease student's motivation, giving rise to worthlessness and hopelessness in the minds of students. It may lead to dysfunctional depression, which may be prolonged beyond this crisis as students find themselves underprepared when opportunities eventually arise. For many small businesses and economic ventures hit hard, or management graduates with rescinded placement offers, the first impulse may be towards reducing effort in the face of dwindling rewards.

This pandemic has not only isolated people but has also minimized positive reinforcement due to the disturbances in routine, job loss, reduction of rewards, uncertain and unpredicted future, and lack of environmental stimulation from the outside world thereby predisposing a person towards depression.

Behavioral Shutdown Model

Behavioral Shutdown Model conceptualizes depression as an evolutionary response operating on the principles of cost-benefit analysis (Henriques, 2000). Simply put, repeated danger, humiliation and failure suppress contingent behaviors. And when a little reward requires too much investment of resources, time or effort, we tend to give up.

Given the scenario with the pandemic and the lockdown in force, most things we do have become more effortful while the rewards have reduced. Going to the hospital for a check-up requires taking multiple protection measures and carries the risk of contracting another disease. Same is true for getting groceries and going to work—either way our health is at risk. These conditions make it more likely that many people will find it too effortful to balance health and work with basic necessities and fall prey to anxiety and depression.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

With the on-going pandemic, people are being deprived of their needs. When the needs remain unmet, they impinge into the brain thereby predisposing an individual to develop various psychological disorders. Maslow classifies human needs in the hierarchical order, beginning with the deficient needs such as physiological, safety, social need to growth needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization.

During this time migrants and labourer do not have access to food, secure place to live, physical and emotional support network which will make them deficient of their basic needs and predispose them to experience negative emotions such as anger, sadness, fatigue, and chandeliering. Depression lays its foundation in vicious cycle by moderately penetrating our ability to meet our needs. With the on-going pandemic, and the individuals facing deficiency of the basic needs, it puts them at risk of facing depression.

The major reason for the development of mental disorder such as depression is “safety worrying” which is more fundamental than physiological needs (Zheng.et.al, 2016). With the infectious nature of COVID-19, people are overwhelmed about their health, the health of their loved ones, financial security and personal security, all of which constitute to Maslow's

safety needs. Absence of economic stability and job security amid pandemic leads to safety worrying which is responsible for experience of depressive symptoms. During the time of stress, safety needs comes prior to physiological needs (Cosmides and Tooby, 2000). Therefore, with the ongoing pandemic, security and protection dominate.

According to Maslow's theory people can go to certain extent to fulfil their basic needs which are of their primary concern. Given the scenario amid COVID-19, people may experience social isolation and loss of connectedness with loved ones leading to a feeling of subjective alienation. Therefore, even with the on-going pandemic it becomes increasingly difficult for people to understand the importance and effectiveness of isolation (Chetterje, 2020). As human beings are inclined towards acceptance and belongingness, a major reason for people not adhering to government guidelines of social distancing rules is to avoid the subjective feeling of social isolation. Connectedness and love are important in coping with any adversity. But with enforced distancing and lockdown, it is difficult to accomplish the need for 'belongingness' which contributes to anxiety, stress, loneliness and clinical depression.

Existential crises and Death anxiety

With COVID-19 and its deleterious repercussions, an individual may suffer from an existential crisis, as a result of which they may fail to understand the meaning and worth of one's life. The most difficult of all questions, which this unprecedented crisis has forced us to confront is, 'what is the point of it all?' Constructing a personal meaning of life was to be found in 'work and love' (Frankl, 1946). Failure to find a satisfactory answer leads to a sense of emptiness, boredom and worthlessness—an existential neurosis (Maddi, 1970). This is the cause of many mental health issues, including depression, and many people bereft of their daily routine are susceptible during this pandemic.

A central idea in existentialism is the conflict between the "inevitability of death versus people's desire for continued existence" (Koole, 2010). Given the scenario amid pandemic, and the increase in the number of reported cases and death rising each day, along with unforeseen future, people are confronted with this existential dilemma. They now have to grapple with the impermanent, fleeting nature of life—their own and that of their loved ones. The increased urgency to resolve this dilemma is taking its toll on mental health and making people across the world more prone to depression.

Questioning one's choices during this period is natural, as the abundance of time and lack of direction create the pressure to construct an individual identity and to be 'authentic.' "A human being is absolutely free and absolutely responsible. Anguish is the result," said Jean Paul Sartre (1882). Questions about what we have done with our lives till now and whether it will be enough to join the herd when the crisis passes, need answers now. There can be a sense of urgency in a life-or-death situation like the present crisis a sense of running out of time.

The consciousness that we have complete freedom to shape our lives, that all finished or unfinished business is due to our choices and we alone have to bear the consequences, can be a very powerful realization. This awareness of free will can lead to a renewed sense of purpose and joy in living, or increase one's feeling of isolation and dread. A poorly developed sense of autonomy and self-efficacy may make one more prone to depression in this situation.

CONCLUSION

Whether it is meeting basic survival needs like safety and health, or grappling with bigger questions like our life choices and goals, the disruption caused by the present crisis has made people everywhere more vulnerable prone to mental health problems. Previously established ways of responding to daily challenges are no longer working. At such a time, people can be easily overwhelmed by feelings of alienation and helplessness, which may lead to depression. The toll of the pandemic on psychological health is already high and needs to be addressed apart from the physiological aspect.

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Acknowledgements

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: G Sharma, G Joshi & S Yadav (2020). Pandemic induced Depression through the lens of various psychological concepts. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(2), 560-564. DIP:18.01.066/20200802, DOI:10.25215/0802.066