

Marital distress during COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown: a brief narrative

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is a universally accepted institution despite the diversity of cultures, religions, and geographical variations. Any crisis that affects mankind invariably can have direct and indirect effects on marriage across the globe. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic seems no different and its effect on marriages is palpable with anticipation of complications related to marital problems even after the pandemic ends. On the other hand, a strong marriage can be major psychological support especially during these times of uncertainty and can contribute to the emotional well-being of both individuals as well as the family. Hence, this brief narrative explores the vulnerabilities of couples, factors contributing to marital distress, and possible solutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic with an Indian perspective.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Marital distress

Marriage has remained one of the most intense relationships which human civilization has witnessed and sustained over centuries. Loosely, it can be defined as a culturally recognized union between two people that establishes various rights and responsibilities between them, their extended family (including their family of origin), and children born out of the union. The fundamental basis of any marriage is the personal association between two individuals for conjugal living, support, mating and reproduction; though all of these need not be met exclusively between any specific couple. The legal and moral dimensions of marriage are also important, as that has played much role to keep this practice respectful, alive and replicable over generations. Throughout the history and evolution of human civilization, a successful marriage has been found beneficial both for the physical and psychological health of a couple, replicated persistently in various scientific researches. On the other hand, marital distress or discord can detrimentally affect one's health and wellbeing; where the resentment, disharmony, aggression (overt or covert or both together) or violence can profoundly hamper

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the productivity and quality of life both at individual and couple level. Also, the extended family members especially the children of the couple gets seriously affected by any kind of marital distress or discord prolonging its long-standing and overwhelming effects over generations. As expected, major crises, be it natural or socio-cultural, do hit every individual to some extent and also affects the relationships between them. Marital dyad, being an emotionally close and intense one, gets affected too; which has been observed persistently during the current COVID-19 pandemic across various cultures, certainly increasing the toll of morbidity and distress during this uncertain time. It also affects the health care cost and burden along with initiating social unrest, which, unfortunately, is feared to continue long even if the waves of the pandemic come to a halt.

EPIDEMIOLOGY

Depending on the nature of the interaction between partners, marriage can be stable or unstable. Unstable marriage is defined by separation or divorce (Corsini, 2000). In the last few years, there is an alarming rise in unstable marriages in India (Singh, 2008).

According to the census of India, 2011 nearly 13.6 lakh Indians have reported their status as divorced. However, this constitutes 0.24% of the married population and 0.11% of the total population. Not surprisingly, because of the stigma attached to divorce, the number of people separated (0.61% of the married population) is nearly thrice the number of people divorced. There is a significant variation across states but minimal differences between rural and urban areas. Despite this increase, as per the report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development as of 2017, in comparison to global divorce rates, India continues to have a lower divorce rate of 1% or 13 in 1000 marriages. The reasons for unstable marriage include many but the prominent ones to be named are domestic violence, real or perceived excessive influence from in-laws or a women's natal family (Ghosh, 2015; Grover, 2009; Mand, 2008), many of which have majorly become evident because of the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. By the time of writing this article, it has been observed by the authors that the negative influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on India is largely unmeasured and indirect; an impact due to uncertainty, health anxiety, quarantine, isolation, separation or lockdown on psychological well-being are equally devastating (if not more), than the direct consequences of the corona virus on physical health.

MARITAL DISTRESS: INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Traditionally, tying the nuptial knot was considered to be a sacred, auspicious and, important event in the life of a person. As per the Report of the Age of Consent Committee, 1984, marriage has a religious and firm basis and is defined as “a religious sacrament and an irrevocable tie which makes the couple husband and wife in the eyes of law and of the public”. This concept of an irrevocable marriage means that the husband and wife had to adjust their tastes and temper, their ideas and interests, instead of breaking with each other when they found that they differed. Thus, it involved a great deal of adjustments on the part of both husband and wife. There has been a profound shift in the Indian scenario, regarding marriage, over for last few decades. Certainly, even today marriage is considered to be sacrament but along with some modern changes in legislation in the form of widow remarriage act, anti-dowry act, changes in sex-roles, and, right to divorce if the marriage is not satisfactory, etc. Nowadays marriage is viewed as “an exciting union which has, as its main purpose, the involvement of both partners in the adventure of actualizing each other’s potential” (Otto, 1970). When the partners fail to commit to such a goal, marital disharmony happens, which unfortunately progresses or rather deteriorates further with time if not solved or intervened in time.

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Some of the most important factors that may hamper marital harmony are briefly discussed in the following section.

1. *Sex-roles* - In the earlier times men were expected to be masculine and women were expected to be feminine. We, Indians have witnessed a shift from these defined or traditional sex-roles to androgynous sex-roles over a period of time. In marriage, partners have a different set of expectations from each other now. A clash in the sex-roles leads to marital conflict. For example, educated and financially independent women expect their husbands to help them in the household chores (traditionally feminine traits) and men who have working wives expect their spouse to handle their own finances (traditionally masculine trait). The list of 'socially or culturally accepted' roles is endless, and if they don't fulfill each other's expectations, a clash is bound to happen.
2. *Communication* - Another important component of marriage is communication. In earlier times women were seldom asked to give their views, but in present India, women have the freedom to have their viewpoints and they are open to voice them. In marriage, they have an equal say and hence can put their points, as needed. With this reform in the status of women and the change in the pattern of communication comes the negative factor of faulty communication. This normally leads to conflict. Usually, people try to be effective by being sarcastic. According to Oscar Wilde, "Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit but the highest form of intelligence". But in relationships, emotional quotient is required more than intelligence quotient; hence sarcasm is considered to be the worst kind of communication. It does not help develop any relationship. Partners need to focus on both verbal as well as non-verbal communication. In verbal communication, the selection of words matter, for example, people tend to answer in negative if they are asked a negative question. The use of facial expressions, eyes, hands, etc. has a great role in changing the meaning of verbal communication. Congruence between the body language and verbal language is necessary to convey the message. If someone says that he is happy but his facial expressions show sadness or anger, he will be understood as sad or angry.
3. *Trust* - It is one of the most important ingredients of a stable and loving marriage. It creates bonding and emotional compatibility. "Trust is fundamental to life, and it is safe to say that more relationships fail by a lack of trust than by actual infidelity or betrayal of the other person" (James, 2015). Mistrust leads to conflict in marriage. When partners don't trust each other there is a constant fear of losing the partner to somebody else, which can lead to fights and arguments with the spouse.
4. *Increase in intolerance* - "While the level of intolerance has gone up, there is a diminishing urge/capacity for adjustment. Earlier, the non-likable personality traits, which got to be known after marriage and which led to sulks or temporary suspension of intimacy, are now resulting in divorce." (Jamwal, 2009). With time, as the entire world is turning into a global village, the causes of any phenomenon are quite similar across culture which is true for India as well. The causes and complex couple dynamics of 'western countries' are not much rare in the Indian context too, shaking our age-old strength of value for marriage and family as well.

MARITAL DISTRESS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A TEST OF TIME

Every relationship goes through testing times when the commitment of the partner is challenged. Their previous adjustment, coping strategies adopted, and intimacy also determine this survival of the relationship. (Acker, 1992). Some of these common testing times include change of homes, jobs, sex roles, and responsibilities of children. Unfortunately, the current COVID-19 pandemic is a combination of several challenges that has brought along with it several unexpected changes and new challenges (pressures of work from home, new sex roles in the absence of domestic help), adjustment to which invariably bring a lot of stress (Richard, 1978). Hence, struggling with the changes and spending a significant amount of time together within the four walls of the house evokes underlying conflicts of an already troubled marriage. Hence, it must be considered that in several cases, the current pandemic crisis could only be unmasking or worsening existing marital distress.

Separation, quarantine, isolation, stigma, and lockdown-

A word that has grown with immense popularity with the advent of COVID-19 is 'social distancing', a word that WHO later urged to replace with 'physical distancing'. As social animals, disconnecting with others can have several repercussions, both on emotional and physical well-being. However, with no available cure, and a significant percentage of asymptomatic individuals affected with COVID-19, separation through quarantine (for exposed and well persons), isolation (for ill-persons) was strictly suggested and enforced, similar to the SARS viral out-break (Knobler, 2004). A sudden declaration of a national-wide lockdown resulted in both the physical and emotional distance creating a 'pseudo-long-distance relationship', especially for couples stuck in different places. On the other side of the coin, some couples temporarily use distancing from one another after an altercation to resolve a conflict. A lockdown would not allow their usual coping strategy of temporary separation and could worsen their conflicts further. Even couples staying together would be experiencing excessive anxiety of spreading the disease to each other and associated guilt of the same. Additionally, there was stigma especially towards health care workers and other vulnerable individuals. As testing, alcohol rubs, and masks were available in limited supply and protective measures advised are very general, there was perhaps more confusion and disagreements about these preventive measures. Not only were the advisory regarding preventive measures changing frequently (such as the wearing of masks, use of Homeopathic medication), the lockdown restrictions were also changing with the different phases of lockdown, demanding different and frequent adjustments.

Intimacy, and sexual relationship -

When the pandemic arrived in India, the Indian media reported a surge in the sale of contraceptives, and hence there was an anticipated rise in the number of pregnancies (Hindustan Times, 2020). The New York Times reported new terms including "corona babies" and a new generation of "quarantine's" in 2033 (The New York Times, 2020). However, contradictory results were revealed in an Italian study, which reported that couples would actually be less inclined to conceive during the pandemic (Elisabetta, 2020). The reasons may include fear of the spread of coronavirus through human-to-human transmission, primarily via respiratory droplets, lack of usual privacy with everybody at home, and other family responsibilities. In other cases, marital distress due to other stressors could decrease libido and further affect sexual intimacy.

Other influencers –

For many, especially in India, the other stakeholders in the house can often redefine marriage. For a married couple with children, there would be additional responsibilities including

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parenting children who are 'grounded at home' by corona, ensuring the continuation of school curriculum and assisting in their online classroom education. The care of elderly parents at home could also prove additionally challenging during these times of vulnerability, anxiety, and anticipation. Also, there were several reports of increased work pressure especially from people employed in essential services, teaching and IT sector.

Displacement of emotions-

As known, Displacement is a psychological defense mechanism in which a person redirects a negative emotion from its original source (stressors related to the pandemic) to a less threatening recipient (spouse, in this case) that is perceived to have lesser repercussions. However, this does not seem to have any lesser repercussions than perceived. There has been a recorded rise in divorce cases in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province in China (Bloomberg, 2020) and a rise in reports of domestic violence as per the National Domestic Violence Hotline Reports in the United States (Time, 2020). To the best of our knowledge, no studies have been conducted in India yet, but similar results revealing an increase in marital discord and domestic violence should not be surprising.

VULNERABLE COUPLES IN COVID TIMES:

The following factors may create disharmony in married couples during the present COVID times

1. Anxiety - The fear of catching the coronavirus and the uncertainty about the future has induced stress and anxiety in most people. This anxiety is sometimes displaced and directed towards the spouse, which deteriorates the marital relationship.
2. Faulty communication patterns - As discussed in the earlier section, communication plays a vital role in the development of a healthy marital relationship. If the communication lacks respect, proper use of words, appropriate tone, and body language, it may hamper the marital harmony.
3. Partner/Partners with a psychological disorder - If the partners already suffer from any psychological disorder it is very much likely that the present anxious situation would increase their symptoms and in turn affect their marriage.
4. Work overload - Indian homes, where people are dependent on domestic helpers for almost all their household jobs like cleaning, mopping, cooking etc., have to take care of all these manual jobs in addition to the office work which they are doing from home. Offices are also expecting a little more from their employees as they are at home and save travel time. This overwork creates irritation, anger or anxiety that affects the easy target i.e. the spouse.
5. Couples already on the verge of a broken relationship - Couples who were contemplating a break-up, separation or divorce just before the lockdown are very much vulnerable to indulge in fights and arguments, as they have to compulsorily stay together.
6. Couples who stay separately due to work requirements - People who have a traveling job and are usually away from home may find it difficult to stay at home 24/7. Their spouse is also tuned to a similar setup, where her/his spouse is usually away. These couples might end up having frequent conflicts with regard to each other's living styles.
7. Unrealistic expectations - Unrealistic expectations from the spouse may create a lot of disharmony and conflict when these expectations are not fulfilled.
8. Job loss/salary cut - Fear of losing the job or reduction in salary has induced anxiety in many people. They are having a tough time justifying their job/salary by over-

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working and pleasing their bosses. This anxiety and fear affects their marital relationships, as the spouse seems the most reachable.

MAKING THINGS BETTER

1. Exercise - Do some physical exercise every day at home in these COVID times. Research says that it releases happy hormones and keeps the mood uplifted. Exercise improves mental health by reducing anxiety, depression, and negative mood and by improving self-esteem and cognitive function (Callaghan, 2004). This will help in having a day sans anger, irritation, and negativity.
2. Sex-roles - Changing the attitude towards sex-roles or becoming androgynous would help in having a peaceful and harmonious relationship with people in general and with the spouse in particular. Researches show that androgynous people are better adjusted in their marriage as well as generally, as compared to sex-typed individuals. Marital harmony was found to be positively related to androgynous sex role conception (Agarwal, 1989). Also, androgynous qualities would make people perceive all situations in a positive and healthy manner (Singh, 1999). As a result, they will have a well-adjusted and comfortable married life. Isaac and Shah (Isaac and Shah, 2004) in their study on Sex-roles and Marital adjustment in Indian couples, also found that more non-distressed individuals show high androgyny and androgynous dyads show better marital adjustment. The qualitative analysis of the study suggested couples to move towards more gender-neutral constructions of marriage.
3. Trust and Respect - Mutual trust and respect enhance the relationship. Relax and grab the opportunity of staying together and knowing your spouse better. This would help you in maintaining the relationship in the long run. Share and receive each other's viewpoints without considering any backlog. Good communication has been reported to be highly associated with marital adjustment (Kazdin, 2000). This will also help in developing trust and respect.
4. Avoid over-indulgence - Where spending time together is important to bond with each other, providing adequate space to your spouse is equally important. May be couples can have different workstations at home, to avoid over-indulgence or interference. There can be a division of work at the beginning of the day.
5. Couples Therapy - If couples are not able to help themselves, they should consider going to a psychologist/therapist to seek help. Couples therapy has been proven to be very effective in enhancing and maintaining relationships. Marital counseling focuses on improving communication skills, and building problem solving and conflict-resolution skills.

CONCLUSION

Marital distress or distresses turning into discord, has turned a growing problem during this uncertain time making lives even more miserable. When the fear, worry about life, and basic existential survival has turned so vital and prominent, people are losing their basic supports like marital bonding. This is more worrisome considering that even if the acute wave of this infectious pandemic might come to a halt, the prolonged effect of major psychological worry and conflict (like marital distress) will continue to dysfunction our lives for an un-measurable period. On the other hand, the strength of a good marital or couple bonding can actually make both the individuals internally strong and confident, which definitely will help to fight this distress in a better way, individually, and also as a strong united couple.

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