

Psychological implications of COVID-19 pandemic: mitigating negative impact through social support

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ABSTRACT

Globally, COVID-19 pandemic is being described as the exceptional public health crisis in a generation. The colossal impact that COVID-19 is having on the whole world is not only in the terms of loss of physical lives but can also be seen in the form of severe psychological, emotional and traumatic effect. The virus has brought whole world under locked down situation where restrictions are imposed on human movement, people are quarantined and isolated, worsening the impact of virus beyond physical health. Individuals as well as nations are facing both health and financial crisis. The present study, therefore, aims to develop a theoretical model illustrating the psychological implications that COVID-19 pandemic has posed on all sections of society and role of social support in reducing this psychological and social burden. The authors of the study assume that this theoretical model will help in developing better understanding of how people are getting affected and will also help in developing practical ways to lower the negative impact.

Keywords: COVID-19, Psychological Implications, Social Support

COVID-19, a transmissible infectious disease, has turned out to be a global pandemic in a short period of time. Among many measures adopted globally to tackle such situations in the past, quarantine and isolation were the prime public health measures for preventing disease transmission at individual and community level (CDC, 2017). Similarly, during this pandemic methods like quarantine, social distancing and isolation have been adopted globally to break the chain of this fast spreading virus and keep infection rates as low as possible. Although, the terms 'quarantine' and 'isolation' are often used interchangeably, these possess conceptually different meanings (Manuell & Cukor, 2011) and have different roles in practice. Quarantine implies separating individuals and/or communities who have potentially been exposed to an infectious disease and have developed chances of becoming ill, whereas, isolation refers to separating those who have been infected from the disease (Parmet & Sinha, 2020).

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Since home isolation and quarantine are rare conditions, which great many people have never experienced, these can influence the mind and can be distressing for those who are affected (“COVID-19,”2020). Social distancing measures implemented by various countries during this COVID-19 pandemic are often very unpleasant for the ones undergoing it, as normal routine life has been interrupted (Lee, 2020) and the feelings of fear and uncertainty are overpowering. Galderisi et al. (2015) states that quarantine can take a serious mental toll by impacting major elements of mental health including autonomy, competence and connectedness, which makes people feel losing control over the circumstances, losing contact with the world and experience inability to perform their routine duties. COVID-19 itself and the measures taken to control it have dreadful psychological impact on all sections of the society including infected patients, frontline responders, children, youth, elderly and even marginalized population.

People having mental health disorders are generally more vulnerable to infections caused by epidemics for various reasons including high risk for infections (Seminog & Goldacre, 2013), impaired cognition, little consciousness of risk, and diminished endeavors with respect to personal protection. Since epidemics like COVID-19 result in a parallel epidemic of fear, anxiety, and depression, people with mental health conditions have high susceptibility to emotional responses which substantially result in relapse or worsening of an already existing mental health problem. Another problem created by lockdown and quarantine for this population is that it has made their regular outpatient visits much more difficult which is further adding to the already prevailing risk caused by epidemic (Yao, Chen, & Xu, 2020).

On the basis of initial reports from China, COVID-19 has been found to have major psychological impact on children and adolescents that is manifested through behavioral problems (Jiao et al., 2020). The most common conditions include clinginess, distraction, irritability, anxiety induced insomnia, impaired social interaction, lethargy, anxiety induced by uncertainty and fear of asking epidemic related questions. Children are also demonstrating physically and socially isolated behavior as they are forcefully kept inside homes. Stress and fear of uncertainty is also seen among college students. The current situation has made college students more vulnerable with the ongoing academic and financial burden (Lee, 2020) as uncertainty regarding career and settlement is prevailing everywhere. We also found empirical evidences from the earlier quarantine studies supporting the recent outcomes (Lee, Chan, Chau, Kwok, & Kleinman, 2005; DiGiovanni, Conley, Chiu, & Zaborski, 2004; Hawryluck et al, 2004)

Previous literature review suggests that among hospital employees quarantine acted as a major predictor of acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder even after 3 years since quarantine ended (Wu et al., 2009; Bai et al., 2004). In a recent study conducted on health care workers of Singapore, it has been reported that out of a total 470 health care workers, sixty-eight were found positive for anxiety, forty two for depression, thirty one for stress and thirty six for PTSD (Tan et al., 2020). Moreover, the main reason for severe stress among frontline doctors, nurses and healthcare workers is the constant fear of contracting the virus and further passing it on to their family (Tsamakis, 2020).

From the above discussed literature, it becomes quite evident that although robust preventive measures (such as, social distancing, quarantine and isolation) taken by the whole world

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collectively are need of the hour but it should not be forgotten that these might also present various logistical challenges resulting in increased risk to those living in the restrictions. Along with focusing on finding the ways to stop the spread of virus, focus should also be towards finding the ways to minimize the psychological and emotional impact of COVID-19. The present study, on the line of finding such solutions, emphasizes on the importance of social support in lowering the negative outcomes at individual as well as community level.

Social Support

During a crisis it is common to feel sad, depressed, puzzled, terrified or furious (WHO, 2020). Any catastrophe has various ramifications on the social networks of the ones who get affected by it (Psychosocial Centre, 2020). Maintaining a physical distance from others is obligatory amid the hour of this COVID-19 outbreak, but it is essential to establish strong relations and strong communication with others because social interaction is of imperative significance for humans as human is overwhelmingly a social creature (Seppala, 2020). A need to be accepted, loved and belong is at the heart of all our desires. A feeling of social association is one of our indispensable human needs and it influences our wellbeing, physical wellbeing as well as our prolonged existence on this earth (Seppala, 2020). Social support is the one noteworthy social factor that influences psychological well-being (Cherry, 2020; Yao, Yu, Cheng & Chen, 2008). Along with this, previous studies suggest that people with COPD, various chronic illnesses, under stress and worse circumstances direly need physical, psychological and social support to flourish from their condition (Gardener, Ewing, Kuhn & Farquhar, 2018; Symister & Friend, 2003).

At this hour of COVID-19 outbreak, it is utmost important to maintain physical distance but on the other side of coin it is necessary to help the affected persons in seeking ways to stay in contact with others, even if they are in isolation or quarantine (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2020). As aforementioned how imperative it is to have social connections since social support can help in mitigating the distress caused by COVID-19 and quarantine. Understanding the spirit of time, in spite of having social meetings and social interactions, social support can be given via smartphone, phone or internet calls and other social media platforms like facebook, twitter, whatsapp and so on (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2020). The Internet rises above geographic restraints to amplify user's access to social support. Online and through social media, social support network operates to provide assistance to deal with a specific health problem and offer therapeutic and informative resources (Rains, Peterson & Wright, 2015).

Social support has a vital conception in health psychology (Symister & Friend, 2003). Social support alludes to the protection and support people believe they are receiving from others (Brugha, 1990). Albrecht and Adelman (1987) delineated social support as any kind of communication between receivers and providers which de-escalates the unpredictability about the circumstance, oneself, the other or the relationship and also augments the personal control over the circumstance. The National Cancer Institute has defined social support as a system of family, acquaintances, nearby residents and community members that are accessible in the midst of hardship to give physical, mental, social and financial support ("Social Support," n.d.) Social support is relationship interaction mechanism that perks up belonging, coping, competence and esteem via real or perceived sharing of physical or psychosocial capital (Gottlieb, 2000).

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According to the transactional stress and coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the manner in which an individual evaluates circumstances regulates both stress responses and coping endeavors. In this situational approach, coping is defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: p. 141). Several studies consider social support as an interpersonal coping resource (Haley, Levine, Brown & Bartolucci, 1987; Knight & Sayegh, 2010; Mackay & Pakenham, 2012), which can help in diminishing the negative impacts of stress. In line with stress-buffering hypothesis, stress is linked with numerous negative health consequences and social support can be potent in safeguarding people from stress (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Hence, on the basis of this theoretical framework, it can be posed that the social support can play a significant role in alleviating the various psychological implications caused by COVID-19 and quarantine as these are perceived as stressful by individuals.

Advantages of social support

Social support is not only limited to lending a hand to cope with threat full situations, despite of this, it also has various positive effects on health, well-being. Social support is an interpersonal resource of coping that affects various intrapersonal resources of coping like resilience, hope, optimism, mindfulness and self-efficacy.

Social support is an extrinsic source of courage which augments resilience (Cao, Yang & Wang, 2018; Cenat & Derivois, 2014; Fan & Lu, 2019; Haase, Kintner, Monahan & Robb, 2014; Haase et al., 2016; Hirai et al., 2020; Laksmi, Chung, Liao, Haase & Chang, 2020). Resilience represents one’s internal quality or capacity to resolve diverse hardships (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Resilience leads to well-being and is also linked with favorable effects such as improved mental health (Betancourt & Khan, 2008), less signs of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Fincham, Altes, Stein, & Seedat, 2009; Heetkamp & Terte, 2015; Ying, Wu, Lin, & Jiang, 2014) less symptoms of depression (Stratta et al., 2015). Resilience has also been associated with one’s coping abilities (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Greene, Galambos & Lee, 2003) and hope (Wang, Bai, Lou, Pang & Tang, 2020).

Several studies state that social support is essential for escalating optimism (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Karademas, 2006; Symister & Friend, 2003; Trunzo & Pinto, 2003). Optimism is defined as a common disposition to expect positive effects even in the face of challenges (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Social support is also positively coupled to hope (Ma, Lai & Xia, 2019; Wang, Bai, Lou, Pang & Tang, 2020), mindfulness (Klainin-Yobas et al., 2016; Mettler, Carsley, Joly, & Heath, 2017), self-efficacy (Wu, Lee, Chou, Chen, & Huang, 2018). Hope is an emotion marked by optimistic thoughts regarding the future instantly or in the long term (“Hope,” 2016). Mindfulness implies receptive attention to and awareness of events and experience at the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Self-efficacy is how effectively an individual can act to reach a target or cope successfully with difficult circumstances (Bandura, 1997). Social support can improve the quality of sleep (Kent de Grey, Uchino, Trettevik, Cronan, & Hogan, 2018; Nomura, Yamaoka, Nakao, & Yano, 2010; Troxel, Robles, Hall, & Buysse, 2010) and boosts immunity also (Uchino, Vaughn, Carlisle & Birmingham, 2012).

Aforementioned factors get escalated in individuals when they feel they are having adequate amount of social support, when they have a feeling that there are people on whom they can count on, when they feel they are having a very robust social back up to fight with any

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adversity. All these factors that are influenced by social support and social support itself ultimately lead to better mental health or reduction in mental health symptoms.

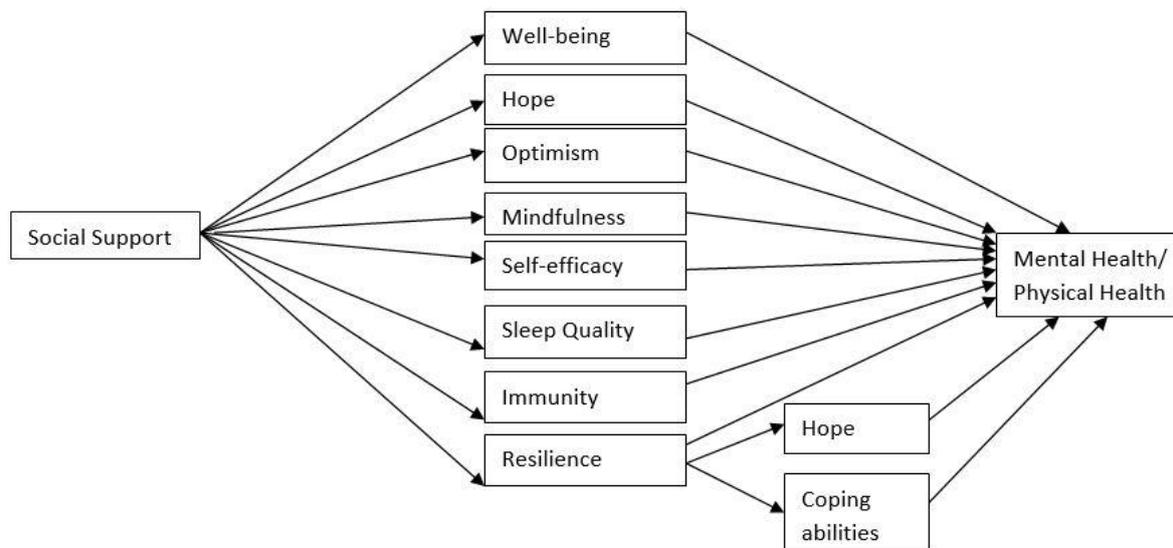


Figure 1: Model showing the impact of social support on mental health through various positive psychological factors

The model demonstrated in Figure 1 illustrates how social support can provide maximum advantage during this period of COVID-19 outbreak. There are various studies showing that social support leads to psychological well-being, mental health and reduction in depression, anxiety and loneliness (Emadpoor, Lavasani & Shahcheraghi, 2016; Field, Diego, Delgado & Medina, 2013; Hombrados-Mendieta, Garcia-Martin & Gomez-Jacinto, 2013; Tyler et al., 2020). Resilience acts as cushion against mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Gloria & Steinhardt, 2014; Tyler et al., 2020), thus becomes a source of sound mental health. Hope strongly influences mental health (Venning, Kettler, Zajac, Wilson & Elliott, 2011), optimism considerably influences mental as well as physical well-being (Conversano et al., 2010), mindfulness as well as sleep quality are considered as noteworthy predictors of mental health (Masuda, Anderson & Sheehan, 2009; Peach, Gaultney, Gray & Walla, 2016), self-efficacy is also significantly associated to mental health (Najafi & Foladjang, 2007) and better immunity also helps in staying healthy and young (Lawton, 2020). Hence, all this valuable information illustrated the importance of social support during this critical period of COVID-19 pandemic and a huge amount of benefits that social support can yield on mental health.

Limitations

The present study has focused on framing theoretical basis but the empirical confirmation has not been done in the present situation. Further research is needed in this area.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

As it is evident from the study that social support has favorable effects on various positive factors and eventually lead towards well-being, mental health. Hence, interventions can be made to make the social support system more robust. Some suggestions were already given regarding how to stay connected with each other via internet, social media midst COVID-19 outbreak. Self-help groups can be made on the basis of requirements like self-help groups of

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all the age groups, self-help groups of colleagues, self-help group of house wives and so on. As COVID-19 has impacted every part of the society, so it will be fruitful to provide them a room to share whatever they are feeling with the like minds, even if that room is some kind of platform on social media. Government can also provide some guidelines on keeping social support system intact while keeping social distancing in mind i.e. stay emotionally, psychologically and financially there for your near and dear ones, even for your neighbors. So that it becomes somewhat easy to fight with this COVID-19 outbreak.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the theoretical background posed by the study reflects that COVID-19 is deadly in terms of physical as well as psychological health impacting all the spheres of the society. The present study has proposed a theoretical model based on social support to minimize the negative impact on psychological health.

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Conflict of Interest

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