

## COVID 19 Pandemic: A Call for Psychological Restoration

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of the novel COVID 19 is the impetus behind this effort to understand the concept of Psychological restoration. The pandemic created a new context for the relevance of this concept. Our adaptation to this novel event which have unpredictable outcome can be assisted by re-orientating ourselves with the focus on psychological restoration. Psychological Restoration is a renewal of resources or capabilities diminished in ongoing efforts to meet the adaptive demands. It occurs at different levels of human functioning at intrapersonal (within an individual), interpersonal (within relationship), terrestrial (with earth and nature). This concept is important because of the close proximity between nature based environmental configuration and our brain functioning and mental health as proven by numerous studies. The pandemic lockdown situation can be a trajectory of nature human conflict which has created a collective experience of demoralisation and it also demonstrates the failure of our pre pandemic habits and behaviour to adapt to the new experience. Under this trajectory there is a need for psychological restoration that can be renewed and rediscovered at the level of the brain (neural plasticity) and overall mental health (benefits of natural configuration at the psycho-evolutionary and physiological level and reclaiming our morale). Understanding the restorative nature of our psyche will help us find the beneficiary aspects offered by this prolong sense of stillness and remoteness and it will go a long way in our overall wellbeing.

**Keywords:** *Pandemic, Environmental restoration, cognitive flexibility, attention fatigue, neural-plasticity, demoralisation*

### Pandemic and Psychological Restoration

With the outbreak of pandemic across the world we have come to a halt and it has introduced prolonged sense of stillness and remoteness that is beyond our expectation. It has caused collective distress and for some pre-dispositional vulnerabilities are triggered, paving the way for typical course of illnesses. There is a need to understand this collective distress because it reflects the attitudinal and behavioural misfit and inability to fit in might be the reason for the distress. The inescapable demands like lack of activities to fill the days, boredom, sense of emptiness, unproductive self are some of the psychosocial fall over of the pandemic and it requires attention as it is necessary for the person to maintain healthy mental state during this period and to redefine the pandemic. In an effort to

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address the stated intentions, understanding the restorative nature of our psyche will help us to dwell upon the beneficiary aspects that is equally offered by this prolonged sense of stillness and remoteness. It can also be said the outbreak of COVID 19 is a call for restoration. The process of restoration occurs at different levels of human functioning, at intrapersonal (within an individual), interpersonal (within relationship), terrestrial (with earth and nature) and metaphysical realm. Within psychological studies, it is studied under various rubric dealing with the notion of innate potential, prevention, recovery and renewal.

In psychology “restoration” is defined as “A rubric covering processes through which people renew physical, psychological and/or social resources or capabilities diminished in ongoing efforts to meet adaptive demands”. This process of renewing the resources more deliberately and intentionally is required in order to lower the negative impact on one’s functioning. In literature psychological restoration has been categorically implied and studied under three main areas: 1) Environmental psychology 2) Brain and Cognitive Rehabilitation and 3) Psychological intervention/psychotherapy. The concept of restoration in all these areas can be situated in the current state of remoteness with new restrictions and curtailment.

### ***Restoration of Brain***

The new and remote environment imposed us to changed at the neuronal level. Demanding our brain to restore its capacity to form new habits and skills that can increase adaptiveness in order to function in this typical situation. Perception of remoteness and newness can be understood as the misfit between our learned habits which accounts for nearly half percent of our behavioural repertoire and the challenges imposed by this new changes. Research have found that 40% of what we do or behave are habits and it emerged as the result of our brain constantly seeking for economical and energy efficient mode of functioning, meaning that, brain stops fully participating in decision making when habits emerged. Our functioning is based on the connectivity of our brain, this connections are formed over a period of time across different situations. We transit to this new remote environment with behaviours and habits which already have connections and well-established reward systems based on the pre-pandemic environment e.g.: going to pizza hut for a delightful meal. But with the pandemic we are forced to rewire our brain for new connections because the well-established reward systems had defuncted and many of the learned gratification behaviours no longer instrumental.

It also implies that brain functioning will change as the situation deviates from the familiar and known ones. This capacity to change and form new neuronal connections or brain Neural-plasticity is responsible for habits formation and also more importantly new learning. This feature of the brain is the innate biological driven mechanism that facilitates in learning range of motor skills, language, verbal and non-verbal skills. This brain capacity for formation of new habits and introducing new learning are restorative as it can engage in learning more adaptive wider range of habits and behaviour. Rehabilitation of brain injury is based on the principle of neural-plasticity and rewiring of brain after injury. The reason to restore the innate capacity during the pandemic is based on the notion that the current crisis is the culmination of problematic habits practiced collectively by us for extended period of time. Restoring our brain to form new connections and habits that are morally appropriate, environmentally more adaptive, and conserving the resources and behaviours that will not lead us in conflict with nature but in sync with the nature.

### ***Psychotherapy: Restoring our morale***

With the outbreak of COVID 19 pandemic, de-stabilising the state of equilibrium has caused emotional instability, sense of ambiguity and demoralisation. Heightened sense of demoralisation is induced within oneself and some samples of the population clearly are more susceptible to experience in an aggravated form, especially frontline health workers, low wage labourers, and certain racial and ethnic group (Chinese and NorthEast Indian). One of the broad aims of psychotherapy and psychological interventions is restoration. As a therapeutic aim it is to bring back the components of the self that was once functional or the state of emotional stability and keeping the anxiety at bay. Regaining the morale or sense of mastery and combatting demoralisation is one of the primary goals to achieve the restorative value. Aggravated demoralisation is one of the original symptoms in disorders like depression and anxiety disorders and in some case, apart from the original symptoms, some symptoms are the result of demoralisation (hopelessness, helplessness, self-loathing). With prolong ambiguity imposed by the pandemic the state of demoralisation in the individual have heightened and mental health have come under strong threat. This state of demoralisation is characterised by feeling of inability to cope with life situation, loss of self-confidence, feeling of failure, self-deprecating attitude, feeling of incompetence. This subjective incompetence coupled with distress that cannot be adequately explain or alleviate and forcing us to look of an alternative that can boost our morale and sense of mastery over one's life. And it has become very much a part of our daily mental activity with the demand of our attention.

### ***Environmental Restoration***

We have come to an understanding that the outbreak is man-made crisis and the germination of the threatening virus is due to aberrations and failure to regain balance in the ecosystem. Within this, there is disconnection and affiliation to nature which can bring us more harm than we can imagine. The term "Environmental restoration" was given by Kaplan and it encompasses that exposure to natural environment protect people against impact of environmental stressor and offered physiological, emotional and attention restoration more so than urban environments (Kaplan 1989). Features in the environment that are natural allows renewal of personal adaptive resources to cope with the demands of everyday life is restorative environment. With emerging clinical conditions that are derivatives of nature like 'Nature deficits' and "Bio-phobia" reflect a deprivation and deficits of nature in the psychological makeup of the person and it can act as threat. The condition of Nature deficit is a clinically recognised condition where there is loss of communion with other living things. It is observed in children who spend more time indoors, which makes them feel alienated from nature and more vulnerable to negative moods and reduced attention span.

The claim that nature offers and allow restorative state is shaped by two theories: 1) Attention fatigue Theory (ART) and 2) Stress Reduction Theory. Kaplan's (1995) Attention Fatigue Theory is based on assumption that exposure to nature can restore from attention fatigue. Attention fatigue is a common phenomena of an inability to sustain attention for a long period that results from directed attention to maintained the focus and inhibiting other form of simulations. This form of attentional pattern and inhibitory style leads to cognitive inflexibility. The impetus behind this cognitive inflexibility is due to the way of living in modern world. Modern lifestyle is highly susceptible to attentional fatigue as it is characterised by highly focussed, narrow, inhibitory nature, with excess amount of time spent indoor along with virtual reality. These features can suppress our instinctual drives and it can unlearned our predisposition to pay attention and respond positively to natural content or any configuration that are favourable to survive during evolution. This cognitive

inflexibility is demonstrated in numerous studies using comparative experimental design based on the performance on Trail Making Test (TMT). The test requires switching the rules back and forth between sets of rules (numbers and letters). Total time taken and accuracy are considered in determining cognitive inflexibility or flexibility. Results are highly consistent in showing that after being exposed to nature it enhances cognitive flexibility than those randomly assigned to other comparison group, typically urban setting. Narrowing down, this experimentation on how nature contributes to cognitive mechanism is the cognitive flexibility which is lower when one is experiencing attentional fatigue. The functional cognitive feature that can be restored from natural environment is cognitive flexibility to combat attentional fatigue. Moreover, humans are driven to restorative places (natural vegetation, museum, religious places, monastery) due to mental fatigue.

The second theory, Stress Reduction Theory (Ulrich 1983) emphasises the connection between nature and physiology. Nature offers visual contents and scenes that provoke positive emotional response and imaginations that are favourable as compared to artificial configurations like busy streets. These features allow quick recovery from stress by switching the level of physiological arousal into a more energy conservative state. The tendency to respond rapidly with positive emotions to some environmental configurations called natural allows for physiological deactivation and mobilisation of energy by parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) can take place. Ulrich (1993) also argues that human beings are biological and evolutionary prepared to respond to certain environmental configurations as humans evolved over a long period in natural environment. Based on this, intervention studies have also demonstrated how restorative experiences offered by natural setting is effective in caring for range of physical and mental health problems. Studies have demonstrated that natural environments are beneficial for people suffering from affective disorder by improving the memory span and improvement in affect (Berman et al). Exposure to greenery also serves as protective benefits on mental health and decrease risk for anxiety and depression (Beyer et al.,2014; Mass et al.,2019). The benefits of nature are being undermined through excess alterations of environment. This undermining and neglect lead to radical environmental mutation which suppressed human psycho-evolutionary predispositions to instinctively respond, and it is leading to rise of nature conflicting problems, and the pandemic is representing this conflict in a mammoth way.

### ***Pandemic: New Learning Experience***

The understanding of psychological restoration as a concept of recovery and renewal of resources can be applied to this current crisis. The pandemic is a trajectory of conflicting human nature relationship, self with low morale and collective and rigid bad habits. These trajectories are addressed in different domains like biopsychology, environmental psychology and psychological intervention. Moreover, it helps us to draw the generalisability of psychological restoration in scenarios like the one we are living.

To move forward from the state of uneasiness and remoteness brought by the pandemic, learning new habits and behaviour offers hope and efficacy to improve the current demoralising and conflicting condition. New learning experiences can enhance morale by enabling us to rediscover potentials that were ignored in the process of meeting our daily demands and following the modern life routine. And one of the important characteristics in this situation that can pave the way for any behavioural and attitudinal change is emotional arousal. At this point, the pandemic is offering us emotional arousal which is the impetus for any desirable change. Emotional arousal is essential for changes in at least three ways: it supplies motive power to undertake the effort and to undergo the distress involved in

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attempts to change one's attitude and behaviour, and it facilitates attitude change as it enhances sensitivity to environmental influences. The emotional arousal triggered by the pandemic is clearly unpleasant leading to search for an alternative way to look at one selves, presenting problems which offers opportunities to develop alternate values. And in this any behavioural and attitudinal change related to human brain, natural environment and crisis of subjective incompetence will help us in addressing the trajectories of challenges highlighted by the pandemic. We are imposed to face the challenges and to endure the distress that is involved in changing one's attitude and behaviour. This change can facilitate in enhancing sensitivity towards the influence of natural environment on our wellbeing, more apt in dealing with solitude, and better understanding of neuronal connectivity as the foundational for any behavioural change. Deliberate and intentional rediscovering these potential of neural-plasticity of the brain, psycho-evolutionary and physiological benefits of natural configuration for human beings, and ability to reclaim morale by one selves by going through a state of despondency are the psychological restoration apt for unusual times like this. Thus, the experience we are going through calls for psychological restorations, both at individual and collective level by reusing and redirecting the human potentials within the radar of moral appropriateness. This global pandemic can be looked from the lens of an already existing knowledge of human behaviour and the shared identification can serve as an advantage for collective reorientation.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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