

Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Triggered a Shift in Psychopathology?

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Abstract:

Context:The unanticipated nationwide lockdown declared in India on 24th March, 2020 left people shocked and unprepared creating difficulties in procuring adequate medications which led to exacerbation of pre-existing psychiatric illnesses. **Aims and objectives:** Aspsychiatrists, we have observed changes in the psychopathologies of our patients and aim to illustrate the impact and association of the COVID 19 pandemic on the symptomology of a few of them.**Setting and Methodology:**The study was based in the OPD of Acharya Vinoba Bhave Rural Hospital, Wardha, Maharashtra, India. All symptomatic patients who consulted the professionals were evaluated and 7 patients were selected to be included in this report.**Results:**Several of the chronic psychiatric patients were found to be affected by the pandemic resulting in their relapses with new COVID 19 based symptoms. Similarly, previously unaffected members of the community were presenting with various complaints

which seems to have appeared due to some aspect of the pandemic. The psychopathologies have been illustrated below. **Conclusions:** The evolving psychopathology over decades demonstrates the influences of the patient's education, cultural beliefs and the general society on the content of delusions and hallucinations. While this pandemic may eventually resolve, it has subtly impacted mental health worldwide and only time will reveal the true extent of the calamity.

Keywords: COVID-19, change, psychopathology, pandemic.

INTRODUCTION:

The novel Corona virus was declared to be a pandemic by the WHO in March 2020. Consequently, governments worldwide established safety protocols which inadvertently gave a new meaning to the term "normal"⁽¹⁾. Medical specialists have observed new symptomatology as sequelae to the COVID 19 disease. The pandemic and the regulations implemented to combat it has caused people to present with complaints of stress, anxiety and depression⁽²⁾. The unanticipated nationwide lockdown declared in India on 24th March, 2020 left people shocked and unprepared creating difficulties in procuring adequate medications which led to exacerbation of pre-existing psychiatric illnesses. As psychiatrists, we have observed changes in the psychopathologies of our patients.

Evolving Psychopathology:

Delusions of persecution and reference are key symptoms seen in patients of schizophrenia⁽³⁾. Delusions manifest differently, from suspected others of discussing about them or trying to poison them to believing that they have been possessed by God⁽⁴⁾ or are victims of black magic⁽⁵⁾. With the invention of the radio and television, patients started interpreting the voices and images to be secretly messaging them. CCTV cameras and computers lead to imaginary chips being secretly inserted in them to monitor them^(6,7,8).

This pandemic chaos has led to non-psychiatric individuals and known psychiatric patients to present to our OPD in Acharya Vinoba Bhave Rural Hospital^(9,10,11), Wardha, Maharashtra, India with new COVID-19 influenced manifestations of their psychopathologies. The following are a few cases who presented with COVID-19 influenced psychotic symptoms.

A 30-year-old man with no personal or family history of psychiatric illness, after watching the news about the spreading pandemic causing an exponential rise in Corona positive patients, presented with anxiety symptoms associated with palpitations, tremors, burning sensation in the chest, intermittent headache and sleep disturbances provoked by the thought of either him or a member of his family testing COVID-19 positive.

A 42-year-old housewife with no personal or family history of psychiatric illness presented with hearing multiple voices of known people telling her or discussing amongst themselves about her contracting the illness and she would subsequently die which made her fearful. She also suspected people around her of talking about her.

A 52-year-old male who was in charge of counting the total number of people visiting his village from other districts as a protocol of the nationwide lockdown, miscalculated this

information on an occasion which triggered difficulty in initiating sleep, decreased appetite and auditory hallucinations reminding him of his mistake. He suspected his family, friends and higher authorities of spying on him through the Government of India's *AarogyaSetu App* and conspiring against him to appropriate his possessions provoking the patient to attempt to commit suicide and trying to convince his family members to do the same in order to evade imprisonment.

A 58-year-old widow, with a history of tooth pain and a sore throat 45 days before presenting to our OPD, complained of episodes of palpitations and restlessness associated with feeling of impending doom when she would worry about having contacted the COVID-19 disease and transmitting it to her family. This caused reduced sleep and a loss of interest in day to day activities. She described palpitations and feeling apprehensive when she thought about experiencing similar anxiety episodes in the future. She consulted with a cardiologist who started treatment but her complaints did not resolve hence she was referred to a psychiatrist for further management.

A 46-year-old homemaker presented to the OPD because she had become preoccupied with thoughts of contracting COVID-19 disease which lead to her washing her hands and using copious amounts of sterilizer frequently to prevent it. She began spending excessive time on cleaning furniture and other objects in her house while neglecting other necessary household chores. The patient had no history of psychiatric illness but her nephew was on treatment for obsessive compulsive disorder.

A 47-year-old man, on irregular treatment for Bipolar Affective Disorder for 30 years had presented in an acute manic episode where he claimed to be able to treat the COVID-19 disease as he was a scientist who had invented a "music machine" with the ability to detect and cure the COVID-19 disease which presidents all over the world including US President were trying to procure from him. His family complained that he was irritable and over talkative and would wander aimlessly.

A 52-year-old female who was a known case of schizophrenia for 7 years and in remission for 2 years complained of hearing multiple voices telling her that the Corona virus would kill everyone and end the world which she would repeatedly mutter throughout the day. She believed the same was being broadcasted via the television and speakers outside her home. This made her worried and would walk restlessly around the house and was unable to sleep peacefully.

CONCLUSION

It was observed that the symptoms of new patients were precipitated by the precautionary measures implemented to control the spread of the pandemic and known patients relapsed due to decreased accessibility to mental health professionals. Similar to our findings, a known patient of schizophrenia in Germany complained of hearing voices accusing him of spreading the COVID-19 virus to his family and others around him⁽⁸⁾. Either way, this only demonstrates the short-term effects of the pandemic on the mental wellbeing of people. The long-term effects are yet to be observed.

The evolving psychopathology over decades demonstrates the influences of the patient's education, cultural beliefs and the general society on the content of delusions and hallucinations. While this pandemic may eventually resolve, it has subtly impacted mental health worldwide and only time will reveal the true extent of the calamity.

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