

BRIEF COMMUNICATION**Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health in Malaysia:
A Single Thread of Hope**

*Hemavathi Shanmugam, Johan Ariff Juhari, Pritiss Nair,
Chow Soon Ken, Ng Chong Guan*

**Department of Psychological Medicine, Faculty of Medicine,
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**

Abstract

Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic is a catastrophic occurrence that has not been seen since the Spanish Flu. Recent researches mainly focused on the adverse effects of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. **Objective:** This article examines both the negative and unexpected helpful changes which the pandemic has on mental health in the Malaysian population. **Results:** We expect to see an upsurge in anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and aversive social effects of isolation. **On the other hand,** we could also postulate that improvement could be achieved in compliance and supervision of medication, strengthening of the family support and reduction in substance-related psychiatric disorders. **Conclusion:** By understanding both deleterious and potentially favourable effects of a global disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health professionals could be better equipped in facing such events.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Impact, Mental Health

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic is spreading all around the world. Many countries in the world, including Malaysia, are experiencing a crisis – one which could stir up tremendous mortality and morbidity. Contemporaneous researches and reviews have focused on the physical impacts of COVID-19 pandemic [1, 2, 3]. However, while dealing with such an enormous challenge, the potential mental hazard brought upon by the pandemic could be disastrous.

Negative Impacts

The World Health Organization (WHO) [4] and public health officials all around the world are calling upon all individuals to practice social distancing - be it avoiding large crowded areas, mass gatherings or to have any close contact with at-risk individuals to prevent the virus's spread. However, this is at odds with the very nature of humans as social creatures. The existence of human beings has always revolved around the connectivity to others, as people have evolved in such a way, that they seek for human connection and affection [5, 6].

Thus, social distancing not only tests the capacity for human co-operation, but it also brings about various mental health implications such as fear, anxiety, grief and depression. A meta-analysis in 2015 that was reported by a psychologist, Julianne Holt-Lunstad and her colleagues from Brigham Young University concluded that the risk of mortality is increased to 29% in individuals who suffered from chronic social isolation [7].

Fear and anxiety towards COVID-19 could potentially be overwhelming and hence heighten the mental stress towards oneself and society. This fear and anxiety are compounded by social distancing as individuals want the best of both worlds which is to be connected, yet to not contract the ongoing coronavirus infection. Undeniably, social distancing minimizes social contact and thus aids to decelerate the spread of COVID-19. However, social distancing could disrupt the social rhythm, by depriving one's regular coping mechanisms with stress – hence putting mental health at stake.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), about 62% of Americans are suffering from symptoms of anxiety, which is related to COVID-19 and 59% feels that the virus is greatly impacting their day-to-day lives [8]. Qiu et al, 2020 conducted a nationwide large-scale survey of psychological distress in the general population of China during the tumultuous time of the COVID-19 epidemic [9]. The survey found those who are vulnerable for psychological distress includes female, young adults who obtain information from social media which triggers stress, the elderly who are at higher risk for mortality and migrant workers affected by the economic crisis. There is however limited

data in Malaysia regarding mental health impacts of COVID-19.

Government's measure: such as movement control order (MCO), not only limits one's movement outside and social activities, but one's job status is jeopardized as well. Numerous non-essential businesses are forced to come to a halt. Financial difficulties quickly set in – and many groups of the population especially those in the B-40 and M-40 category, have already lost their source of income or are in the verge of termination. Despite the government's stimulus packages that were developed to aid the financial burden faced by many citizens in Malaysia, many small and medium enterprises (SME) in Malaysia, can no longer sustain the financial burden that is brooding and has been resorting to cutting wages, reduce the number of employees as well as providing unpaid leaves indefinitely due to blooming uncertainty of the country's economic status. Losing a job brings in feelings of uncertainty and insecurity - which eventually disrupts mental health, leading to feelings of anxiety and depression. According to the Malaysian Mental Healthcare Performance in 2016, mental disorders were estimated to be responsible for 8.6% of total DALY's [10]. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, one can only expect these figures to rise dramatically. The financial burden hitting the population in Malaysia could further escalate with individuals coping by drinking alcohol and taking illicit substances which then give further rise to multiple other disorders such as alcohol use disorder and so on.

Pandemics may also negatively impact the poor and vulnerable populations, and especially patients with serious mental illness [11]. People with preexisting mental illnesses suffer a greater risk of relapses, owing to fear, anxiety and social rhythm

disruption. Furthermore, social distancing forces an individual to stay at home for an extensive period. If the individual is already living in a preexisting toxic home environment, spending more time at home could be extremely stressful. The Women's Aid Organisation and Talian Kasih reported an increment of 44% and 57% respectively in contacts after the government-issued Movement Control Order (MCO), for which domestic abuse is one of the reasons cited [12]. A patient who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to past family trauma, staying with the family with more contact at home could mean disaster. Another example is people who have a pre-existing condition known as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). This group of people, who have contamination OCD, potentially already suffers from the compulsion of frequently and repeatedly washing their hands. The COVID-19 pandemic then creates a blurry line between safety and compulsion.

Besides the general population, health care workers on the front line are also at risk of developing psychological distress while managing patients with COVID-19. A study in China by Lai J et al in 2020, found that, among 1,257 healthcare workers working with COVID-19 patients in China, 50.4% reported symptoms of depression, 44.6% symptoms of anxiety, 34% insomnia, and 71.5% reported distress [13]. Front-liners are afraid of disease transmission to their family members, felt exhausted with long working hours especially due to lack of adequate protective gear. Some of them also had a sense of guilt as they could not do enough for their patients and watched the patients deteriorated without their family members by their side.

Unexpected Helpful Impacts

Interestingly, COVID-19 pandemic might have a potentially favourable impact on mental health in the Malaysian setting. Due to the MCO and hence movement restrictions outside of the house, families tend to stay at home. Family's supervision of medications potentially become more available and regular – hence there are fewer relapses for psychiatric conditions. MCO could also bring the family together, enabling a chance for bonding. The improvement in familial bonding could, in turn, improve family support, which is vital in the face of crisis: such as COVID-19 pandemic. Family support is cardinal and therapeutic especially for patients with mental illness [14], by fulfilling their physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

Besides, family support could as well improve the outcome in substance-related psychiatric illnesses [15]. With the enforcement of MCO, family support could be enhanced. Family is expected to be at home and potentially acts as vital overseers - by supervising and monitoring individuals from using substances. Besides, MCO could provide a chance for substance users to bond with their family, and hence possibly helps in fulfilling their psychological need of relatedness. Gloria H. Y. Chan in 2019, found that: one's psychological need for connectedness serves as an important determinant for substance use [16]. If their psychological need for relatedness is fulfilled, the ultimate coping mechanism of using drugs could as well be diminished – and hence resulting in an overall reduction substance-related psychiatric disorders. Furthermore, the MCO comes with heightened security and numerous

roadblocks. Tightened security could potentially make substance use and trafficking less accessible. As a result, substance use and its related psychiatric conditions are less prominent too. The Police DiRaja of Malaysia in a recent press statement in March 2020 reported that since the starting of the MCO, crime rates around Kuala Lumpur has seen a 48% dip.

Additionally, MCO enables a break from the hectic schedule of work and studying. For certain individuals, whose work and study serve as major stressors, the MCO provides a much-needed break from the stressful daily routine – thus less psychiatric relapses and psychological distress may occur. Carolyn S. Dewa in 2007, found that chronic work stress could worsen the outcome of patients with psychiatric illness [17]. Hence, MCO could provide a long-awaited rest for those who suffered chronic stress from work – and thus providing a favourable outcome in mental health. Furthermore, staying at home longer potentially enables more home-cooked food and a healthier diet regime. Dinan et al. in 2018 found correlations between a healthy diet and mental health [18]. For example, a higher amount of dietary vegetables and fruits is associated with increased levels of reported happiness and mental health [19].

In addition to food and rest, MCO drastically slows down the pace of life. People could gain more time and opportunities to think about the meaning of life. According to Huguelet P. et al in 2016, spirituality and meaning in life are important determinants of recovery for patients with psychiatric disorders [20]. In the face of an unprecedented global crisis, while being equipped with more time, people could explore, or re-explore about the meaning of life. People might have a chance to learn to appreciate things which were overlooked

before this – and possibly finding a new balance between work, family and personal life. T. S. Sathyanarayana et al in 2010, pointed out that: work, family and personal life should be complementary and not conflicting with each other [21]. Decent family happiness and personal life are especially key dimensions of a successful career. Art of balancing between these dimensions is no easy task. However, the pandemic and resultant MCO potentially allow people to attempt - to learn to attain a newfound balance in work and life.

Conclusion

It is intriguing yet crucial to learn about the psychological impact – both negative and potentially favourable ones. Some of the major issues to ponder: did the theme of psychological distress change due to the pandemic? For example, in patients with anxiety, do the symptoms of anxiety change to fear instead due to the COVID-19 pandemic? More targeted and structured research on mental health implications should be studied in Malaysia. This is to develop a better understanding of the paradigm of the pandemic and to tailor an individualized treatment and prevention of mental health complications due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the preventive measures proposed by Xiang et al, 2020 are, forming a multidisciplinary team which consist of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and other supporting staffs [22]. Secondly, communication should be concise, clear and accurately updated from time to time. Lastly, secure services such as usage of electronic devices are important to provide psychological support [22]. Druss, 2020 also emphasized the importance of continuation of mental health services for patients with severe mental illness via methods such as

telepsychiatry [11]. Furthermore, education regarding mental illness is also crucial to reduce stigma and encourage more people to come forward to seek treatment for the psychological distress that they might experience following COVID-19 pandemic.

As such, it is interesting to note that albeit the more apparent fallout of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic might seem bleak, there are numerous potentially helpful impacts on the mental health of the Malaysian population. COVID-19 and consequential MCO could offer both the patients and their family a rare opportunity for bonding. Together, they could look at things which were overlooked for the whole time previously: connectedness, support and precipitants for relapses – in aiming to work together for the betterment of mental health.

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Corresponding Author

Ng Chong Guan
Department of Psychological Medicine,
Faculty of Medicine, Lembah Pantai,
50603, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Email: chong_guan@um.edu.my