

Reviewed:

Guidelines for Mental Health Care  
Settings During the Pandemic COVID-19:  
A Mental Health Percept Out in Time

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"Mental health in the times of COVID-19 pandemic - Guidelines for general medical and specialized mental health care settings" is a dossier originated by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in association with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. The guideline is a hundred- and seventy-one-page text in very simple and clear language, published by Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health & Neurosciences in April 2020.

As the entire globe grapples with the ever-intensifying impasse of COVID-19, the Department of Psychiatry of NIMHANS in accord with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India has swiftly and diligently responded to the critical situation at hand and issued a comprehensive set of parameters for general medical and specialized mental health care environments. The guidelines' intent is to support the health care function of the nation amidst the pandemic. Given the paucity of time and acceleration of the crisis, the document is a well-resourced compilation and incorporates all the guidelines published to date by The World Health Organization (WHO), The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC), Centre of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Government of India. However, the primary focus of the document is predominantly problem-focused and has a fair scope for the inclusion of some more pragmatic strategies which can upswing positive vitality among masses.

The document has two segments. The first part provides guidelines for the non- psychiatric medical professionals to address the immediate mental health needs of the community and treatment centers and the second part provides recommendations for psychiatrists

to ensure safety during their day to day practice. The general public may refer to the document to address their own mental health concerns, however there is a restrained reach for the same.

The document starts with a compendious overview which legitimately addresses key struggles at hand and spotlights on what time can hold for the future. Further it amalgamates the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health. The section covers various important issues such as public reaction to restrictions imposed by the government to contain the pandemic, stigmatization, anticipation of growing mental health challenges and the quiet imperative, that is, the adaptation of masses to the situation where change is the only constant. It suggests possible solutions to deal with challenges that have arisen in the wake of COVID-19. The dossier also talks about the much required mindfulness of policy makers which will be a prerequisite in ensuring the management of mental health in the community. The guidelines very perceptively focus on several susceptible groups which need attention during policy making strategies. The creators of the document have incorporated the most worthy and laudable submission of laying emphasis on integration of mental health perspective into the broad framework of COVID-19 health care response. There is an earnest advice to incorporate a psychological medical team either as a standalone team or a part of the general medical team attending to patients affected by the pandemic (p. 09). Having said this, there is also a necessity to include a concise reference of a few policies that must be framed for propagation of the subject by media. It is a fact that media (print, social and digital) plays a pivotal role in framing the cognition of the masses, especially in these testing times where social isolation predisposes individuals to a mentally and emotionally vulnerable state. In light of this, it is long awaited and prudent that some guidelines pertaining to the content and manner of propagation by the media (in all forms) should be suggested to the policy makers by the mental health fraternity.

Further, the document brings into view common psychological disturbances that have been observed post COVID-19 outbreak. It effectively suggests how common symptoms of mental illness or maladaptive behavior can be identified, to ensure an early and effective intervention. The creators of the guidelines have framed a thorough content explaining the symptomatology with the support of appropriate case specimens, which make this portion of the document effortlessly comprehensible to a larger population. It provides a brief mental health assessment that can be used by mental health crews (pp. 20-22).

Mental health issues faced by various groups in society during pandemic have been discussed, along with customized remedial measures. A set of guidelines that health care

providers can use for individuals who have been quarantined at home or isolated at the hospital have also been given. Guidelines for management and treatment of psychiatric patients, whether at home or at the hospitals, have been determined. The document notes that mental health issues can also be found in individuals who have not been infected. The source of their concern could be the unfavorable environment created by the pandemic. To help children and adolescents, simple strategies have been provided for parents and guardians to follow. Older adults, pregnant and postpartum women, and people with disability (PWD) are groups that are highly vulnerable both physically and psychologically to the current pandemic, thus the document provides potential interventions for each of these groups.

The guidelines provide some useful points of advice for the frontline personnel combating COVID- 19 (“COVID Warriors”) who are at high risk of burnout due to increased workload and stigmatization by society. However, these recommendations appear to have lesser relevance in the present context given the harsh ground realities in India. The suggested measures for COVID warriors include timely breaks, pursuing hobbies and making time for family. But these are seemingly a distant reality under such catastrophic conditions. It is earnest, at this juncture, to recognize the necessity of psychotherapy and counselling not just for the patients but also for the medical practitioners who are equally mentally drained and fatigued. It is emphasized that some precise illustrations of yogic practices and psychological first aid can be prescribed which could minimize their mental stress. Ease of instructions in this regard should also be meticulously considered for achieving better percolation of the prescriptions amongst the masses.

The guidelines cover the grave subject of stigmatization while wisely considering that people are more vulnerable to biases in a situation where there is a lack of accurate information or lack of general awareness. Reflecting on the same, there is a judicious description of plausible causes and consequences of stigmatization. The document also talks about the possible solutions for the same. However, the emphasis is laid more on what ought not to be done rather than prescribing what may be done. Guidelines of using effective modelling (faith leaders, business leaders and celebrities) and disseminating information of diverse communities working together to deal with the COVID situation can be incorporated to denounce the effect of stigmatization. Again, while framing guidelines to reduce stigmatization it is essential to provide certain firm recommendations regarding promotion of ethical journalism as even the creators of the document emphasize on the dominant effect of media in fostering stigma (p. 61).

The risks of engaging in harmful acts such as aggression, domestic violence and self-harm have risen during the lockdown, thus effective measures have been included to debilitate their occurrence. To deal with mild and common mental health concerns arising in the pandemic, a set of simple and effective psychological strategies have been prepared. To boost physical and mental well-being, a separate chapter on yoga has been devised. Use of digital platforms for training, mentoring, and dissemination of knowledge has been advised to remove roadblocks in learning.

The second part of the book suggests protective measures that can be used in psychiatric hospitals to prevent the spread of infection. It explains how rapid tranquilization, electroconvulsive therapy and transcranial magnetic stimulation can be safely administered in very difficult conditions, but the guidelines clearly specify that it should be the last resort. Any rapid tranquilization should be an alternate after clear consideration of both risks and benefits and when all other measures like psychological strategies have proven ineffective. Mental health professionals need to maintain a written record in the patients' files. To follow the rules of social distancing, telepsychiatry consultations have been set up to keep up the flow of mental healthcare services. Instructions related to sanitation, including cleaning and disinfection, and use of protective gear have been provided. However, use of more diverse case studies representative of the population could have been added. An analysis of successful and unsuccessful interventions will also help us create more refined strategies and will go a long way in overcoming the consequences of the pandemic.

To sum up, it is believed that the document has encompassed various requisite issues for prevention and treatment of various mental health concerns during this pandemic. Having said this, it is also felt that the prescriptions suggested in the document can be more attenuated towards percolation to the masses considering the harsh ground realities. It is also pertinent that all guidelines framed, and the preventive measures recommended should be translated in all regional languages for effective propagation of the same. Lastly, an efficient collaborative effort is the need of the hour across all state agencies like the eminent regional mental health organizations and esteemed educational institutions across Maharashtra who are committed to betterment of mental health in times of our crusade against COVID-19 pandemic, to achieve a common goal and develop similar guidelines catering to the needs of the state.

Sincere thanks to all the architects of the document for their efforts in collaborating and developing the document which remains a comprehensive and prudent archive on the issue at hand.

