

# Psychological Impact of Covid -19 on Young Adults, Coping Strategies

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'Corona Go! Go Corona Go!' is a wish billions all over the globe make today. A wish if and when granted will change our entire ecosystem and evolve us as humans. Change is inevitable. We cannot stop change from taking place but we can change our ways of adapting to it.

What is Corona? The new corona virus is a new strain of virus that has not been previously identified in humans. According to WHO Corona viruses are large family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). There is no specific vaccine for Covid-19. The treatments are under investigation and are tested through clinical trials. The corona virus causes Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) infecting people of all age groups, however evidence suggests that 2 groups are at high risk-people over 60 years and those with underlying medical conditions (cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases and cancer) Today, the death rate in Maharashtra is 4,57,956 as on August 5, 2020. (Aarogya Setu App) These figures indicate that state of Maharashtra is highly affected.

Youngsters are not equipped with life skills or coping mechanisms to deal with any kind of crisis in life. Even though their world is alive on social media which is picture perfect for all to see, each individual within themselves is groping in the dark with their own identity, innumerable fears and constant pressure to

be better than the others. In this world of theirs they have got used to their own freedom to do as they please. A happy go lucky attitude and care free life without being really responsible or accountable for their actions or speech. Corona has changed many things for them. The facade behind the image is showing through the cracks. The VUCA (Volatile, Uncertainty, Complex and Ambiguity) world has thrown them off balance, has challenged their mental strength.

The pandemic has brought forth not only a risk of life but psychological pressures as well. Situational factors surrounding Covid-19 are bound to stay and will have profound impact on mental wellness.

The present paper attempts to evaluate mental- mind - set of college students (18-25years) during the lockdown of approximately 60 days in Maharashtra. Researches have attempted to provide a framework or a set of coping strategies to help young adults cope with the pandemic.

## **Cause of Psychological Distress among Young Adults (18-25 Years)**

**General Anxiety and Fear of Future** - Young adults have a bundle of unmatched energy and enthusiasm. But if you ask them today, "How is the Josh?" the response would probably be "Low Sir!" That is exactly what they feel, low energy levels and a sense of uncertainty about their future. The sudden pandemic has shattered their dream plans for the upcoming year. Most young adults of this age group have chalked out their career plans well: probably a master's degree, taking up a job or switching base to another country. All these plans are currently at stand still. As a result this has led to feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, ambiguity and lack of road map for the future. Recent research conducted by Roy and colleagues on Covid-19 indicated high anxiety among high risk groups and those with history of depression or loneliness. Anxiety leading to substance abuse and pornography was higher among sexual minorities and young adults. (Roy et al. 2020) Some may experience extreme worry leading to irregular sleep and eating patterns. "I had my career plans all set for the coming year. I would go in for a

master's degree and take up a part time job. Now am so uncertain about the next academic year. I feel so lost and have sleep issues" (Personal counselling session with the author, June 5, 2020) Sudden changes due to Covid-19 has brought immense agony to the students who are already burdened with their semester and competitive exams increasing unemployment rates, bleak job prospects and uncertainty have shattered their dreams and aspirations. This is pushing them towards extreme anxiety and stress. (Patnaik 2020)

**Academic Worries at Peak** –Youngsters are facing the worst academic dilemma ever – exams or no exams. Some exams were left incomplete. Students are feeling more confused and totally demotivated. Result declaration delay has affected the admission process creating further anxiety in the young ones, leaving them overwhelmed with worry and panic. Entrance exams are rescheduled and students fear their performance due to lack of proper coaching and guidance. This is also an important time for every student as memorable academic occasions are held during this time of the year: farewell, graduation, Fresher's party and other important academic functions, some of which the students will not have a chance to attend post lockdown. This sense of loss and misfortune of missing out on these events is causing mood swings –from a feeling of excitement to sadness.

**Isolation Playing Havoc** – The new norm of social distancing is making young adults feel isolated. Home quarantine has changed their routine of outings with friends and- freedom of movement: being constantly stuck at home makes them feel depressed (Puri 2020) Distancing from near and dear ones, especially friends, during the lockdown period, has created a sense of disconnect. This is especially true of those in the age group 18-25 who spend most of their time in college or universities with friends, but now confined to the four walls of their home. This is very damaging as it increases feelings of loneliness, dullness and depression. Those in close relationships miss their partners deeply, leading to a feeling of being trapped and helpless. This results to lack of interest in regular activities, aggression and in some cases substance abuse. Research on earlier epidemic highlighted the fact that for people in relationships, isolation may resemble that of a long distance relationship. Studies have linked individual and relationship –stress and possible disruption of psychobiological linkage between partners. (Du Bios et al. 2015)

**HYPOCHONDRIA** (Excessive fear of catching the virus) - In the past, during outbreaks such as "Ebola Virus" people have reported excessive somatization, obsession-compulsion, depression, anxiety, paranoid ideation, bad sleep and appetite. Mental status of EVD survivors included fear of seriously falling ill, worry relating to contracting the virus and spreading it to others. (Dong et al. 2008) Today, youngsters fear catching and transmitting the infectious Corona virus to others. This unhealthy paranoid-thinking forces them to engage in obsessive compulsive cleanliness regimes, causing trouble to self and other family members. An online survey across India shows 80% of the respondents were preoccupied with thoughts of Covid-19. Sleep difficulties and paranoia about acquiring the virus. (Roy et al. 2020) Some may experience a deep fear of an impending death. "Ma'am I worry about me catching the virus sooner or later. Am extra cautious about my cleanliness routines. This irritates my younger brother and we end up fighting". (Personal counselling session with the author, June 23, 2020)

**Worry about Finances** - In Spain and other countries facing Covid-19, people have reported of being in fear of losing their jobs and suffering from decreased family income leading to PTSD symptoms and negative coping measures. (Leilei et al. 2020) The current pandemic has certainly put financial restraints on family expenditure and personal spending. Young adults, who are used to spending money freely, feel restricted. Those who were involved in part time jobs to meet their academic needs are at a total loss now. The under-privileged students would not be able to cope with the financial crises and may decide to drop out affecting increasing dropout rates at the university level. Social and economic fissures exposed by the pandemic will result in unemployment, depleted social safety nets and starvation. Post Covid-19 world will be a breeding ground for chronic stress, anxiety, depression, PTSD and self-harm. (Armour 2020)

**Family Time Curse versus Blessing** - The current lockdown has its plus side too. It is a great opportunity to connect with family and dear ones. However, it is for this very reason that the youngsters are distressed as they are under constant monitoring by their parents and siblings. There is no privacy or personal space. Being home 24/7 and under constant surveillance is only making them more irritable and frustrated. The main cause of their anger is that they are not able to reach out to their friends and their conversations are overheard. Young

adults, who are addicted to alcohol or smoking, have difficulty explaining this to their family and may experience withdrawal symptoms. Students living in disturbed family setting are now forced to be with their family member, which will heighten the constant strain in their relationships and impact them mentally and emotionally. This would lead to anger, frustration, verbal abuse and physical violence. Current Chinese study suggested wide range of psychological distress both during and following the period of self-quarantine and quarantine of family members including depression, low mood, irritability, insomnia, confusion, anxiety and anger. (Newbigging 2020) Over and above, in such a situation if there is a medical emergency wherein the parent needs to be taken to the hospital or a family member needs to be quarantined, then the fear of losing a parent can prove to be traumatic for the young adult. One student reported during the counselling session that he could not attend online classes and when asked the reason he said his Dad had to be quarantined. (Personal counselling session with the author, July 8, 2020.) When a family member is tested positive, it certainly leads to panic attacks and excessive worry and anxiety.

**Virtual Detox versus Virtual Addiction** - Young adults are living a virtual life away from reality. Students spend most of their day on social networks or binge watching Netflix, Amazon or web series. This often leads to reduced family interaction, avoiding confrontation. Moreover, their participation in daily chores makes them sluggish which would have long term effects on their physical well-being. Research on adolescents and young adults, who are socially active and particularly susceptible to the impact of social isolation as an alternative to in-person socialization, shows that social isolation amplifies feelings of disconnect and can result in negative psychological effects and disorders. (Burza 2020) During this pandemic, online presence has increased due to online classes, courses, webinars and the pressure of doing something constructive during quarantine. All of this is leading to additional stress. Some would suffer from performance anxiety of constantly updating social media to avoid fear of being left out or the FOMO syndrome (Fear of Missing Out). The pressure to be productive is heightened by celebrities posting challenges and rosy picture of life. (Puri 2020.)

**Fighting Infodemic** - Research shows that media coverage on epidemic can provide important information to the public, and in turn, can induce positive

healthy practices in public. At the same time pervasive media coverage leads to a desensitisation to media reports and a diminished emotional responsiveness to a negative or, an aversive stimulus after repeated exposure. (Collinson et al. 2015) Media in these trying times has become an indispensable source of vital information but also a fertile ground for dangerous rumours. WHO Director stated, “We’re not just fighting an epidemic, we’re fighting an Infodemic.” Infodemic is an excessive amount of information about a problem which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemic can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among public. (Merriam-Webster n.d.) Pandemic outbreak coupled with Infodemic explosion has created widespread anxiety among youngsters. Pervasive media coverage of the pandemic may lead to desensitization to media reports and negative reactions to repeated exposure. Sensationalism and politicization of news may create fear, anxiety, confusion and panic among young adults. A student has said that every time she watched the news for an update, she felt heavy in the head and would just withdraw from all and question life and if it was worth living. She would only feel despair and hopelessness. (Personal counselling session with the author, June 12, 2020)

**Excessive Spare Time**– With colleges and universities being shut down, the young adults have excessive spare time. Initially they enjoyed catching up with friends, cultivating a hobby or doing some household chores. Leisure activities during home confinement such as physical activity, watching films, reading, browsing, video calling are associated with low stress. With the lockdown extended beyond two months, slowly but steadily, it is leading to boredom and mental fatigue. As a result these young adults are finding it difficult to concentrate on simple tasks, missing out on exercise regimes and diet plans, lowering their self-image and immunity to fight the corona virus. “I feel extremely guilty of over eating and awful of putting on weight during quarantine. How would I face my friends once the lockdown is over?” (Informal chat with the author, July 5, 2020)

**Physically Inactive**– Lack of normal routine is a cause of sleep disturbance, excessive worry and anxiety. This leads to psychosomatic disorders such as ulcers, gastrointestinal troubles, severe back pain, frequent headaches and chest pain due to excessive anxiety and worry. Restricted movement only within the

house, not much fresh air and lack of proper exercise routine adds more weight to the body as consumption of food has not decreased. Long hours in front of laptop or computer screen can cause aches and pains in the body. It is common knowledge that any kind of discomfort experienced in the body makes the young adult irritable and snappy.

**Social Stigma:** Lastly, when a member of the family has tested positive for Corona, the social stigma attached to it adds to the mental pressure one is already facing. People who were quarantined have reported stigmatization and rejection from people in their neighbourhoods. People treated them with fear and suspicion, and made critical comments. (Brooks et al. 2019) There is no immediate help available. Neighbours keep away. The fear of losing a dear one coupled with feeling of isolation and being treated as an outcast takes a toll on an already mentally and emotionally harassed young adult.

It is not only important to identify these stressors among young adults but help them deal with them effectively. Coping strategies can prove to be beneficial and help young adults deal with stress. According to APA, coping strategies can be defined as, “an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one’s reaction to such a situation. Coping strategies typically involve a conscious and direct approach to problems, in contrast to defense mechanism”.

Coping Mechanisms have been suggested in three categories Personal, Family and Community level respectively.

### **Coping Strategies – Personal Level**

Every individual can take charge of themselves through self-care. This paper advocates different ways in which an individual can take care, beginning with personal hygiene, daily exercising, eating healthy and setting a routine. It is also suggested that individuals meditate and contribute towards household chores, journalize one’s feelings, use social media constructively and seek professional help if required. The expressive arts have proved to be a great way of relieving emotional stress, thus exploring one’s creative side, be it in the form of colors, dance or music.

### **Coping Strategies – Family level**

An average Indian family may have maximum four to six members. The lockdown has pushed us all to spend more time with family which has proved to be a boon for some and bane for others. Fostering positivity amongst all is required as it contributes in boosting our immunity system. Thus during these trying times, this paper suggests that as a family have meals together and talk about Corona in a positive way by stressing on the plus points of it instead of focusing on the negative, sharing work at home and playing board games. It is also suggested that as a family talk about happy memories and holidays taken earlier. Openly talk about financial constraints the family is facing, know and accept that the entire family is in it together. Maintain positivity all around.

### **Coping Strategies – Community levels**

This paper recommends that as a community one can do their bit to contribute, in whatever way, towards the community. Reach out to friends and relatives through video calls, help the children with studies and collectively spread awareness of living responsibly. Set up help desks, career guidance cells for students since education is now online. Most importantly, responsible reporting must be done by media. Community living is encouraged as it gives a feeling of togetherness – a feeling that we are not alone in it.

### **Coping Strategies – Affirmations**

Affirmations are statements that are positive and reaffirm one's self-belief. This paper highly recommends making affirmations during this pandemic to instil confidence in self. Saying to the self that I am not alone, I have faith, emphasises on believing the same and there by manifesting it in reality. A thought gives rise to a feeling which makes us feel either happy or sad. Making a positive affirmation can therefore help in changing the way we feel. The affirmations work like auto suggestion to the mind and that's why this paper suggests it as one of the coping mechanisms.

**CONCLUSION** – Let’s build our resilience and courage to fight Corona by taking the simple measures suggested in this paper at the level of family, individual and community. This pandemic situation has given the young adults a moment to pause and reflect, an opportunity to move out of their comfort zone. When the lockdown ends – what will be the normal we will return to- is still to be seen but it is clear that if mental strength is built upon during these days of lockdown using the recommended coping mechanisms, the young adults will be much better equipped to handle any situation in future. As recommended by this paper, if the youth can implement the suggested coping mechanisms, they will be able to overcome the fear of Corona and uncertainty, dealing with life in a more matured way.

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