

Letter to the Editor

Impact of physiotherapy on mental health during COVID-19

Sir,

COVID-19 pandemic has immensely affected the entire world including both developing countries like India and other developed nations. The pandemic is not only affecting physical state of individuals but also the psychological condition is largely affected. Depression, stress and fear are some of the common presentations during the course of disease and also in post COVID state. For effective management of mental health of patients and frontline workers it is essential that certain set of exercises should be done, in order to avoid stress related health impairments.

Currently, all of us are undergoing through a web of emotional crisis and have to cater to situations that we have never experienced before. In the nineteenth century also, there have been various pandemics such as plague, cholera and the flu pandemic. The “Spanish flu” ransacked the world in the early part of the twentieth century. There has been subsequent outbreak of various other pandemics including Asian flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola etc. the pandemic of COVID-19 has an entirely different outlook. It has devastated the entire world and created havoc across the entire globe. As COVID-19 is wiping out one country after another, it is also leaving behind significant psychological impacts in each country, depending on the stage of the pandemic. In India, there is no strong data to suggest that there is wide range of community transmission, as compared to developed countries including USA and Europe. But, till date there is no idea also as to how this pandemic is going to behave further in our country. Majority of the psychological responses seen so far are reactions to the outbreak of the pandemic across the world.

Also, people are in fear of the futuristic outcomes of the pandemic as they are apprehensive that they might get contacted with the virus. There is ongoing stress in response to the lockdown as there are significant changes in our daily lives due to restrictions imposed in freedom of movement in order to contain the virus. In addition, the “normal” society has to face extraordinary challenges which this COVID era has given including new realities of work from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact/ social distancing norms with other family members, friends and colleagues. So, it is highly appreciable that the masses are thriving under stress and fear of the COVID-19 pandemic. In India, the most common effect that is being faced by all of us is fear and a sense of clear and imminent danger. There is range of fears, from those

based on actual facts and figures of the pandemic to the misinformation being circulated in the social media. This is leading to varied responses amongst the masses, as some are simply “worried” and others develop a “mental disorder”. Also, the fear of contracting the disease has a wide range of misinterpreting every fever or cough as a COVID-19 infection, and going for a test just for reassurance, despite the fact that there are strict guidelines for testing. Although, there are many advisories being issued for disease prevention including self-hygiene, regular hand wash, use of mask, maintaining social distances and use of sanitizers etc. But still the pandemic has leads to the outbreak of job losses and economic failures across the country. The list is quite large and has leads to the onset of concern, anxiety, worry and fear, in both the young as well as the old aged population. The elderly population may feel further isolated and neglected as there is lack of medical support systems. Medical professionals are another important category of persons who are facing various stressful situations including patient care, preventing their families from cross infection, working for long hours, lack of proper food, diet, rest and isolation from their families. In all of these situations, it is evident that COVID-19 has affected the mental health of the entire community in one or the other way and it is substantial that there should be proper strategies for coping with stress, depression and anxiety. As if these mental health issues are not recognized and managed, then they can transform into their severe distressful forms such as helplessness, hopelessness and suicidal thoughts and feelings. The interventions aimed at improving the mental health issues should be planned separately for various groups including confirmed COVID cases who are being hospitalized, suspected cases or those in home quarantine, health care professionals working with COVID patients and community personnel. the common psychological presentations post COVID-19 include the following: depressed mood, loss of energy, increased fatigue, poor concentration, ideology of being worthless, feeling helpless, irritability, tension, sleep disturbances, presence of a generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorders.

There are thousands of workers including medical professionals, police and other district/local government officials; who are working 24×7 to fight this disease. Focusing on the healthcare workers in the present article, most common issue being experienced by the healthcare workers is “burn-out”. It is a triad of emotional dissipation, disconnection from family (lack of care and compassion), and decreased sense of achievement of

success. These symptoms may predominate over one another or they may co-exist.

Burn-out may significantly reduce the efficiency of healthcare professional. Long working hours, tension of cross infection to one-self and to family, isolation from family members for long times and preexisting mental health issues; are some of the common risk factors involved in the burnout of healthcare professionals. Definitive steps should be taken for controlling the stress level in healthcare workers as almost all frontline workers employed in COVID-19 are at risk of developing mental health disturbances and all workers should practice “self-care” activities. “self-care” activities include having a proper routine, good sleep, short breaks for family meetings, carrying out some activities or hobbies, regular exercises and a healthy diet, practicing yoga, and spiritual works.

Physical activity is one of the key components to manage mental health; thereby it is imperative that we as physiotherapists should promote this to the society. The national physical activity guidelines recommend following guidelines of minimum half-hour of moderate intensity of exercise, preferably throughout the week with just the once exercising for 10 minutes. Being active the maximum amount as possible, e.g., using stairs rather than lift. In addition, the assorted set of exercises that will help to alleviate stress levels and help in promoting the health levels of frontline workers in accordance with the rules issued by Ministry of health and family welfare are as follows:

Relaxation techniques

Autogenic training, biofeedback-assisted relaxation, deep breathing or breathing exercises, guided imagery.

Progressive relaxation/ Jacobson relaxation or progressive muscle relaxation, involves tightening and relaxing various muscle groups, progressive relaxation is usually combined with guided imagery and breathing exercises.

Abdominal breathing

Instructions to follow: Sit in a comfortable position on the floor or a chair, remove your wallet, belt or other items (phones) from your shirts, trousers or dress, relax your shoulders, bring your hands to your lower belly together with your two middle fingers touching the belly, close your eyes now, take an extended, deep, gentle breath right down to your belly, so your stomach expands (keep your shoulders relaxed), you must find that your middle fingers naturally part slightly because the belly expands with the breath, exhale or respire slowly, now you will feel how the belly naturally draws inwards because the breath exits the body and therefore the middle fingers slide to touch again, do this abdominal

breathing a minimum of 10 times (inhale and exhale slowly).

Stretching exercises

Neck movements, hands-up stretch with breathing, heel to palm stretch, backward bending and shoulder rotations with elbow stretch.

CONCLUSION

The key message is that if you are a frontline worker and have been inactive then both mental and health benefits can be gained by becoming slightly more active, “a little physical activity is best than none in the slightest degree, and more is healthier than a little”.

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