

Impacts of sudden lifestyle changes due to COVID-19 on mental health: African perspectives

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Respected sir,

The current outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus infection among humans and its spreading around the globe is heavily impacting on the global health and mental health. Despite all resources employed to counteract the spreading of the virus, additional global strategies are needed to handle the related mental health issues. The aim of this study is to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on people's mental health, to assist policy makers to develop actionable policies, and help clinical practitioners (e.g., social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists) provide timely services to affected populations.

The Covid-19 pandemic needs to be understood as a psychological or mental problem which has impacts on sudden lifestyle changes as much as it is a medical one. We are trying to protect ourselves against the virus, but how are we protecting ourselves against the psychological distress it wreaks?

The rapidly evolving coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is placing an overwhelming burden on the mental health of people to respond with effective and appropriate interventions, policies, and messages (WHO, 2019). A critical element in reducing transmission of the virus is rapid and widespread mental change which has great impact on mental influence. Evidence shows that a perceived lack of consistency, competence, fairness, objectivity, empathy, or sincerity in pandemic response in the public could lead to distrust and fear which have effect on mental health of African (Bao et al., 2019).

According to the Johns Hopkins University, as of April 15, 2020, Covid-19 has thus far claimed more than 132,889 lives and has infected 2,051,000 people around the world and recovered people are 507,890.

Nevertheless, it is disappointing, but not at all surprising

that in its approach of sudden lifestyle changes due to the pandemic, Nigeria government have not integrated emergency psychological crisis interventions to reduce the negative psychosocial impact of the pandemic on public mental health in the country (WHO and UNHCR, 2015). In public mental health terms, the main psychological impact to date is elevated rates of stress or anxiety. But as new measures and impacts are introduced – especially quarantine and its effects on many people's usual activities, routines or livelihoods – levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behavior are also expected to rise (Taylor, 2018).

In his prognostic book titled "Psychology of Pandemics", Steven Taylor, a professor and clinical psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia (Canada), maintains that psychological factors influence the spread of pandemic infections and the associated emotional distress that comes with them (Taylor, 2018). In populations already heavily affected in Africa, issues of service access and continuity for people with developing or existing mental health conditions are also now a major concern, along with the mental health and well-being of frontline workers (West China Medical University, 2020).

In essence, the footprint of Covid-19 is not only seen among those who are sick or succumb to the virus, but it is also entrenched among those who experience the consequent stress, anxiety, anger, fear of death and fear of losing loved ones, among other psychological discomforts (PAHO, 2006). These days, a simple cough or sneeze could invoke a lot of anxiety for an individual and those around him or her. The sudden and severe

disruption of routines, separation from families, wage losses and social isolation are undoubtedly contributing more to the havoc.

The implications of COVID-19 on mental health affect individuals and society on many levels causing disruption, which is a risk to human life and ensuring economic distress and also cause invisible emotional strain. It causes financial crises where so many people lost their job. There are also those who have pre-existing psychological ailments such as anxiety disorders (panic disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and phobias), mood disorders (depression and bipolar), personality disorders or even post-traumatic disorders and their conditions could be worsened by this pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020). The recent reports of a rise in domestic violence are of great concern. Coupled with all of these challenges, there is an over abundance of misinformation on social media and elsewhere about Covid-19, and ways to prevent/cope with it and these can impede the process of infection control.

The suggested solution to COVID-19 on mental health is by strengthening community prevention through providing risk-stratified crisis counseling support to individual and families who are affected with COVID-19, individuals who lost their jobs, poverty-stricken people, healthcare and essential workers, older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals experiencing extended quarantine across the community by conducting an outreach to promote resilience, normalize reactions, and let people know when and where to seek help.

Another suggested solution is to leverage on data and technology by using predictive analytics to direct prevention and clinical resources to those most at risk for mental health or substance use problems and unmet basic needs (Rubin et al., 2009). Leveraging and improving available data sources by encouraging the use of artificial intelligence to connect consumer seamlessly to evidence and measurement based care and also government should consider how they can fund telehealth, examine what impact emergency waivers, flexibilities and rate increases for telehealth under COVID-19 are having on care delivery (Van der Pligt, 2006).

Suggested solutions to the mental health implications is to address unemployment and income disparities in order to reduce long-term psychosocial risk from COVID-19, policy makers and employers may want to reimagine the future to alleviate economic disparities. More innovation may be valuable around accelerated skill redevelopment, supported employment and incentivizing investment in local growth.

Conclusion

The impacts of the sudden change in lifestyle due to the pandemic have affected a lot of people financially and their daily basic activities due to restrictions in place and this has disrupted many African houses; bringing about

negative thinking in the minds of a lot of Africans because the means of their survival is held and their standard of living has dropped.

While these consequential events could be seen as been far from our immediate reality, it is possible that they could already be taking place here in Africa countries. It is therefore important for the government to proactively assist Africans to cope with not only the containment of this virus, but also the potential psychological consequences that it presents.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests.

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