

AN INTRIGUING EXPERIENCE: COUNSELLING COVID 19 CLIENTS

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ABSTRACT: *Corona virus hit the world by January 2020, after which it slowly started to lurk into India by March 2020. This sudden catastrophe started to take a big toll of lives all over the world and had the same effect in India also. The enormous number of patients getting admitted were massive and at the same time, the patients recovering was also inversely proportionate. The patients were being diagnosed, and some of them were admitted in the hospitals and the others were advised to being quarantined at home, as there was no space in the hospitals. The stress of being diagnosed positive for corona virus can bring lots of unresolved conflicts for any human. These clients had a very poor mental state. They had symptoms of loneliness, depression, fear and anxiety about the outcome of the disease. A registry was maintained in a hospital for such clients and they were counselled through their mobiles. The process was challenging and a mind-blowing experience for the counsellor.*

Key words: *Corona virus, Clients, Counselling,*

INTRODUCTION

Things were going on normally till unexpectedly in January 2020, a new disease hit the world. People are suddenly alerted to stay at home. The news says a novel virus has struck the world and it is called Corona virus. The virus corona had affected many people all over the world with a very devastating experience for each and every individual, both mentally and physically. COVID 19 is a disease which is very infectious caused by the corona virus. The outbreak of this virus began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It had taken a big toll of deaths in China and later spread all over the world. Worldwide, the confirmed cases of COVID -19 seem to be escalating every day. The cases as presented by WHO (October 23rd, 2020) are 41,570,883 confirmed cases of COVID 19 which includes the patients who died of COVID 19 (1,134,940 deaths). India was not left out. Kerala was the first State to receive cases of corona virus and later on it spread to the other States of India. India too is struggling with this fatal disease. Tamil Nadu has a total of 7,00,000, out of which 6,55,000 have recovered and 10,825 dead.

THE PROCESS OF THE DISEASE (PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY)

As it is a viral infection, the symptoms of the corona virus disease begin like any other viral infections with fever tiredness, and dry cough. The other symptoms range from mild symptoms to severe illness. Usually the symptoms can appear 2 – 14 days after the exposure to the virus. The symptoms are fever with chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue,

muscle or body aches, headache, loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting and diarrhea. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020)

When the symptoms become severe, emergency medical care needs to be given. The emergency warning signs of COVID 19 are trouble breathing, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, new confusion, inability to wake or stay awake and bluish lips or face. The symptoms can be any 2 or 3 symptoms out of the mentioned symptoms which can be devastating and needs to be attended too. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020)

The “*Lancet*” published a review of the psychological impact of quarantine and measures to reduce it. (Brooks, Webster, Smith, et al, 2020). Out of the 3166 papers, 24 papers were reviewed and the following stressors were elicited from these papers:

- Fears of infection
- Frustration and boredom
- Inadequate supplies
- Inadequate information
- Hopelessness
- Stigma
- Individuals under pressure and children needing more attention/attachment due to uncertainty
- Loss and grief

HIGH RISK GROUPS NEEDING COUNSELLING

The groups that need special intervention due to mental health issues are: confirmed patients, individuals suspected of having COVID 19 and awaiting test results, individuals who have been in contact with COVID 19 patients, unwell people who refuse to seek care, and susceptible members of the general public (Dong & Bouey, 2020).

THE CLIENT’S MENTAL HEALTH

When the COVID 19 hit hard on the physical being of the person, it also took a great toll on the mental wellbeing of the individuals throughout the world. People had fear of contracting the disease and death was one of the main threats. Complaints of frustration, boredom, hopelessness, stigma, loss and grief were also prevalent. Other symptoms like feeling stressed or overwhelmed, anxiety, worry, fear, racing thoughts, sadness, tearfulness, restlessness, agitation, feeling helpless, difficulty concentrating or sleeping, apprehension about going to public places, and even trouble relaxing. These experiences caused significant challenges in people life which were loss of life, changes in the way of life, travel restrictions, and social distancing. This situation is still causing prevailing and there are thoughts of uncertainty in everyone’s mind.

Many health agencies extended a helping hand rendering services through the health care professionals like doctors, nurses, social workers and psychologist in resolving these sudden psychological symptoms in patients and in general public which was devastating and a big task.

One of such a program was from the District Mental Health Programme and the Department of Psychiatry at the Trichy Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Government Hospital who aided the COVID 19 patients who were distressed due to the lockdown. Each health professional received approximately 30 calls per day. The caller had three main apprehension which were anxiety, phobia and loneliness. Further, concerns about their old parents, being stigmatized in the neighbourhood, fear of death, and loneliness were also seen. (The Hindu, April 19, 2020)

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

Patient's mindset ranges from mild to severe mental symptoms. Therefore, the patients are to be assessed and then the appropriate interventions need to be applied.

Positive psychology: Blue (2020) prompts people to understand that it is a passing and temporary time. The present situation which has come to a standstill will definitely come to an end and things will come back to normal.

Stillness practices: Encouraging patients to relax and use progressive relaxation techniques and find peace in an agitated world.

Discovery of meaning, purpose and values: It is helping ourselves to mobilize our interventions and finding a purpose, meaning and values during this pandemic period pulling things together and getting on with life. It becomes a powerful antidote to fear and panic during this pandemic period. (Assagioli, 1973/1984)

COUNSELLING CLIENT X AND HIS FAMILY

The clients were assigned a pseudonym after which I called the client. A shriveled voice from the other side responded to my greetings. I introduced myself and explained the aim of calling him. Without any hesitancy, he explained about the members of his family. Coming from a joint family, he had politely answered to all my questions. He and his family had been in home quarantine for the past 2 days, as a member of the family was suspected to have COVID positive. The gentle man was anxious looking out for answers that can be unveiled. There were 12 members in the family including the grandchildren.

They had a normal routine of taking hot water and regularized themselves in taking only hot meals three times a day. But the news channels giving information about the status of the increasing corona cases was devastating for them. Minimizing watching and listening to the news about COVID-19 which caused anxiety and distress was discouraged and trusted sources was given to them. It was advised to them not to listen to the rumors and misinformation. As one of the son's was educated, I advised him to go through the fact sheets in the WHO webpage which would reduce fears and apprehension and explain to the other members of the family.

Details were explained about the symptoms of COVID 19, prevention and the management. The family members shared all their feelings with me which was unique and a laudable experience. It reveals that every individual has emotions tied towards this haunting disease. The role of explaining every detail to the family was an enriching experience. The family members were receptive and eager to pass on the information to the neighbors and friends. One member had a query on stigmatization, which caused a sense of loneliness and isolated feeling. Positivity was instilled in the thoughts of the family members, explaining to them about being together with the loved ones and sharing experience about the cases who have recovered.

The counseling for the family continued over a fortnight. On another day, the mother in the family had queries on engaging the children. Every child is unique and have their own way of expressing emotions and reacting to what the parents advice. There were 4 children in the family, a grandson in the ninth grade, a granddaughter from the fifth grade, another granddaughter in the third grade and the youngest grandson in the first grade. They had their online classes going on nevertheless, they needed to be engaged when there were no classes. Sometimes they had headache and eye pain as they used the computer and mobiles frequently. The parents showed a lot of concern related to engaging them in other activities. Supportive the children and helping

the children to express their feelings were encouraged. They will have a feeling of a safe and supportive environment. I noticed that there were frictions between the children and even this friction was obvious in the parents in suggesting activities and in correcting their children. Sometimes these can be very demanding on the parents. Parents can give more detailed information to the children about the COVID 19 and what they can expect and why such new routines are carried on in the family. The children may have been educated in the school, but it is the added role of the parents to give them an added information which is honest and age appropriate.

Coming to the elderly in the family, they were doing well. They were also anxious and fear stricken. Nevertheless, they enjoyed the family being together. They did not complain of cognitive decline. The elderly father and mother were worried about the members of the family. In fact, they were well supported and cared by their family members. They listened to each and everything that was explained to them by me about the corona virus. They precautioned and reminded the other members of the family and alerted them from time to time. The couple were mobile and did all the daily routines of daily living by themselves. They were a lively and loving couple in fact.

REFLECTIONS

It has been a very enriching experience counselling COVID positive cases. The counselling was given through the mobile for the particular clients and their families. It is purely done through the telephonic conversation. I needed to be stable and have self-control. I needed to ask a few questions to myself.

- What things are within my control?
- Am I overestimating or underestimating the cases given to me?
- What strategies used helped me to cope and counsel well?
- What is the most helpful action that I have taken during the counselling session?
- What are my merits and demerits?
- Was I able to help the individuals to fight the pandemic actively even if it wasn't a direct contact with the client?

I needed to keep myself from being stressed and to pay attention to my needs and feelings. Journaling and talking to others also helped me. I tried to avoid rumours and unwanted information about corona. It was an exercise I followed every day. I prayed for the family before I started my counselling. I learnt a lot through this experience and everyday was a learning experience as it was not one side of the coin, it was either side, I had to balance, that is the challenges what the pandemic had for us each and every day and the family atmosphere where they had new issues and doubts every day. It was definitely a rich experience.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the experience of a counsellor who gives counselling for a family during the outbreak of the pandemic. The experience gained was intriguing. The hope and the ray of light which was instilled in the family during this period of hopelessness, stigma, losses, and the pressures of life was a laudable experience.

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