Applied Science & Technology Annals

Thematic Opinion

Psycho-social perspective of COVID-19 in Nepal

Sharmila Maharjan

[1] Clinical Psychology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

Abstract: This 'opinion article' is based on World Health Organization (WHO) news and online publications along with the cases handled by the writer. It aims at overviewing psycho-social angle of collectivistic social structure of Nepal during the pandemic called COVID-19 caused by Coronavirus. Majority of Nepalese are dependent on agriculture, remaining on private or public services either in or out of the country. COVID-19 entered the world health threatening their existence, authority and leaving social system in halt. Coronavirus attacked breathing system and lungs claiming hundreds of thousand people's lives around the world. No vaccine or medicine to combat it has been developed till date. Educational, professional and service organizations have been shut down leaving families isolated from friends and relatives. People are living with fear, denial, panic reactions, dissociation, depression, and socially distressed in 'lockdown' condition. It can damage trust in authority and socialization pattern as after-effect. Doctors, Politicians, educators, local government, social workers, psychologists and people themselves can reduce negative psycho-social effects occurring in future. Emotional management (situational awareness and acceptance), relationship management, meditation and relaxation exercises can contribute positively in reducing psychological problems of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19; Nepal; pandemic; lock down; psychological effect; psycho-social; WHO

सारांश: प्रस्तुत विचारमुलक लेख लेखिकाको व्यक्तिगत अनुभवका साथै विश्व स्वास्थ्य संगठनका जानकारीमुलक प्रकाशनहरुको सहायताद्वारा तयार पारिएको हो । नेपाली समाज संगठनात्मक सामाजिक संरचना भएको समाज हो । यहाको टोल गाउका मानिसहरु साना ठुला उद्योग तथा कृषि व्यवशाय गर्दछन् । केहि युवा जागिर खान्छन् भने केहि युवा बैदेशिक रोजगारका लागि देश बाहिर छन् । परिवारका सबै हासिखुसि दिनहरु काटिरहेकै बेला कोभिड-१९ भन्ने एक महामारी विश्वमा प्रवेश गर्दछ । सामाजिक व्यवस्था, मान तथा अस्थित्वलाई नै संकटमा पार्ने यो स्वास प्रस्वास सम्बन्धि रोग लाखौको ज्यान लिदै मात्र छैन यसको उत्पत्तिको कारण र औषधि समेत पत्ता लाग्न सकेको छैन । प्रकोपले गर्दा विद्यालय, महाविद्यालयहरु बन्द भए । कल कारखाना, बजार र मनोरन्जनका स्थलहरु संगसंगै टोल गाउका बाटा-गल्ली बन्द रहे । दैनिक उपभोग्य सामाग्री किनमेल गर्न समेत समय तोकिएको र आफन्त तथा साथिहरुसंग सजिलै कुराकानी नगर्ने, सामाअजक दुरि कायम गर्न भनियो । बन्दाबन्दिको अवस्थामा रहेको बेला जनमानसमा बिभिन्न समस्या संगसंगै मनोसामाजिक समस्या पनि देखा परेको छ । मानिसहरु डराउने, आत्तिने, विषादमा जाने, तथा सामाजिक कष्टको महशुस गरिरहेका छन् । यो लेखमा यस्ता समस्याहरुको समाधानका उपायहरुमा प्रकाश पारिएको छ । साथै भविश्यमा यस बारे पर्न जाने असरहरुलाई न्युनिकरण गर्न बिभिन्न निकायहरुले अपनाउनु पर्ने पाईलाहरुलाई पनि यहा उल्लेख गरिएको छ । सम्बन्ध व्यवस्थापन, संव्यग नियन्त्रण, ध्यान तथा शारिरीक व्यायामले व्याधि नियन्त्रणमा पार्न सक्ने असर बारे पनि उल्लेख गरिएको छ ।

---

* Corresponding author, E-mail: sharmila.psychology@gmail.com; Tel.: +977- 9851126707

1. Introduction

Nepal is a peaceful country in south Asia. Majority of families in cities belong to middle class with limited resources. The major resource they have is social capital and they share most of the emotions with each other with ever present smiles on their faces. Rural life still follows agriculture as major course of income. Since the last couple of years, the concept of entrepreneurial practices has been seeded among youths. The government statistics shows millions of skilled/unskilled youths have gone out of the country to try their luck. Eventually, their combined income has been providing the major source of national income in the last couple of decades in the form of remittance. Female members in families have started working out of home holding double responsibility at home and work. Social bond is so strong that they can understand each other's emotions without verbal communication. If one in society is affected with health/wealth/emotions, the other easily gets it. Whether it is common cold or the pandemic like Influenza, Dengue or COVID-19, people demonstrate similar intensity of social and psychological strength to fight with. Nepali society is facing a pandemic called COVID-19 together at present.

The world Health Organization (WHO) defines a pandemic as "a worldwide spread of a new disease", a dangerous disease that infects many people at a time. Earlier, Nepali society faced many pandemics like Smallpox, Influenza, Cholera and in recent years Dengue. People have lost their loved ones, friends and family members to unknown enemy. Like many others across the world, Nepali society is also facing the cruel virus called 'Novel Coronavirus'. From December 2019, when it started in the neighboring country China, it has already claimed more than four hundred thousand lives around the world. Pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, China was first reported to WHO Country Office in China on 31 December 2019. China confirmed human-to-human transmission of the novel Coronavirus on 20 January, 2020. The outbreak was declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January, 2020. On 11 February 2020, WHO announced the name for the coronavirus disease as COVID-19. All the preventive and protective measures along with isolation of families and shorter or longer lockdowns has been announced all over the world. In Nepal, 'Lockdown' has been implemented by the national authority seriously for the period of worldwide infection

2. Symptoms of COVID-19

Most common symptoms of Coronavirus according to WHO are fever, dry cough and tiredness. According to the organization, less common symptoms of the disease are aches and pains, sore throat, diarrhea, conjunctivitis, headache, loss of taste or smell, rashes on skin or discoloration of fingers or toes. People with mild symptoms who are otherwise healthy should manage their symptoms with medicine suggested by the doctor. Symptoms are seen only after 5-6 days when someone is infected with the virus, however it can take up to 14 days. The disease is prevalent among individuals with chronic diseases and mostly in elderly people. Source of community infection is unknown till now. Infection is escalating and developed countries are found to have been the most affected.

The countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom have suffered the highest human death toll followed by major countries in Europe including the close neighbor- India. Infection rate in Nepal has not accelerated much since the government announced 'Lockdown' in time i.e. from March 25, 2020. So far, about 6500 individuals are reported 'positive' with Coronavirus. Total population is under stress of rapidly spreading 'Virus'. For many people, daily life is changed dramatically, and the 'normal' ways of life as we know them are suspended indefinitely.

3. Psycho-social effects of COVID-19

People of Nepal are showing psychological symptoms of COVID-19 collectively. People are quarantined in homes with very less possibility of mobility except for some emergency. Access to general stores is prohibited to maintain 'social distance'. People cannot visit their relatives and friends or go to parks, bars, theatres and shopping malls. They are told to wash their hands and wear masks to prevent disease. This situation is very new and unpleasant for Nepali society. Since the outbreak started from China and spread over to the USA and European countries, people are shocked and scared. As the citizens of an underdeveloped country and having observed the fate of even the strongest nations in the world, Nepalese people are unconvinced of the local authority in their ability to protect their wellbeing during the crisis. As a result, people are facing occupational crisis, economic problems, and psychological problems staying away from their work and growth. Some of these psychological effects can be seen as follows:

Fear (Phobia): COVID-19 is considered as the main source of fear at present for people who are cognitively conscious. They are fighting an

unknown enemy with unknown weapons used against their health. Doctors and scientists are not able to suggest the cure of the disease if they get infected. People are suspicious of even individuals who they are living with. Every piece of news they come across makes them fearful resulting into problems in sleeping, change in eating patterns (thinking more about the advantages and disadvantages of food they eat rather than enjoying it) and many others. Following the hygiene behavior 'excessively' such as washing hands time and again and cleaning the floor are some of the common activities displayed by people as fear reactions.

Denial: When there is no solution found, it is easier to deny the existence of the problem. People are heard to be saying "we are safe, we have numerous 'gods' to protect us". Some others claim their 'herbs' and 'spices' will protect them. This can be true in some cases of normal days but less applicable during grave pandemic situations. People are denying the possibility that everyone can get infected by the disease if exposed to virus. People in denial stage are seen roaming around the streets with less protective measures followed. Denial syndromes can be commonly observed among elderly people, seemingly primary target group of the virus.

Generalized anxiety: Due to the terror of disease, along with general public, even leaders and professional workers such as doctors, nurses and social workers are reported feeling anxious during their routine work and decision making processes. They say they have experienced excessive worry, lack of concentration, restlessness, fear of infection all the time and an obsession to be updated with news on television, radio or social media. Few others reported physical symptoms such as trouble sleeping, nightmares, irritation and bowel syndrome after the outbreak of the pandemic. Students are not able to concentrate in their studies. Increased cases of aggressiveness and irritability are being reported in 'lockdown' period. "Statistical analyses have indicated that certain groups are more vulnerable to anxiety, specifically, the females, self-employed people, never married ones and even some religious groups reported poor health and poor sleep" (Ahmad et al, 2020).

Dissociation: When one encounters unknown reality and feels helpless, a different self develops to face it. People tend to develop completely new personality patterns including skills that don't match their usual tasks. During this COVID-19 lockdown, people in town are performing new activities such as excessive physical workouts, farming/gardening, suddenly developing high level

cooking skills, writing poems, etc. These activities keep them away from the distressing thought of sad reality and help them avoid it at least for shorter time. This way, people also feel disconnected with the world around them. Staying home and work-from-home have also created confusion between professional and personal identity for people.

Panic reactions: People facing panic reactions of the pandemic complain of chest pain, numb limbs, excessive sweating, weakness, feeling fear of death and other psychosomatic symptoms. It occurs when people cannot find solution to sudden crisis. Prolonged panic reaction may lead to cardiac arrest and kidney problems in near future.

Social distress: When we feel severely threatened, it's our survival-self that rushes to our defense-reactively, impulsively, haphazardly and often counter-productively. During this pandemic, symptoms of social distress are prevalent among people. The major cause of the distress does not know the progression of disease and undiscovered treatment method. As a result of social distress, people are reluctant to seek help from local authority, even from doctors and local/political leaders. They follow rules not rule makers. They accept isolation rather than attending social awareness activities or campaigns. As a result of distrust to authority, people tend to speak against it when any opportunity occurs. In this kind of situation, people care less about the result of their reactions. We observed this sort of social distress in people within the first two weeks of the 'lockdown' period than the weeks that followed.

Depression: More than 200 Nepalese have lost their lives during pandemic abroad. This has caused hopelessness and helplessness among relatives, friends and family members dependent on income of members out of country. People could not even help those who lost lives during their last days. Many students planning to go abroad for their further studies have been disheartened. People having jobs are feeling insecure. Many people have already lost their jobs due to the crisis and many others are in the fear of losing them. Consequently, loss of interest in daily life, disturbed appetites, or weight changes, change in sleep pattern, causeless anger, loss of energy, unexplained aches and pain (generally headache) are the clearly observable symptoms of depression. Many are depressed because they are not able to feed their family. Children are seeking for their usual playground and friends to be with. House-wives are depressed because their work pressure has doubled. Working women are having simultaneously two roles to perform: of home and office. There are many people who have no faith in

city life and have gone back to their rural villages due to hopelessness.

People in depression are likely to self-harm or take their own lives if they have to face prolonged tainted situation. This has been proven by the rising number of suicide in the country during the pandemic.

4. Positive effect of pandemic: People living in urban areas were so much mechanized with personal business that they had lost the art of sharing feelings with each other in rush to earn a better life. Due to pandemic, they have been able to talk to and connect with neighborhood. They have time to understand the importance of people around and share what they come to know from various sources. Mentally healthy people are more connected socially by sharing their feelings. This lockdown has brought them together and revived their instincts.

5. Psychological effect in future: COVID-19 has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives worldwide, largely from developed countries considered role models of the world in terms of health care, politics and diplomacy. When their health care system goes down, the systems of other countries go clueless. Similar phenomena occur with social authority figures including the head of the family as a result of inability to fulfill healthcare solution during need. People become self-centered as they have experienced life's uncertainty. Without proper psychological support, social chaos can upswing to the level of anarchy. This will raise challenges to national planners, economists and lawmakers. All such after-effects of crisis need to be handled properly and timely, so that it becomes less harmful and helps in rapid normalization of society.

6. Preventive measures of psycho-social effects

Medical professionals (Doctors, Nurses and Medical helpers) are playing heroic roles to fight coronavirus. Survivors' memories are full of helpful revival skills of medical personnel.

Schools and colleges can play a major role to increase or decrease the level of psycho-social unity of society in this crisis. A child can reflect positivity in family induced through educational institutions. Small assurance to students via phone call, text message, or sharing relevant information can bring huge differences in family. Students' teaching-learning activities have been paused for the time being. Capable schools and colleges have started online classes with paid internet facilities. Students of public schools from remote areas are made to stay home merely with or without television and social media. So, it is necessary to introduce something productive for all the students by ministry of education.

In spite of the existing negative image of **politicians**, people still expect a lot from them. So, politicians, at this time, can play the role of sympathetic leaders to reduce the after effects of pandemic. They should take stand for their voters in this crisis time for psycho-social ease by possible help being with them instead of raising political issues only. People are not very happy for leadership role played by political leaders at the time.

Local government can play the role of an honest public communicator. They should transparently disseminate the fact about the crisis to the public; their ability and limitations to help people in need. People should not have false hope from authority. When there is no expectation, no hopelessness occurs. This will be less painful than no communication at all from concerned authority.

Along with politicians and local government, **Social workers** are quite active these days distributing food to needy people. These activities reduces the feeling of left out in crisis among the general public.

Psychologists too, during this pandemic, are found helping people to deal with psychological problems. They are working through publications, telephone-counselling, psychotherapy, group online sessions etc. to reduce symptoms in people. General population, not aware of symptoms, is still suffering from anxiety, panic attacks and depression. Many of them take these symptoms as physical problem and few are scaring them as symptoms of corona virus itself as they are similar to it in many ways, such as chest pain and uneasiness in breathing.

Government can play a major role in spreading awareness among the general public.

7. Curative measures of psychological effect

COVID-19 infected people are being treated with available resources. Those who are affected mentally and socially should be treated in a way such that physical and social problems can be prevented at present or in future. Medical persons are treating physical symptoms of infections and psychologists are reducing symptoms of above mentioned psycho-social problems using different methods. Psycho-social support provided to the service seekers should include the following measures:

Emotional management: Negative emotions are the major cause of all kinds of psycho-social

problems. People should be aware of the reality of life. They should learn to manage emotions according to situation. Birth and death are inevitable facts of life. One needs to observe and accept emotions, rather than being overwhelmed by them. Naming our feelings makes it more distant, especially when they're intensely negative. This skill will be very helpful in times of crisis. We need to live our life to the fullest without letting negative emotions disturb us. The saying 'Be yourself' and 'no one can replace you, so do positivity' will help deal with the existing situation well. Uncertainty is natural; one can develop skill to manage it or managed by it. If emotions are not managed, they will manage in own way, not pleasant all the times. Sharing may produce positivity than crying and annoying.

Relationship management: This social isolation has taught us to stay close without being physically close to each other. People need to manage their relationship so that they can understand each other's adjustment during hardships. Management of stress is compatible and contagious. Resilient to the situation helps to adjust and be open minded. If people cannot see relatives and friends, they can connect with them through telephone, social media, e-mails etc. A call a day to one person can save a relationship. The more people get connected, the better they feel.

Relaxation exercises: One cannot fight with COVID-19 but confront its negative consequences and prepare for better adjustment. During lockdown, 30 minutes of workout, laughing sessions, breathing exercises, and jumping can positively impact physical and mental health. Exercises also help calm you, regardless of what's going on around. Another simple and powerful way to be calm is breathing exercise. When one cannot do longer workouts and exercises, few minutes of breathing exercises (like inhaling on count of four through the nose and exhaling on count of eight slowly through the mouth) can be beneficial. This process helps clear bloodstream and calm stress hormone. Movement inside the house such as running upstairs and downstairs is also helpful to reduce stress and quiet the body and mind.

Meditation: Mindfulness (internal as well as eternal peace of mind) is important to reduce stress. People who meditate can observe their internal self and watch eternal feelings. Free time can be utilized to learn basic meditation at home. Ten minutes can work as a magic sparkle in isolated body with multiple thought.

COVID-19 is a disease. Mental resilience as well as immunity is equally necessary to deal with the Coronavirus. Many are infected by virus, but much more are affected mentally. Death toll of Coronavirus is way less than the people recovered from it. Fear of death is affecting people more than the infection of the disease. However, the psychological effects can be lessened by using proper psycho-social support method.

References

Ahmad A, Rahman I, Agarwal M. Factors influencing mental health during COVID-19 Outbreak: An Exploratory Survey Among Indian Population. medRxiv. 2020 Jan 1. https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.03.20081380

Gupta S. Social distancing comes with psychological fallout. Accessed: 31-Mar-2020. https://www.sciencenews.org/article/coronavirus-covid-19-social-distancing-psychological-fallout

WHO. Coronavirus disease (COVID-2019) situation reports (2020, May10). https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports.