COUNTERING ANXIETY DURING COVID-19: Steps To Promote Wellbeing In The Educational Sphere

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"In these troubled, uncertain times, we don't need more command and control; we need better means to engage everyone's intelligence in solving challenges and crisis as they arise."

~Margaret J. Wheatley

Introduction

With the emergence and high prevalence of the disease COVID-19, the life of every individual across the globe has been affected in a drastic manner. Each one of us faced anxiety and stress of varying degrees due to the widespread and unknown nature of this pandemic. In the present times, when uncertainty is at its high, every sector is badly affected. People aren't sure as to when things will get back to the way they were earlier. In such times, when nothing and no one can be sure of, anxiety and stress seeps into every individual. The mental health of people in every corner of the world is disturbed. Our nation India has also witnessed its citizens getting stressed and anxious because of the ongoing times. People are finding it difficult to adapt to these new situations and make them their new normal. In a very recent study by Verma & Mishra (2020) it was found out that 25% of the population was depressed (moderate to severe level), 28% of the population showed moderate to extreme levels of anxiety, and similar levels of stress was observed in 11.6% of the respondents. This study presents a picture of the mental health conditions of the Indian population in times of COVID-19. Therefore, to prevent any more negative effects on mental health of people, and to help them in elevating their wellbeing, it is imperative to provide intervention at every level to help each and every individual to deal with the stress of uncertainty.

One such sector that is worst affected is the education sector- the students, teachers, as well as the parents of the students. COVID-19 has been declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 and since then schools and colleges have been closed. This has affected millions of students in India alone. As the learning couldn't be allowed to stay on halt for long, online teaching was adopted as an alternative till things get back to normal. With this new perspective and new learning mode, classroom education is now transformed into online education. This technologically advanced method has burdened students as well as the teachers. This has caused a total transformation of learning-teaching pattern.

The challenge of online teaching is more severe for kindergarten children and for the senior teachers. This population is facing major issues due to this shift in method of imparting and gaining knowledge. The data from National Sample Survey (2017-2018) reveals that only 23.8% of households in our country have access to internet. Such limited access to resources

again posits problems for students nationwide. Another problem with this new-age method of teaching and learning is that a lot of people do not find it user-friendly. It is difficult for a large section of people to learn and get accustomed to this technology-laden way, especially in such short span. All these pressures are not only hampering the education of students but is also affecting their physical as well as mental health. With the increased pressures, their wellbeing is deteriorating and thus calls for immediate attention. There isn't any surety as to when the schools and colleges will re-open and till when all of us will have to manage with these online platforms. As this has become the new normal, we need to think of measures to enhance and promote the wellbeing in present times.

In the present chapter, we'll understand how the uncertainty brought by COVID-19 has created problems in the educational sphere, for the students of all ages, their parents and for the teachers. Apart from this, we will also consider the ways that can be adopted by these people to manage their anxiety and stress and uplift their wellbeing. The major focus will be on promoting wellbeing in these hard times.

Impact on Students

With the schools, colleges and other educational institutions being shut, around 320 million students' learning process has come to a standstill. In the times of COVID-19, students and the healthcare professionals are the ones that seem to be experiencing stress, anxiety and depression than any other line of work (Rehman et al., 2020). With so many futures at stake, government had to take an initiative to continue the education of students. Online classes came as a rescue in the educational domain. But just like every other thing, the online teaching-learning process too has its pros and cons. Some of the benefits of online classes for students are:

- Ensuring education in times when students cannot go to educational institutions.
- Comfort of home.
- Travel time is saved.

Like said earlier, every coin has two sides. Though there are advantages of online classes, these classes also have numerous disadvantages, like-

- Increased screen time
- Negative effect on physical health (fatigue, eye strain, headache, body ache, spinal issues, etc.)
- Reduced physical activity.
- Reduced interactions (with friends, teachers).
- Impact on mental health (anxiety, stress, mental fatigue, decreased concentration, decreased attention, etc.)
- Students feel saturated easily as compared to when attending physical classes.
- Less clarity of concepts.
- Increased irritability.

These concerns are not just of middle and high school children or college students, but even of kindergarten and junior students. There is a section of students which was supposed to start their school journey in this year, but they could not due to this pandemic. Their concept of school, classes, teachers, classmates is totally different from what it should be. They tend to develop a notion that this is what school and classes looks like, that classes happen at the comfort of one's home with teacher being on the other side of the screen of mobile or laptop or computer. Their schema related to school is entirely different from that of others, and when these children will have to go to school later on, they will have to go through a major shift in their schema. This will in turn present them with a lot of challenges and adaptation issues.

The other older students from middle and high school and colleges miss playing and spending time with their friends and being a part of school/college activities, hanging out with friends. They seem to like the part where they aren't required to go to their school/colleges and can comfortably attend classes from their homes. But they all agree that these online classes aren't providing them the clarity of concept taught as it would have if they were attending physical classes in the presence of a teacher or professor. They feel more drained out as compared to earlier times, with reduced focus and clarity. They also end up feeling unproductive and helpless. All this has taken toll on their wellbeing which needs to be recovered to maintain healthy functioning of the students who are the future of the country.

Promoting Wellbeing of Students

This sudden change in the learning environment of children has presented them with various difficulties (as discussed above). To make sure that students aren't overburdened with the new pressures that the lockdown has brought, it has become important to direct our attention towards them and their mental health conditions. In a survey, it was found out that 51% of the participant students had higher stress than before, 39% feel lonelier now, and 38% reported that they are more concerned about their mental wellbeing since the times of COVID-19 (Schaffhauser, 2020).

Sitting in front of screens to attend online classes for long hours is a huge task. Apart from that, for junior, middle, secondary, and senior secondary school students they are then presented with classwork as well as homework which creates unnecessary burden on them making them irritable and tired all through the day. Like it is said, "all work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy.", so instead of teaching the younger kids on online platforms, the teachers should try to **engage them in activities** that are fun and knowledgeable (like **story-telling**, **who in the world**, etc.). Towards the end of classes, the kids can be asked to stand up and dance a little, this will **remove the fatigue** of class and fill them with energy and excitement, providing a positive end.

Students should also be encouraged to **spend time with their families** and discuss any negative or sad feelings that they are experiencing. Another step that can be taken is **measuring their wellbeing**, both subjective and psychological, once or twice in a month to find out if any student is going through disrupted health and wellbeing. This can be done with the help of various wellbeing scales that are available. Students of all age can be also asked to maintain a

gratitude diary where they are supposed to keep note of anything they are grateful for every day. They can also **note down any good thing that happened**, however small it maybe to reinforce their belief that in the times of despair as well, there exists goodness. Another activity they can indulge in is to pen down **what will they like to do** as things get back to normal. This will fill them with hope and boost their wellbeing.

At the professional front, there should be enough mental health professionals that are well-trained to deal with prevailing issues. Government should open up **helpline numbers** and emails, where students can reach out anytime they want and are provided with **guidance**, **support** and **solution**. Easily accessible online platforms should be there to enable students to post their issues and get help. These online platforms can also be a source of open discussions, where people having same issues can discuss freely and we all can help each other out. The youth is very active on online platforms, and so these measures will ensure that the targeted population (the students) is provided help immediately and in the comfort of their homes.

The parents should also understand that their children, whether young or adult, have also been affected in these unprecedented times. As parents, they should be able to provide their children enough space to release their stress. This can be done by providing them their **personal space** and also by being **available for communication**. They should talk with them, talk about the issues they are facing in the present times, about the disruption of their work. **Play** with them as you are the only people they've got as of now due to restrictions on going out. **Involve** your child in house activities but **don't force** them to be a part of it.

Impact on Teachers

With the shutting down of schools, colleges and other educational institutions, the teachers too faced extreme challenges and had to go through a lot of struggle. They had to experience a major shift in the teaching pattern in very little time. Majorly the teachers and professors come from a generation that isn't technologically advanced. They don't have the required expertise that is required when teaching in virtual classrooms. But they were asked to learn about online teaching, prepare lessons and activities that are compatible on online platforms, control students in these classrooms, and ensure proper learning. This overburdened the teachers, specially the ones that were elderly and were technologically challenged. It was definitely a task for them. This need to develop a new skill in such short span increased their stress and anxiety and caused their wellbeing to diminish.

Promoting Wellbeing of Teachers

A lot of emphasis is being placed on the mental health and wellbeing of students and numerous steps have also been takin in this direction. But amidst this noble step, what we have overlooked is the health of the educators. We need to understand that in order to ensure a good teaching-learning experience, the wellbeing of teachers should be given equal attention.

Some of the measures that our teachers and professors can adopt to lower their stress levels and enhance their wellbeing are:

- <u>Know your limits</u>: All of us have our limits that there is only so much we can do and there's no shame in it. Our efficiency decreases if we go beyond that level. Find out that level for yourself and work accordingly without feeling bad about it.
- <u>Organize your day</u>: Allot a fixed time duration to your roles and responsibilities. This will help you in not over-expenditure of time to a particular task. It will ensure that you don't tire yourself over one thing.
- <u>Keep variations</u>: The days on which there aren't class scheduled for you to take, engage yourself in some fun or leisure activity, something that gives you calm. It could be anything, reading a magazine/novel, penning down your thoughts and feelings, cooking your favourite meal, spending time with your family and friends (virtually), organizing your home, or any activity that takes away your stress and fills you with excitement and joy.
- <u>Collaborate</u>: You can hold a fun activity session/class with your students. You can share experiences of student life and ask them to share their experiences as well. This will not only uplift your mood, but also lighten the mood of students, thus, reducing their stress and pressures as well. Such sessions can also be organized by collaborating with your colleagues where you share moments of happiness and joy that you people have shared in the past. This will instantly make you feel lighter and stress-free.

Our teachers and professors have always been our well-wishers. Its time we think about them and about their health and wellbeing. The school/college management should understand that no one is perfect, and we all have our shortcomings. The educators are already burdened with the acquisition of online teaching skills, do not burden them with excessive workload.

With the routine of children affected due to the closing of schools for uncertain period of time, the life of parents is also affected. The effect is graver on parents who are working from home. They have to manage their work, the online classes of their children and the household chores, all at the same time. With so much increased pressure, their health definitely tends go downhill. The parents tend to have higher stress, pressures and frustration. As evident from the past researches, the attitude and behaviours of parents directly affect the behaviour and personality of children. Parental stress acts as a precursor to behavioural problems among children (Neece, Green & Baker, 2012). The more the parents are stressed about this lockdown, the more it affects their children and creates problems from them. The stress of children is mediated through their parents (Spinelli et al., 2020). They have to stay vigilant as the access to internet exposes children to the uncanny world of the internet and could create havoc if left unchecked. Another problem the parents are facing is that earlier when the kids went to school, the parents had that time to themselves and could complete their household work on time. But, now they have to sit with the children or keep checking them, which increases pressure of the household as well as the office work on them. At times this combined frustration and anger is released on children, which itself is a maladaptive behaviour.

Common Activities to Promote Wellbeing

Apart from the above-mentioned steps to avoid stress and enhance wellbeing, there are certain things that the students and teachers and the parents as well can keep in mind to make sure that they stay happy and healthy.

- **Worry Breaks**: We all are bombarded with information (out of which a lot of it false information) from the news houses and social media. Not just that, whomsoever we talk to, the talks about quarantine, lockdown and COVID-19 are always there. Due to this there is constant worry in our minds. We need to take break from this. Fix a time for talking about COVID-19 and take in information about it only during those fixed times. If you come across anything related to it at the time other than fixed for it, say to yourself that I will see, hear or think about it later when it's the time for it. This way you'll free your thoughts with worries of uncertainty.
- **Family Time**: Utilise this time when all of the family is at home. Talk and discuss about the collective memories as a family or you can talk about your individual memories as well. This will create a reconnect and strengthen the family bonds. The funny memories will give you laughter, the pleasant ones will make you happy, the sad or embarrassing ones will help you to reflect. This will take away your mind from the pressures of work, school, colleges and any such thing.
- **Meditation**: Meditation always brings calm to life and calmness is what we all need in the times of chaos like these.
- **Exercise**: Indulge in some light or rigorous physical exercise as per your body and abilities. This will fill you with energy and will keep you moving through the day. Exercise not only strengthens and improves your physique, but also plays a vital role in uplifting your mental health.
- **Indulge in Hobbies**: Engage in some hobby, like painting or doodling, gardening, story or poetry writing, cooking, or any activity that gives them a sense of pleasure and takes away their stress. One doesn't have to be pro at their hobby, they only need to distract their mind from the uncertainty. Such activities not only reduce the stress, but also enhance the wellbeing of an individual. When one indulges in activities that are enjoyable to him/her, it improves his/her physical as well as psychological functioning, like better sleep, blood pressure, BMI (Body Mass Index), increased positive affect, decreased negative affect and depression, and higher life satisfaction (Pressman et al., 2009).
- **Make a Bucketlist**: Sooner or later we will win over these unprecedented times and will be able to live our lives like we used to. So, prepare a list for the upcoming days, like places to go, people to visit, things to learn, or anything. This will fill you with hope and purpose, something that will definitely boost your wellbeing.
- **Learn**: At some point of our lives, we all have wanted to learn something, but could not go ahead with the idea due to paucity of time. Now's the time to fulfill those wishes and dreams. With everything available on online platforms, learn that new language, or art form, or cuisine, or any skill that you wanted to learn all along.

- **Keep a Diary**: One can also write down the thoughts that come to his/her mind, be it positive thoughts or negative. The diary can also be used to record experiences of the day. When a negative thought comes, write it down and then also mention how you worked on it. This way, you'll know that you are capable of taking care of the negative thoughts and that you won't let them harm your wellbeing. The diary can prove to be a measure to reflect and explore your self. So, the next time you feel low, you can open this diary motivate yourself, to strengthen the belief in yourself, that you have had rough days earlier as well, but you sailed through them. It can also help you in reliving the good and positive thoughts and experiences.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has affected the life of each one of us in different ways and in varying degrees. Some are happy that they no more have to attend schools/colleges/offices nd can work from their homes, while others have been feeling low because of the same reason, that they cannot go out. At some point of time, we all have felt low and stressed during this pandemic and wanted to do things as they were before we were hit by this disease. Such times aren't the first in history. If isn't for this worldwide uncertainty, we all have had uncertain times in our lives, where we had no idea what to do. None of us want any such pandemic again in future, but still we should all be prepared for the future crisis, if there is any.

Students are the future of every nation and teachers are the ones that help in their shaping. Changing times have changed the way education is being imparted and taken. With rapid changes in technology, there are chances that teaching-learning experience might change again with time. Students are the ones that take a country forward, and teachers help the students by preparing them for the future responsibilities. If we ensure them of good wellbeing, we can be assured that the nation is in good hands. In these times, we all need to stay together and be supportive of each other. With a balanced equation between teachers and students, any situation can be won.

With the steps discussed in the chapter, the students and the teachers can maintain their physical and mental health and their wellbeing as well. These steps would also help the members of educational sphere to cope with stress and anxiety of not just COVID-19, but any situations that bring uncertainty with them.

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