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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF LOCKDOWN AND QUARANTINE IN CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The pandemic of COVID-19, originated from China have swept across the whole globe within a very short span of time. Along with loss of physical health, countless casualties, adverse socio-economic impacts, this pandemic also knocks the psychological wellbeing of people. Lockdowns, curfews and quarantine are introduced as techniques to check the spread of transmission of virus, but have taken its toll specially on Children, as they are the most emotionally and psychologically vulnerable group to these havocs going. Psychological impacts of lockdown in children are discussed in this study. This study is an attempt to jot down the measures useful in maintaining the psychological balance of children at primary as well as secondary levels in lockdown. The study will be a leading light for all stakeholders of education to look into the academic and mental aspects of children.

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Introduction:-

Epidemics and pandemics alike other catastrophes have been a part of human history since time immemorial. However, the degree of reactions to pandemics differs from other calamities as it necessitates medication, separation, isolation and quarantine. COVID-19 emerged as a pandemic which have affected the population worldwide. In severe cases coronavirus yields enormous respiratory damage and then to death. The depth and breadth of this coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is similar to the ailment of 1918 influenza pandemic (Spanish Flu). In the abrupt milieu of the fire up of COVID-19 cases in Wuhan, other neighbouring nations to China have immediately started adopting thoughtful approach, e.g., Japan, Macau, South Korea, and Hong Kong had imposed some extent of lockdown and social distancing by mid of February, 2020. And as mostly every country started reporting rising number of casualties, more and more countries began to impose lockdowns and domestic and international travel restrictions and banned global meetings and events.

India have adapted lockdown, curfew and quarantine technique to minimise the transmission of virus since the very first case was reported. In view of rising number of cases, the Government of India have imposed nationwide lockdown on 25th March 2020 to break the transmission chain. With the implementation of lockdown, a large number of populations have started returning back to their native places and it was suspected that some of these individuals might have been exposed to the virus and may act as super-spreaders. It was nearly impossible to track them down, so in the advisory by Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare it was directed to place them under minimum 14 days of quarantine, either at the quarantine centres/facilities or at their respective homes.

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Meaning of Quarantine

Quarantine can be defined as “the separation and restriction on the movement of people, goods and animals who have potentially been exposed to a contagious disease, intended to prevent the transmission of the infectious agent and spread of disease.” The subjects are usually quarantined in their homes or in community-based facilities. In recent times of COVID-19 outbreak, multiple governments along with health and medical agencies have widely enacted the technique of quarantine as an endeavor to check the prompt stretch of coronavirus. Nationwide quarantine-like restrictions (curfews, shutdowns, shelter-in-place orders, stay-at-home orders, or lockdowns) were imposed in most of the countries.

Phases of Psychological Issues During COVID-19 Pandemic

Mental health issues logged during COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown guidelines can be classified into two main phases:

- a) **Acute Phase-** this phase lasted during the outbreak of pandemic, i.e., approximately 2-6 months. In the acute phase, the pandemic has casted immediate mental health impacts like fear, stress, anxiety, depression, denial, substance withdrawal, insomnia, suicidal thoughts, OCD and relapse of pre-existing mental health issues.
- b) **Long Term Phase-** this phase started after control of the pandemic outbreak, i.e., after 6 months. The mental health issues reported during this phase were depression, substance use, survivors’ guilt, setbacks of pre-existing mental problems, grief, somatisation disorders, and PTSD.

The major cause of psychological disturbances during both of these phases were the direct and indirect socio-economic impact of the pandemic. So, every frontline worker and health care professional should keep in mind that all the psychological issues coming up post-COVID-19 represents emotional outcomes of ordinary individuals in extra-ordinary situations and in majority (especially children) these symptoms are self-limiting because they are not taught and able to adapt to these restrictions and casualties.

Psychological Impacts of Lockdown and Quarantine on Children

The pandemic of COVID-19 has put on an extraordinary challenge for physical as well as mental health services across the world. It was found out in number of past studies that lockdown reportedly have negative psychological impacts on the people mainly like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), nervousness, fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, depression, stress, confusion, grief, emotional disturbances, low mood, irritability, insomnia etc. According to a “Rapid Review” published in *The Lancet* in relation to COVID-19 pandemic, “Stressors included longer quarantine duration, infection fears, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss, and stigma. Some researchers have suggested long-lasting effects. In situations where quarantine is deemed necessary, officials should quarantine individuals for no longer than required, provide a clear rationale for quarantine and information about protocols, and ensure sufficient supplies are provided. Appeals to altruism by reminding the public about the benefits of quarantine to wider society can be favourable.”

Researchers have comprehended that lockdown and quarantine may have adverse effects on psychology of children. The stress caused on home-quarantined children might be eased to some degree (Wang, 2020). However, children quarantined in hospitals or other facilities, separated from their family or caretakers or whose folks have died because of this disease might be more vulnerable to mental health problems because of the grief and fear of separation, loneliness or parental loss. For a child’s normal psychological growth and wellbeing, ‘companionship’ is very essential. Children find themselves in crisis with higher risk of psychiatric problems when separated from their caregivers (Norredam, et.al. 2018). Furthermore, it was also found out that quarantined children during pandemics have higher risk of developing adjustment disorders, acute stress disorders, and grief (Sprang & Silman, 2013). Parental loss or separation from parents during childhood might cause adverse effect on mental health entailing a higher risk of advancing psychosis and mood disorders and suicides in adulthood (Abel, et.al. 2014).

Every single individual including children, is trying to acknowledge these existing consuming circumstances due this global pandemic. Children are already at home since more than a year with schools been shut throughout the country. This have disrupted their regular schedules, leaving them with no viewpoints that when will it restart. Children are restricted to their homes and even separated from their family and friends, because either they were stuck somewhere or their parents were in lockdown. Lockdown and isolation may also lead to a wide array of psychological issues in children such as fear, anxiety, grief, worry, depression, existential crisis, identity crisis, loss of appetite, loss of sleep, acute stress disorder, and PTSD.

Children who have some pre-existing physical or mental problems were more vulnerable during these times, because the health care facility (various therapies, special schooling, psychotropic medication, etc.) they were undergoing pre-COVID may not be easily available after the pandemic. Lockdown have worsened the living state of children in abusive environments as well as those with special needs. The living condition of children in abusive environment and those with special needs might get worsened due to social isolation and lockdown. Potential fall in the parental psychological or physical health and their economic adversities have taken a toll on children's mental health during pandemic.

Substantiating Evidences for Psychological Impacts of Lockdown and Quarantine in Children

Few reported news articles from some renowned online news websites are presented to validate that how far this pandemic lockdown have knockout the psychological health of children in India:

1. According to a report published in The Indian Express on November 9, 2020, "A second-year student of Lady Shri Ram College for Women died by suicide last week at her hometown in Telangana, citing financial troubles in a purported suicide note. Her father, who is a motorcycle mechanic in Ranga Reddy district, said she was an IAS aspirant but the family was unable even to buy her a second-hand laptop to pursue online classes during the pandemic."
2. According to a report published in NDTV on September 15, 2011, "A 17-year-old girl in Tamil Nadu, a daily wagger's daughter, had taken NEET 2021 or the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test exam for admission to undergraduate medical courses and was worried she would not clear it. She had scored 84.9 per cent in Class 12. A 17-year-old student had died by suicide after taking NEET on Monday. This, a day after the state government passed a bill exempting the state from NEET and allowing admission to medical colleges in Tamil Nadu based on Class 12 marks."
3. According to a report published in Moneycontrol, September 3, 2020, "A Class 11 student in Tamil Nadu has died by suicide over not being able to deal with the pressure of online classes, which are running due to the coronavirus-induced lockdown. According to the report, he told his family about his struggle with online classes and that it was difficult for him to understand lessons."
4. According to a report published in World ASIA, July 20, 2020, "Along with the wrong turn that the pandemic has taken, so have suicides in the state, with each day bringing new reports of suicides, many of them reportedly committed under mental stress caused by the pandemic. What is even more alarming is that the state has witnessed as many as 66 cases of suicides by children during the lockdown period."

These news articles and statistics are more than alarming and hence it became the need of the hour to study the psychological impacts of lockdown and quarantine in children.

Measures to Deal with Psychological Issues in Children at Primary Level in Quarantine and Lockdown

It was observed in India that quarantined children and adolescents experience more psychological distress in comparison with non-quarantined children and adolescents, and the most commonly experienced feelings were Worry (68.59%), Helplessness (66.11%), and Fear (61.98%) (Saurabh & Ranjan, 2020). The following measures were collected from different guidelines and advisories to gear the psychological issues of children at primary level during lockdown period:

1. Children explicitly have some fears related to lockdown because of the constant news all over the news and social media. They should be provided updated and clear-cut information in age-appropriate language regarding to pandemic in order to reduce the overstated threat.
2. The quarantine period for primary level children should be kept as short as possible, as over extension of this period may lead to frustration and demoralisation.
3. Children's queries regarding lockdown measures should be answered properly and honestly in a balanced way to avoid panic and anxiety.
4. Children shouldn't be excessively exposed to fear mongering or alarming information while they are alone under lockdown.
5. No false promises should be made to children.
6. It should be discussed that what to do if anyone gets infected in the family and how to maintain social distancing with them.
7. During lockdown a new routine should be followed up including academic work, play, recreational activities, physical exercises, interactive session with peers and relatives, meals, bedtime, as well as some family time too. But this should be made collaboratively, shouldn't be rigid and changed when needed.

8. This lockdown time should be as an opportunity to reconnect with the folks and parents should try to make strong bonds with the children.
9. In order to maintain the social attachments during lockdown, access to family and friends should be provided through mobile phones and social networks.

Measures to Deal with Psychological Issues in Children at Secondary Level in Quarantine and Lockdown

The following measures were collected from different guidelines and advisories to gear the psychological issues of children at secondary level during lockdown period:

1. The feeling of boredom, loneliness, sadness, guilt, stress, confusion, grief, loss of personal freedom during lockdown and pandemic should be acknowledged and parents should act as anxiety barometers for their children.
2. Parents should notice that is there any kind of behavioural or emotional deviations in their children, as usually these changes are very subtle to be noticed. If any significant distress is observed, parents should seek help of mental health professionals.
3. If any pre-existing health problem is present, parents should try to reach their doctors via phone or online mode. Coping strategies should be taught to such children and parents shouldn't discontinue their treatment abruptly in lockdown.
4. Parents should try to ensure that their children have a balanced mental health by listening to them, acknowledging their problems, giving them hope and positivity, clarifying their doubts, providing emotional support and reassurance, and helping in resolving issues.
5. Excessive use of social medias and electronic gadgets like mobile, PlayStation, etc. could result in behavioural addiction. Parents should keep a check on children to ensure limited use of electronic gadgets.
6. If any significant loss of sleep or appetite, or physical aggression, or self-harm attempts, or suicidal ideas, or death wishes, or hopelessness, are observed in children, then immediate professional help should be sought by parents.
7. To reduce the risk of incubating of infection, the telepsychiatry platform should be opted for counselling those who are in hospital quarantine.
8. During hospital or facility quarantine, rumours and speculations should be avoided.
9. While in pandemic lockdown, all the physical symptoms are misinterpreted by children as indicator of the infection which might further turn into anxiety and later into other psychological issues. Therefore, accurate and unambiguous information about the rationale and contamination about lockdown should be provided.
10. A balanced diet and physical activities and good hobbies should be inculcated in order keep children calm and sane.

So, it can be said that these measures tend to be very useful in maintaining the psychological health of children, as well as adults too in the lockdown period. The psychotropics should be used sparingly as most of the population may do psychologically well with following the simple ways described above. Everyone should be advised to look at reliable websites only for COVID-19 related information, such as the Centres for Disease Control (CDC), World Health Organisation (WHO), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW).

Conclusion:-

In the times of a raging pandemic, lockdowns, curfews, quarantine, isolation and social distancing could be psychologically stressful for a lot of individuals. However, some simple, efficient, and effective actions could be taken to maintain the psychological balance by having unambiguous information through a reliable and trustworthy source. The children and unaware population should be explained the logic of quarantining and social distancing. People should be encouraged to remain in touch with their acquaintances through virtual modes. Stigmas should be addressed properly and anyone having any kind of distress should be referred to a mental health professional.

COVID-19 is a very big problem for a parent, or a health care professional to solve individually on their own. Since children are at home most of the with their parents, the parents should try to be the required emotional and mental support for them, and should never hesitate to consult professional mental health care for their children if needed. But, for parents who are struggling with the basic needs of life in lockdown, demanding them to build their child's schedule is unfeasible. However, some of these principles could be utilized whenever possible. Given the true picture of the country and living condition of people, social distancing itself may be impractical. To manage distress among children in lockdown, parents' psychological health has to be attended first. As we know that this is very hard on all of us with no exact remedy, but some of these simple measures may be helpful.

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