

Enhancing the Psychological Well-Being of Frontline Essential Service Providers of COVID-19

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Calamities, natural or manmade, are the ultimate test of human resilience, and the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 is no different. It has brought to the forefront challenges of unprecedented scale and severity that have overwhelmed public health systems across the world and left those on the frontlines scrambling for support. These frontliners are dominated by two cohorts of professionals who have stood out for going above and beyond the call of duty: health care workers and police personnel. Like the masses, even they were not mentally prepared for stepping into the crisis against the invisible perpetrator. From being at the helm of hospitals and hotspots to enforce the stringent lockdown measures to helping distressed citizens while maintaining law and order, these health workers and cops have been recognized as the sentinels of succor for the virus-wary, emotionally charged and phobia-stricken people forced to stay indoors. They have risen to the occasion at the risk of their own safety and that of their families. Underscoring the risks of pandemic for those dealing with up close is the fact that scores of health professionals and cops were infected with COVID-19 while on active duty. In the Indian context, much of their efforts were aimed as much at maintaining peace and safety as making the home-bound citizens' lives largely hassle free. That, in turn, led to better adherence and low resistance to an array of restrictions put out to check the virus' spread and molded the public to embrace the "new normal." Underlining these imperatives, an online pan-India study, conducted in the first 10 days of the lockdown, delved into the psychosocial impact of COVID-19 and coping strategies. It emerged that though the respondents felt stress, anxiety, and insecurity over the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and livelihoods, yet they effectively handled the disruption by spending time and bonding with their family (96%), enjoying nature (94%), practicing yoga (89%), meditating (78%), and performing physical exercise (80%). 95% individuals reported happiness and a good emotional, mental, and physical health.^{1,2}

But the essential service providers engrossed in doing an enormous task could not avail these coping strategies to vent out their anxieties and fears. Suddenly, the health emergency,

both life-threatening and life-altering, has put the usually "taken-for-granted" medical professionals and policemen to the forefront.³ The pandemic is far from over anywhere in the world. The UN said "a long-term upsurge in the number and severity of mental health problems is likely".⁴ In other words, the disease is here to stay, at least till the vaccine is invented and is made readily available. Eventually, the virus will be vanquished, but its psychological bane is likely to linger much longer. It is hard to map out the extent of the pandemic's impact on mental health, and still harder to treat its manifestations, both short term and long term.

The most vulnerable to the psychoemotional brunt of the response efforts, of course, are the COVID-19 frontline essential service providers. The literature is replete with longitudinal studies on the psychological toll of wars, long-running violent conflicts, and disasters. In the same vein, the corona virus frontliners might also show up post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression during or after their active duty and may need psychological help. The inherent resilience of citizens has made them mentally strong to accept the critical situation and make best efforts to protect themselves and their loved ones. This has, to some extent, taken the burden off the shoulders of the essential service providers and the government, allowing them to focus on other community responsibilities during COVID-19.

Hope, optimism, trust in leaders, and commitment of essential service providers during COVID-19 has instilled confidence in citizens. The positive attitude of society as a whole has helped the essential service providers to deal effectively with the crisis, thus making India better placed as compared to some developed countries, where the death rate is much higher than others. However, scant attention has been paid to the psychological well-being of the frontline essential

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service providers who have been the sheet anchors in saving lives and bolstering a positive image of the country. That does not augur well for the most critical cogs in the corona-fighting machine.

That brings home an urgent need to first fathom the gravity of the psychological health of these corona warriors, and then devise strategies to enhance their well-being. This is crucial to adequately equip them for the long haul battle against COVID-19. It is time to design new training modules backed by scientific methods and data. Equally important will be a sharply focused awareness campaign that projects seeking psychological consultation as normal as medical consultation. Not only physically, essential service providers need to have a robust psychological health to overcome the negative impacts of the corona crisis. Cognitive-mindfulness, yoga, meditation, and positivism need to be relooked and promoted as strategies to enhance the psychological well-being of frontline essential service providers.

While the COVID-19 vaccine is still in the works, the robust human immunity is seen as an effective protector against the virus, and yoga and meditation could be a potential game-changer. These techniques have, for centuries in India, been known as a shield for stressors and ailments. Based on a body of evidence, yoga is now recognized and promoted all around the world over as therapeutic strategy for physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. As a complementary medicine, it is also an efficacious antidote to stress, anxiety, and depression.^{5,6}

The frontline essential service providers are the first responders in the battle against coronavirus. Their well-being is as crucial as emerging a winner.

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