

How COVID-19 is Effecting the Mental Health of Doctors and Nurses

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How COVID-19 is affecting the mental health of doctors and nurses?

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By Dr. Pankaj Gupta

COVID-19: If you are battling with anxiety and stress because of the pandemic, spare a minute to imagine how healthcare workers must be feeling. Doctors and nurses do not have the luxury of holding themselves up in their homes to protect themselves from the outbreak. They must get up every day and go to work knowing very well that they must expose themselves to risk. A lot of them have voluntarily separated themselves from their families to keep them safe.

COVID-19 and Healthcare workers

Not only do healthcare workers suffer the anxiety of caring for the sick while facing a shortage of PPE kits and changing medical protocols, but they also must forge a calm companionship with their partners and children. The level of stress they put themselves through daily is immense, and it should come as no surprise that their mental [health](#) is in jeopardy.

COVID-19: Healthcare professionals experiencing anxiety, depression

A large proportion of healthcare professionals are experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, insomnia, and psychological distress. Nurses report severe symptoms, which should not come as a surprise, as they often must engage in a lot of emotional labor, like reassuring patients while keeping their own emotions in check. Frontline healthcare workers in hotspots exhibit a higher degree of a psychological burden compared to ones further away from them.

Ensuring the safety and protection of medical professionals should be an integral part of the public health measures for addressing the outbreak. We need specialized interventions to promote the mental wellbeing of doctors and nurses who are exposed to COVID-positive patients, with a focus on frontline workers and nurses.

COVID-19: Doctors forced to make tough decisions

Doctors across the world are being forced to make difficult decisions like choosing which patients for ventilator access, a heart-breaking choice that may leave a lasting psychological impact. Doctors are trying to keep up, but the leadership is just as confused as the ground workers. They lack crucial information, face a shortage of essential equipment, and must battle public panic. The last one, especially, takes many forms, from gossip and social rejection to denial of essential services and physical assaults, all of which can compound their mental burden.

COVID-19: Stigma and support

It is not easy for healthcare professionals to admit to mental distress either. Even though burnout and depression are quite commonplace among doctors, the healthcare industry has done very little to provide them with institutional support so that they can seek out mental health treatment. If a doctor admits that they are undergoing treatment for a mental health condition, patients do not trust them to treat their condition. Our prevalent attitudes towards mental illness exacerbate the psychological distress faced by medical professionals.

However, the right kind of mental health support can help foster resilience, giving healthcare workers the ability and confidence to manage stressors in the future. It is essential to understand that expanding mental health services is an ongoing process. We need to address many factors, such as the nationwide shortage of mental health professionals and the regulatory hurdles that limit the offering of telemedical services. Teletherapy, virtual mental health services, and meditation apps have started to make inroads after the central government imposed the nationwide lockdown, and they should be leveraged to reach healthcare workers too.

In countries across the world, people under lockdown gathered at their balconies to applaud and cheer for healthcare workers who are putting their lives in line to save others. Social media posts are rife with people expressing their gratitude to healthcare workers. While these gestures can boost the morale to a certain extent, it is crucial to understand that hero-worship alone is not going to protect them from the mental anguish they face daily. Like soldiers returning from the war, it is going to take time for them to process everything they are going through and heal. Once the medical crisis comes to an end, we need to brace ourselves for a mental health crisis. Meditation and inner journey, mindfulness can play an important role in bringing the inner peace and restoring the 'restfulness' amidst this chaos.

(The author is President, IIHMR University, Jaipur. Views expressed are the author's own.)