

Psychological Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health of Students in Nigeria: The professional interventions

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Abstract

Nigerian students may encounter various degrees of mental health challenges as a result of the uncertainty surrounding the outbreak of COVID-19. This paper highlights the psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health. It also explored the history of the pandemic, the concept of mental health, preventive/control measure to reduce the spread of the infection, the psychological interventions for the treatment of mental health problems and also self-help strategies that can help in boosting mental health. The paper went further to recommend that there should be an awareness campaign for the students by the appropriate agencies in order to help those that are mentally ill and others to maintain psychological homeostasis during and after the pandemic.

Keywords: coronavirus, COVID-19, anxiety, mental, health

Introduction

Education is the most important foundation or building block which paves the future roadmap for an individual; but unfortunately the Nigerian education system has been bedevilled by several challenges, such as poor funding, examination malpractice, poor infrastructure, cultism, corruption etc. Recently, with an education system that is already on a fragile pedestal, the outbreak of COVID-19, which has led to the enactment of some public health measures by both state and federal government to slow the spread of corona virus such as social distancing, school closures, stay at home orders, has further crippled its activities and militated against its proper functioning to meet the set goals and global best practices. Though, it is necessary to prevent loss of life due to COVID-19, the disrupted routines, the potential for contracting a life-threatening disease and physical distancing, may be exacerbating pre-existing mental illness and expose many people including the students to experiencing situation that is linked to poor mental health.

As stated by Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, (NCDC, 2020), long term school closures besides disrupting students' education, also impact those that depend on school services such as Federal Government sponsored meal supply to children in schools, physical, social and mental health services, and may increase mental health issues among them, due to fewer opportunities to engage with peers. Feelings of

anxiety are increasingly common as people are fearful of their, or loved ones, falling sick and are uncertain of the consequences of the crisis (Sher, 2019). It is therefore imperative that the psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic be discussed for the students to be aware of the consequences on their mental health and understand how to boost mental health for a quality life.

Origin of COVID-19 pandemic

A novel strain of beta coronavirus, named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV-2-) was first detected in Hubei province, Wuhan, China in December, 2019 after the outbreak of pneumonia without a cause (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Basher & Siddique, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared it a public health emergency of international concern on 30th January, 2020; announced a name for the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on 11th February, 2020; and declared it a pandemic on 11th March, 2020 (WHO, 2020). It has since spread all over the globe. The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was confirmed by the Federal Ministry of Health on 27th February, 2020; the case was that of an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria and returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos on the 25th, February 2020. On the 9th March, 2020, a second case of the virus, a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian, was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State (NCDC, 2020).

SAR-COV-2, the agent of COVID-19 primarily spread by droplets, is easily transmissible and can spread through asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic individuals (WHO, 2020). It has a median incubation period of five to six days, a period of infectivity extending from two days before symptoms onset to two weeks after disease onset in severe cases. Coronavirus disease affects respiratory tract, commonly presenting symptoms such as fever, dry cough, with some patients presenting respiratory symptoms (sore throat, nasal congestion), malaise, headache, shortness of breath, loss of taste and smell. In severe cases, pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, blood clot, kidney failure and death may result (Hui, Azhar, Madani, Ntoumi, Kock, Dar, Ippolito, Mchugh, Memiah & Drosten, 2020).

The virus spreads easily from person to person among those in contact, spreads by respiratory droplets released when someone with the virus coughs, sneezes or talks. These droplets can be inhaled or lands in the mouth or nose of a person nearby, the virus can also spread if a person touches a surface with the virus on it and then touches his or her mouth nose, eyes (Wang, Tang & Wei, 2020). As at 31st May, 2020 the global figure stood at 6,028,135 for confirmed cases and 368,944 deaths while that of Nigeria had risen to 9855 for confirmed cases and 273 deaths. So, COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as a global health calamity that has taken a significant a toll on people the world over.

Concept of mental health

Mental health, according WHO (2019), is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. It is cognitive, behavioural and emotional well-being; it is all about how people think,

feel and behave. Individual's mental health can affect daily living, personal routine, relationship and physical health. Poor mental health is associated with rapid social change, stressful work conditions, social exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle, anxiety, depression and stress. Mental health includes subjective well-being, perceived self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, inter-generational dependence and self-actualization of one's intellectual and emotional potential, among others. According to Njoku (2017), mental health problems includes anxiety and panic attacks, bipolar disorder, depression, eating disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychosis, schizophrenia, suicidal feeling etc.

Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that can impact on students' mental health as a result of physical/social distancing and isolation measures, closure of schools/public places include the following:

i) **Anxiety:** The coronavirus causing COVID-19 understandably makes most people anxious. Anxiety, according to Bergstrom and Meacham (2016), is a maladaptive behaviour pattern that is dominated by excessive fear, worry and resentment that can adversely interfere with normal life activities. Everyone feels anxious at one time or the other. Sometimes, a little feeling of anxiety is necessary to give one a push and improve alertness. However, when anxiety becomes severe, it can be distressing and disabling.

ii) **Depression:** A functional and active human being, as reiterated by Njoku, Igbodor and Amalu (2020), experiences a swing of depressive mood at one point in life or the other as the struggle for survival continues on daily basis. The ability to overcome this mood swing and positively continue in daily task is a sign of good mental health. With coronavirus pandemic separating people, limiting interaction and exerting pressure on the economy, common anxiety and stress could tip into depression. Depression is a common mental health that presents with depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, decreased energy, feeling of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite and poor concentration (Olfson, Blanco & Marcus, 2016). Moreover, depression often comes with symptoms of anxiety. These problems can become chronic or recurrent and lead to substantial impairment in an individual's ability to take care of his everyday responsibilities. At its worst, depression can lead to suicide.

iii) **Stress:** Stress is among the important factors threatening mental health and individuals are faced with numerous social, cognitive and physiological stressors and experiencing varying degrees of stress in their everyday lives. Njoku and Omeire (2016) define stress as a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Accumulation of daily stress and occurrence of unpleasant life events that make one feel frustrated and nervous like social distancing, loss of loved ones, economic problem, closure of schools as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, would affect an individuals' physical and mental health and in the long term can lead to physical and mental health disorder such as anxiety and depression (Bhurga, Till & Sartorius, 2013). Stress is not always

bad. In the short term, it can help one overcome a challenge or dangerous situation but when stress is chronic and remains unchecked, it can raise blood pressure, suppress immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

iv) **Loneliness:** People who embrace solitude are more likely to adapt to current circumstances related to social distancing, given that it is not outside the normal realm of how they live. However, for those individuals who generally choose to be more social, a sudden need to be physically distant from others can lead to feelings of emotional distance, loneliness and isolation. There is increasing evidence that lonely individuals feel less healthy, have higher risk of hypertension and high blood sugar. Furthermore, when loneliness goes unaddressed over a long term, it can affect physical well-being and lead to mental health problems such as psychosis, suicide and depression (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris & Stephenson, 2015). Loneliness is also associated with increased morbidity and mortality risk and lower capacity for self-regulation. As a consequence, lower self-regulation goes along with worsened lifestyle. Lonely individuals are less physically active, are more often affected by alcohol abuse and are more often obese than non-lonely persons (Richard, Rohrmann, Vandeleur, Schmid, Berthi & Eicholzer, 2017).

v) **Insomnia:** Sleep reduces inflammation, stress and the risk of depression, improves cognitive function, helps the body repair itself and ward off illness (Goran, Micheline & Hemels, 2017). But because of the pandemic that has led to increased anxiety level, elevated stress, overload of information, inconsistent bed times and wake times, loss of day time structure, the body arousal system can be elevated triggering insomnia (Van Someren, Cirelli, Dijk, Van Cauter, Schwartz & Chee, 2015).

vi) **Fear:** Fear is a natural, powerful and primitive emotion that is adaptive and critical for survival when it is short-lived, but can lead to mental health conditions such as social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobia and post-traumatic stress disorder when chronic (Quirk, 2017). It involves a universal biochemical response as well as a high individual emotional response to a definite threat. Fear about COVID-19 can take an emotional toll especially for those already living with an anxiety disorder. When circumstances are out an individual's control, it is easy to become overwhelmed by fear and negative emotions. One may think that bottling up how he feels, trying to put on a brave face or forcing himself to be positive will provide the best outcome (Carleton, 2016), but denying or suppressing your emotions will only increase stress and anxiety and make one more vulnerable to depression.

vii) **Suicide:** People feel suicidal when life has become too difficult or hopeless as a result of symptoms of a mental health problem or when someone experiences intrusive thought about suicide or hearing voices which instruct them to take their lives. Anxiety, distress and uncertainty may trigger suicidal ideation and suicide attempt in individuals with psychiatric disorder and in low resilient individuals with psychiatric diagnoses (Sher, 2019).

Prevention/control of COVID-19

There is currently no vaccine for COVID-19, and as with other respiratory problems, the public health measures, according to WHO (2020), to reduce the spread of COVID-19 include:

- Staying home when sick
- Covering mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing, then properly disposing the used tissue immediately
- Washing hands often with soap and water, or cleaning with alcohol-based sanitizer
- Cleaning frequently touched surfaces and objects
- Maintaining at least one metre distance with people coughing or sneezing.
- Refrain from smoking and other activities that weaken the lungs
- Practice physical distancing by avoiding unnecessary travel and staying away from large groups of people

Psychological interventions for mental health problems

Psychological interventions are activities used to modify behaviour, emotional state or feelings. Psychotherapy is most common application used for the treatment of mental health disorder. The ultimate goal behind these interventions is not only to alleviate symptoms but also to target the root cause of mental disorder. Psychological interventions can also be used to promote good mental health in order to prevent mental disorders. In other words, it can improve quality of life even when mental illness is not present. Psychological interventions include:

a) **Eye Movement Desensitization and Re-processing (EMDR):** This therapy, according to WHO (2013), is based on the idea that negative thoughts, feelings and behaviour are the result of unprocessed memories. In this, the patient being treated is asked to recall distressing images, the therapist then directs the patient in one type of bilateral sensory inputs such as side-side eye movement or hand tapping. The treatment involves standardized procedures that include focusing simultaneously on (a) spontaneous association of traumatic images, thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations (b) bilateral simulation that is most commonly in the form of repeated eye movement. The therapy is for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

b) **Brief Behavioural Activation (BBA):** This is an intervention that is used to treat depression. It is based on the idea that by doing more activities, people can feel better; when going through the treatment, the person will be encouraged to think about past/current activities and from a checklists, the patient chooses which category that these activities fall into. The therapist encourages the person to schedule a balance of activities, to record the activities then the therapist uses the record during each session to monitor progress and trouble-shoot any issue (Courtney & Stephen, 2013).

c) **Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET):** This is a treatment for survivors of multiple traumatic events who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In NET, the patient, with the assistance of the therapist, constructs a chronological narrative of his life story with focus on the traumatic experiences. Fragmented reports of the traumatic experiences will be transformed into a coherent narrative. The therapist is expected to be empathic in understanding, be an active listener, congruent and have unconditional positive regard (Robjant & Fazel, 2010). For traumatic experience, the therapist asks in detail for emotion, cognitions, sensory information, physiological responses and probes for respective observations. The

patient is then encouraged to relive these emotions while narrating without losing the connection.

d) **Common Element Treatment Approach (CETA):** This a cognitive behavioural approach that contains eight different elements covered in modules. CETA has been shown to help with posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression in people affected by traumatic experience. Element selection order and how many sessions per element are based on the symptoms. The common element in CETA, besides safety and psycho education, are relaxation, cognitive coping, exposure-trauma memories, exposure-live cognitive restructuring, behavioural activation and problem solving (Murray, Dorsey, Haroz, Lee, Alsiary, Haydary, Weiss & Bolton, 2015).

e) **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is a short-term treatment that aims to change unhelpful patterns of thinking or behaviour that can contribute to maintaining or worsening various mental or physical health problems. The therapy employs a range of therapeutic techniques that aim to change people's distressing emotions (Blane, Williams, Morrison, Wilson & Merger, 2013). This approach is effective for a range of anxiety disorder. In cognitive therapy, the therapist helps the patient to identify and modify excessively negative cognitions (thoughts and beliefs) that lead to disturbing emotions and impaired functions.

Self- help strategies: Self-help strategies and tips that can help students boost their moods, build resilience and strengthen their mental health are as follows:

(i) **Alcohol and drug usage:** Sometimes people use alcohol and other drugs to self-medicate but in reality, alcohol and other drugs only aggravate problems. According to Green, Bratherg and Finnell (2020), excessive alcohol intake and drug use can weaken the immune system and put stress on the body's cardiovascular and respiratory systems and may increase susceptibility to COVID-19 as well as its complications.

(ii) **Sufficient sleep:** Sleep is important for physical and mental health. Sleep helps to regulate the chemical in the brain that transmit information. Good sleep is important for various aspect of brain functioning such as cognition, concentration, productivity; while sleep deprivation can lead to anxiety, stress and depression. Researchers believe that lack of sleep contributes to high rate of depression in college students (Amalu & Ntamu, 2018)

(iii) **Self-esteem:** This is the overall opinion about oneself, his abilities and limitations. Healthy self-esteem makes someone feels good and values self as deserving the respect of others while low self-esteem may lead to less value on one's opinion and ideas which may subsequently lead to anxiety and depression. Engaging in hobbies and favourite projects can help an individual build confidence and self-esteem (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma & Nanne, 2004).

(iv) **Social connectedness:** This is personal sense of belonging to a group, family or community. It is about the relationship people have with each other and their engagement with the broader community. Feeling socially connected especially in increasingly isolated world is a key driver of physical health, mental health, well-being and resilience. It also protects against anxiety and depression. Socially

connected people are happier, healthier and are better able to take charge of their lives and finds solutions to the problems they are facing.

(iv) **Exercise:** The mind and the body are intrinsically linked. Improved physical health leads to greater mental and emotional well-being. Physical activity also releases endorphins, powerful chemicals that lift an individual's mood and provide added energy. Regular exercise or activity can have a major impact on mental and emotional health problem, relieve stress, improve memory, self-confidence, increase brain power and help one to sleep better. It is also linked to reduced heart disease, obesity, blood sugar fluctuations, cardiovascular disease and cancer (Elmagd, 2016). It is good to exercise daily.

(v) **Seek information:** It is important for individuals to be aware of the latest information on the pandemic but a limit should be set for news and social media. This is because much time on social media about the pandemic may increase worry and level of anxiety. The information needed should be from trustworthy and reliable source such as WHO website.

(vi) **Stress management:** Stress can take a toll on mental and emotional health, so it is important to keep it under control by knowing what triggers stress; how to cope is key to maintaining good mental health. While not all stressors can be avoided, stress management strategies such as making leisure time a priority, and relaxation practice can help bring things back into balance (Onwubiko, 2016).

(vii) **Nutritious diet:** Diet is as important to mental health as it is to physical health. A healthy diet is protective and an unhealthy diet is a risk factor for depression and anxiety (Popkin, Adair & Ng, 2012). Eating a nutritious diet helps keep a healthy body weight and reduces the risk of developing some chronic diseases. Stressed or anxious individuals should limit the intake of caffeine as this can make one feel more anxious and jittery.

Conclusion and recommendations

COVID-19 pandemic has greatly increased morbidity and mortality over a wide geographic area and has caused significant disruption in mental health and psychological well-being of individuals. There is therefore every need for an awareness campaign for the students who are mentally ill and others by the appropriate agencies in order to help them maintain psychological homeostasis during and after the pandemic.

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