

Not the Disease, but Fear Kills: A Lived Experience of a COVID 19 Survivor

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“As a middle-aged man, involved in spiritual care of a Christian community, I thought I could handle the disease - Covid 19 better. But loneliness caused by isolation and the fear of unknown component of the disease process led me to depression”.

The outbreak of Covid 19 in Wuhan, which became a pandemic affecting more than 195,498,370 people [1], causes fear to any individual. When the whole world was looking at India, a developing country which is highly populated to see how the pandemic will affect, fear and anxiety became a part of the lives of all Indians. The mental health of the people was worsened by the lock down. Social quarantine of the migrants has caused enormous stress among them. This article is a reflection of the experience of a Covid 19 affected person which focuses on the emotional impact of the disease and how the individual coped the situation.

“Though I had counselled many during my career who were depressed, I did not realize that mental illness can affect me. I could feel the darkness penetrating into me. I became withdrawn, had no interest in food, hated rather feared health team members entering my room. Staying in an isolated room for 47 days, I thought I may leave the ward as a lifeless body or as a mentally ill person. But thanks to the untiring effort and concern of the health team members for their constant support and guidance. I became emotionally fit through the support and guidance by the professional crew”.

The words of Mr. X reveal the emotional trauma he underwent during the isolation for his disease. How did he manage to recover from his mental disturbance? According to him **Figure 1** depicts the interventions which encouraged him to recover from his depression.

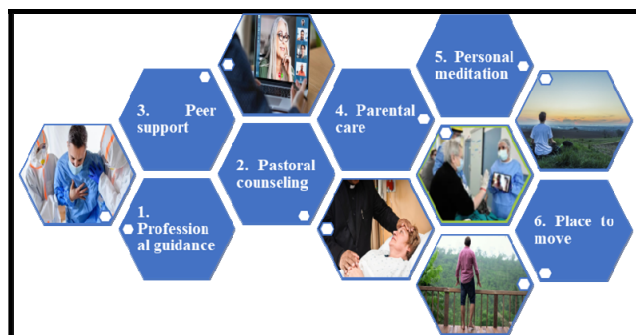


Figure 1. Interventions which encouraged the patient to recover from his depression.

1. Professional guidance

The team of Doctors, Nurses and Therapist are helpful in overcoming the depressed feelings. In the present world when Covid 19 is a social stigma, health care professionals work like warriors focused to revive an infected person. Their personal concern and care exhibited through frequent communication and explanation of the condition and words of encouragement throws light into the dark world of the patient. Providing a get well soon card, trying to entertain the patient according to their personal hobby and interest helps them to be engaged and keeps them diverted from the negative thoughts.

“A doctor, fully adorned with PPE sat next to me and held my hands to explain my condition. I felt God was beside me. It removed the fear of stigma associated with the disease. I

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felt I am still somebody to be respected and treated as a human being”.

2. Pastoral counselling

When we feel that the people around us fail us, the only source of help is the supreme power [1]. Spiritual counseling plays an important role in overcoming depressive thoughts. Words from the spiritual book or from the spiritual leaders boosts the morale of a person. Daily thoughts of encouragement and spiritual music provides peace of mind and enhances sleep.

“A Pastor from the religious department called every day to enquire how I am, he listened to me more than advising me. I felt my burden was eased whenever I spoke to him. Every day prayers were said four times in the Chapel which was audible in the room through the speaker, it helped me to gain strength from the Lord Almighty. Whenever feelings of loneliness popped the prayer helped me to reconnect with the God who is omniscient and omnipresent”.

3. Peer Support

Friends are forever is a known quote. No one can understand like a friend would do. An encouraging word or just the silent listening from a friend will help to soar high. The silent room disturbed by the fully covered health care person on and off creates a scary feeling. The unknown environment with no familiar faces, rather no human faces to see, leads to low feelings. A call or a chat from a friend shifts the focus of the patient from the gloomy atmosphere to a cheerful one.

“I felt very low and withdrawn for two weeks when I did not attend any call or involve in communication from my friends. But when I started talking to my best friend, I felt much relieved. I did not feel that the day was long”.

4. Parental Care

Support from family especially the spouse is very important. In Indian culture the close family relationship is valued the most. Any individual would always seek for love, affection, and care from the spouse and children. Support from family gives lot of confidence even during times of trials and failures. Presence of parents during difficult times have enabled children especially adolescents to cope with the stress of life. Literature reveals that family support reduces stress and anxiety among patients in critical care units. Patients with chronic illness such as stroke with physical deformities have positive attitude towards life if they have good family support. In a time of isolation or quarantine technologies are used to bridge the gap in the social distancing.

“Frequent calls from my wife made me to have a positive attitude towards the outcome of the disease. Encouragement from her made feel that I will soon become normal. Video

conference call with family members made me feel at home”.

5. Personal Meditation

Meditation is found to reduce psychological distress, symptoms of depression, anger, worry and anxiety. Studies reveal that meditation helps to cultivate greater attention, awareness and acceptance. Also, meditation lowers the heart rate, breathing and metabolic rates. The impact of personal meditation on both the psychological and physiological functioning of an individual leads to better living. The quality of life of an individual will be enhanced by regular personal meditation [2]. It relaxes the body, mind and the spirit. Empties the mind of the thoughts of fear, anxiety, hopelessness and fills with clarity.

6. Place to Move

Socialization keeps a person happy and contented. Having loved ones around makes a person feel more important or significant. Isolation restricts the movement within four walls. With no access to the external environment, it gives a feeling of being in a jail. Nature parks were invented to make animals feel in their own environment. When animals appreciate place to move around, how much more would a human being? Human beings always long for independence. The isolation of Covid 19 patient restricts them to four walls. The fear of transmission of the disease has led to strict isolation policies. The patient is confined to a small room with minimum facilities to prevent contamination of equipment which intern leads to transmission. This restriction causes enormous stress on the patient.

“I cried like a child, rejoicing, when I was permitted to walk in the terrace garden for 10 min. The thought of being able to see the external world brought joy to me. I felt like a bird let out of a cage”.

CONCLUSION

The reflections of the patient indicate the importance of providing psychological care to covid 19 patients. Especially those who have no symptoms and are isolated require more attention in terms of their emotional care. As these patients are prone for going into depression, health care professional need to focus on the psychological health of the individual as much as the physical symptoms are cared for. With advancement in technology patient should be provided access to friends and family members to prevent lonely feeling. Occupational therapist may be involved in the care of Covid survivors to ensure that patient is engaged. An activity schedule for the day will keep the patient occupied and provide diversion. The rooms of the isolation wards should be planned in such a way that the patient can have a view of the external environment. Glass windows or a glass door on the top of the room may provide a good view of the nature to help the patient feel relaxed. Neglecting the psychological aspect may lead to a decreased quality of life

of the patient and may affect their coping and early resuming of normal activities.

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