

The pandemic of stress, fear and anxiety

Carol Natukunda shares her experience coping with the Covid-19 lockdown

I was a bit excited when my country announced home isolation as a key measure to stop the spread of coronavirus (Covid-19) infection. It would be comforting to just stay home, or so I thought.

I was wrong! Barely a week into home confinement, I was doubly stressed. I missed being free to move to wherever and whenever I wanted. I suddenly missed travelling by boda-boda and commuter taxi, or running my otherwise hectic daily errands. There were days I woke up angry for no reason at all. It was frustrating.

While I have had to devise ways to cope by including exercises and games amidst my schedule – office work, parenting and house chores – I still involuntarily get nervous. I worry about how much longer we are likely to be stuck in our homes; and how we will be able to put the next meal on the table – if the Covid-19 infection persists. I worry about the economic crisis in the aftermath of the pandemic. It is frightening.

From conversations with friends over the telephone or social media platforms, it is easy to tell that isolation is taking a toll on many people. Families whose loved ones are being quarantined or have tested positive have to bear untold distress. It must be worse for those who are in quarantine centres, receiving treatment. Households that live hand-to-mouth particularly spend sleepless nights with untold fear of what the next day holds. Health workers who are at the front-line have to endure fatigue, irritability, and a sense of helplessness especially as people continue to be infected or succumb to the infections.

What's worse? The statistics are disturbing. The number of deaths has more than doubled in the past week. As of 1 April 2020, the World Health Organization indicated that the coronavirus has infected more than 900,000 and left more than 45,000 dead. WHO predicted that in next few days, the statistics would reach 1 million confirmed Covid-19 cases, and 50,000 deaths.

Sombre as the picture looks, it is important to focus on the positive side, by focusing on what is within our control. Recently, the WHO Mental Health Department issued self-help tips for the general population, health workers, and families.¹ It cautioned every individual to minimise watching, reading or listening to news about Covid-19 that causes anxiety, and to seek information only from trusted sources to get facts not rumours and misinformation.

Rather than focus on unverified information, individuals are encouraged to focus their energy on protecting themselves and loved ones. These include washing your hands frequently with soap and water, or a hand



sanitiser that contains at least 60% alcohol; avoiding touching the face (particularly eyes, nose, and mouth); staying home as much as possible; avoiding crowds and gatherings; avoiding all non-essential shopping and travel; ensuring social distancing and following all recommendations from health authorities.

Individuals are also encouraged to stay connected and maintain social networks such as email, social media or telephone; and try as much as possible to keep personal daily routines – engage in healthy activities, exercise regularly, and eat healthy food.

For health workers, the Covid-19 outbreak is a first-time experience and they are bound to go into panic. Some healthcare workers may experience avoidance by their family or community owing to stigma, or fear. Staying connected with your loved ones through digital methods is one way to maintain contact. Experts recommend coping strategies such as ensuring sufficient rest and respite during work; eating healthy food, physical activity, and staying in contact with family and friends.

Most importantly, health workers are urged to know how to provide support to people who are affected by Covid-19 and linking them with available resources. This is especially important for those who require mental health and psychosocial support.²

Last year, WHO endorsed Interagency Mental Health and Psychosocial Support³ guidelines for effective response to emergencies at different levels – from basic services to clinical care. WHO also recommends that community self-help and social support should be strengthened, for example, by creating community groups in which members solve problems collaboratively, while ensuring the involvement of people who are vulnerable and marginalised.

In conclusion, Covid-19 is bringing new and difficult challenges. Let us support each other and be ready to help anyone who is struggling to deal with the situation.

References

1. www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2
2. www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-in-emergencies
3. WHO Tool Kit for assessing health-system capacity for crisis management (2012)