

REVIEW ARTICLE

IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Background: The COVID-19 has drastically changed the lives of people; majorly it has affected their wellness due to the lockdown and economic downfall. Psychosocial factors associated with social isolation, limited access to basic needs, loneliness, loss of income, decreased social and emotional support, and reduced physical activities have exacerbated the mental health of humans. There is an increased risk of developing mental health and physical issues in the specific vulnerable population of society, especially persons with disabilities. **Method:** Potential research articles were identified and extensively studied through a variety of internet databases, such as PubMed, Google scholar, Science direct, and Psych info. Nearly 35 studies were retrieved for finding several COVID and mental health articles related to caregivers and persons with disabilities. **Results:** Pandemic has led to innumerable challenges for disabled people. During COVID – 19 mental health issues like anxiety, panic, depression, PTSD, and other psychological problems were found. The vulnerable population could experience enduring consequences from the implications on mental health during this challenging situation. Most disabled people used to live with families comprising elderly parents, children, and persons with multiple disabilities who have pre-existing physical or mental illnesses in remote villages. The disabled population is at a substantial risk of having trouble while performing crucial hygiene measures and are deprived of accessing health care services. **Conclusion:** These people are prone to develop more stress during the pandemic and we suggest providing special interventions for them during pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Persons with disabilities, Psychosocial stressors, Mental health care.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 was the world's greatest epidemic of the twentieth century. It affected almost every part of the world (Shetty, Amaresha, Bamney, & Shah, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has directly impacted many people's physical health; besides, it has posed a great

threat to the mental health of millions (Tsamakis, Tsipsios, Ouranidis, & Spanou, 2021; Usher, Durkin, & Bhullar, 2020; Shetty, Amaresha, Bamney, & Shah, 2022). Studies suggest that psychological distress and issues like depression, mood disorders, anxiety

disorders, sleep disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, behavioral disturbances, and substance use may commonly occur after natural disasters (Beaglehole, Mulder, Frampton, & Ferris, 2018; Chaves, Castellanos, Abrams, & Ramos, 2018; Granados, Christine, Ionides, & Coakley, 2018).

Stressors such as longer quarantine duration, fears of getting an infection, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss, and stigma increase psychological distress in the public (Panchal, Kamal, Orgera, & Alker, 2020; Shetty, Sridharan, Kumar, & Prasad, 2020).

This pandemic has drastically changed the lives of people, majorly affecting their wellness due to the lockdown and economic downfall (Shetty, Sridharan, Kumar, & Prasad, 2020). Persons with disabilities are more affected than those without disabilities (Na & Yang, 2022). Psychosocial factors associated with social isolation, limited access to basic needs, loneliness, loss of income, decreased social and emotional support, and reduced physical activities have exacerbated the mental health of humans. Many developing countries faced unique problems such as limited resources to respond to the pandemic (Poudel & Subedi, 2020; Sandya, Shetty, Jaise, & Kumar, 2022).

There is an increased risk of developing mental and physical health issues in vulnerable populations, especially persons with disabilities (Panchal, Kamal, Orgera, & Alker, 2020). Studies suggest that individuals affected by the pandemic may have a high epidemiological burden of depression, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, somatization disorder, sleep disorders, emotional disturbance, PTSD symptoms, suicidal behavior, and many more mental health problems (Hossain, Roy, Ullah, & Mollah, 2020; Poudel & Subedi, 2020). Many studies also indicate that vulnerable populations such as

persons with disabilities and their caregivers face greater risks than the general population, making it essential to provide special interventions and care for persons with disabilities and their family members.

COVID-19 AND PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The pandemic plays a key role in increasing psychosocial issues for persons with disabilities. The economic recessions caused by the pandemic affected the financial stability of the population. Lockdowns, curfews, self-isolation, social distancing, and quarantine have impacted the overall physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being of the population. Certain studies suggest that most people experienced extreme distress during the pandemic because of lockdowns, extreme isolation, and especially low income (Mathias, Rawat, Philip, & Bansal, 2020; Shetty, Amaresha, Bamney, & Shah, 2022).

Persons with disabilities were already undergoing many psychosocial issues, such as a decreased quality of life for their family members and an increased social distance between the patient and their caregivers. These psychosocial challenges are exacerbated by social stigma (Iseselo, Kajula, & Yahya-Malima, 2016), and persons with disabilities had reduced access to the healthcare system and experienced social and lifestyle changes, decreased physical activity, and mood changes (Lebrasseur, Fortin-Bédard, Lettre, & Ducharme, 2021).

During the pandemic, no nation had enough healthcare resources to combat the crisis, with fighting the pandemic becoming the priority of healthcare systems. This reduced accessibility for other patients, including those with disabilities. The increased fear of contracting the coronavirus also discouraged persons with disabilities and their family members from seeking treatment in hospitals (González-Touya, Stoyanova, & Urbanos-

Garrido, 2021). A lack of proper communication from authorities further amplified public fear (Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020).

Persons with disabilities faced delays in accessing the healthcare system, resulting in delays in receiving treatment, including therapeutic interventions and medications. Lack of transportation during lockdowns further contributed to these delays. The burden on caregivers also increased during the pandemic, especially when caregivers themselves were diagnosed with COVID-19, adding strain on other family members and relatives (McKinney, McKinney, & Swartz, 2021).

COVID-19 had a significant impact on persons with disabilities. In addition to psychosocial factors, the mental health of persons with disabilities and their families was also affected by the pandemic. Quarantine, lack of access to healthcare, fear, and stigma surrounding COVID-19 contributed to the mental health struggles of both persons with disabilities and their families (Jesus, Bhattacharjya, Papadimitriou, & Rodriguez, 2021; Khasawneh, 2021).

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES FOLLOWING COVID-19

Mental health conditions such as sleep disorders, mood disorders, panic attacks, and PTSD worsened life for persons with disabilities. The burden and stress among caregivers of persons with disabilities also increased due to the pandemic (Dhiman, Sahu, Reed, & Ghosh, 2020; Maggio, La Rosa, Calatozzo, & Stella, 2021). Both persons with disabilities and their caregivers were mentally affected by the pandemic.

The quarantine period during COVID-19 also affected the general population, leading to post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion about illness, and increased anger. Stressors such as long quarantines, infection fears,

frustration from isolation, boredom, inadequate supplies, lack of information, financial loss, and stigma impacted the mental health of the general population (Brooks, Webster, Smith, & Woodland, 2020; Sandya, Shetty, Jaise, & Kumar, 2022).

Patients with disabilities also experienced stress, isolation, fear, sleep disturbances, and mood disturbances during the pandemic, as well as difficulties accessing healthcare systems, therapeutic interventions, and medications (McKinney, McKinney, & Swartz, 2021). Financial challenges faced by families also negatively impacted the home environment for patients with disabilities. The mental health struggles of family members further affected the mental health of patients (Lebrasseur, Fortin-Bédard, Lettre, & Ducharme, 2021).

STRESSORS DUE TO COVID-19

Existing literature indicates that the pandemic has presented numerous challenges for persons with disabilities. The mental health of both persons with disabilities and their caregivers was deeply affected by the pandemic. Studies suggest that mental health issues such as anxiety, panic, depression, PTSD, and other psychological problems emerged during COVID-19 (Hossain, Roy, Ullah, & Mollah, 2020). These issues were the result of an inability to cope with the stressors created by the pandemic, including limited access to healthcare, financial difficulties, and caregiver burden. The long-term consequences of these mental health issues may persist for vulnerable populations (Chaves, Castellanos, Abrams, & Ramos, 2018; Granados, Christine, Ionides, & Coakley, 2018; Usher, Durkin, & Bhullar, 2020). Many persons with disabilities live in families with elderly parents, children, or individuals with multiple disabilities and pre-existing physical or mental illnesses, especially in remote villages. These individuals face

significant challenges in maintaining hygiene and accessing healthcare services, including medication, welfare benefits, and follow-up care with health professionals, making them more susceptible to stress during the pandemic (Dhiman, Sahu, Reed, & Ghosh, 2020; Maggio, La Rosa, Calatozzo, & Stella, 2021).

INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES DURING COVID-19

Persons with disabilities are a vulnerable group requiring psychosocial support and care, especially during crises like pandemics. Unlike the general population, they need special attention and assistance from state authorities and organizations. Due to their disabilities, they are exposed to more stressors, and comorbid psychological conditions can arise during the pandemic. Research has shown that conditions like PTSD, anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and sleep disorders tend to increase following or during disasters (Banks, Davey, Shakespeare, & Mactaggart, 2021; Toquero, 2020).

Access to healthcare systems is typically limited during pandemics. Persons with disabilities faced significant challenges obtaining the medications and interventions they needed during this time. Government and non-government organizations needed to provide support to help these individuals access healthcare. If direct access was not possible, healthcare systems should have reached out to these individuals. Primary healthcare centers (PHCs) and community healthcare centers (CHCs) could have been used to reach vulnerable populations. Mobile healthcare units could have provided support and care directly to the homes of persons with disabilities. It would be ideal for governments to include such measures in their disaster policies (Camden & Silva, 2021; Kronberg, Tierney, Wallisch, & Orton, 2021; Rojas-Rueda

& Morales-Zamora, 2021; Smith, Tani, Yates, & Thornton, 2022; Uddin, Alam, Ahmed, & Rahman, 2020).

Tele-counseling and video conferencing could also be used to provide support to persons with disabilities, reducing their fear of COVID-19 infection and ensuring timely interventions (Sandya, Shetty, Jaise, & Kumar, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has created numerous mental health challenges for persons with disabilities and their families, making them more vulnerable to these problems. The financial crisis, difficulty accessing healthcare systems, and other pandemic-related factors increased their vulnerability. This paper emphasizes the need for special interventions for persons with disabilities and their families during crises like COVID-19.

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