

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Effects of Covid-19 on Mental Health of Older Adults: A Study Based on Perceptions and Experiences of older adults suffered from Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The objective of this conceptual study was to know the effects of COVID-19 on mental health of older adults.

Study design: This qualitative study was conducted in October-December 2022 in District Sargodha. Twenty (20) older adults who have been suffered from COVID-19 were taken as respondents selected through snowball-purposive sampling technique. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect data through in-depth interviews from the respondents. Thematic analysis method of qualitative methodology of research was used to analyze the data to find the results.

Results: The study found that older adults experienced severe mental health issues during COVID-19 period due to loneliness, isolation, anxiety and fear of disease and death. During the quarantine period and hospitalization, loneliness and social isolation affected the mental health of the older adults. Fear of disease & death and losing the loved ones negatively affected the older adults psychologically to great extent. However, respondents who were educated and well aware of causes and consequences of the disease; used this information and awareness as coping strategy and such respondents had less adverse affects on their mental health.

Conclusion: COVID-19 virus affected the well-being of older people with regard to mental and emotional. Social isolation and loneliness have been observed as main factors affecting the mental condition of older adults during the pandemic. They experienced grave psychological issues due to loneliness and fear of disease & death during the quarantine/ hospitalization period.

Keywords: COVID-19, Older adults, isolation, quarantine, fear, mental, health.

INTRODUCTION

Corona virus, a nightmare for the world originated from Wuhan city of China in 2019 and it has been affected more than 230 countries and territories around the world¹. This widespread outbreak has affected almost every stratum of society². The pandemic accelerated at an alarming pace and total cases have crossed the figures of 675 million till January 2023³. The unprecedented pandemic of COVID-19 led to fear and a panic situation around the world. It created a terrible fear among people and they started thinking that life is going to end in few days⁴.

The corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has been traumatic for the people especially for those who were aged or diseased. Fear and worry about one's own health and the health of loved ones, financial situation or loosing job, or loss of support services on which people rely on. Fear and anxiety about a new disease can be overwhelming and cause strong psychological distress and emotions in people with all age groups especially the older adults. By using recommended preventive measures such as social distancing and not going out, can make people feel lonely and isolated which may further cause of increasing stress and anxiety⁵.

COVID-19 has adverse social, psychological, emotional and financial affects on people of all age groups but the older adults who have already weak psychological and emotional condition, faced adverse mental health issues during the pandemic. The Psychological well-being of the elderly was affected significantly due to social isolation and quarantine during the pandemic period. Mental health problems increased rapidly in the older adults due to social separation, loneliness and depression. The fear of exclusion or losing the social relationships has been shown as indicator of depression, anxiety and other mental health issues. Consequently, COVID-19 caused serious level of anxiety in the older adults. Family members were avoiding having physical contact with the older members because they were more susceptible to be infected with weak immune system, which caused developing an increased level of loneliness, depression and anxiety⁶.

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Pakistan has above 30,500 deaths toll out of about 15,76,000 confirmed cases till January 2023 as reported by WHO⁷. Pakistan has the world 6th largest population including more than 14 million elderly people. During the covid-19 pandemic, this portion of population was most vulnerable segment having different challenges including accessibility to healthcare services due to lockdown restrictions, transportation and limited access to other facilities. In Pakistan, just like other countries, the risk of corona virus infection was associated with age. In Pakistan, the COVID-19 virus mainly affected the people below than 60 years of age but the death rate was highly increased in the infected persons of the age group of above 60 years. The Help Age International indicated in its report (2020) that more than half of the people who died of COVID-19 were aged 60 and above. In the Sindh Province of Pakistan, where the COVID-19 infection ratio was very much high, the provincial government reported that nine in every 100,000 elderly people had sever risk to be infected. Whereas, from age 70 and above, seventeen in every 100,000 people were at risk of COVID-19 infection⁸.

According to the report of Help Age International, the elderly people during the pandemic had reportedly increased sense of isolation, stress, depression and anxiety as they were much anxious and fearful about their families, children and loved ones due to prevailing virus infection situation. The report further elaborated that it was reported that elderly people who have a usual routine to go out, spent time with their age fellows, sitting in tea shops etc., and visiting others, have been confined in their homes due to the restrictions⁹.

Numerous studies conducted in different countries confirmed that during the COVID-19, people with all age groups who experienced this disease were affected socially and psychologically but the older adults were affected mainly due to being more vulnerable. Hence, with the objective to explore the situation regarding the same phenomenon in Pakistan, this conceptual study was conducted to know the effects of COVID-19 on mental health of older adults

Study design: This qualitative study conducted in October-December 2022 aimed at exploring the affects of COVID-19 on

mental health of older adults who have been suffered from COVID-19 and experienced isolation due to being quarantined. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect data through in-depth interviews from twenty (20) respondents i.e. older adults who belonged to district Sargodha and have been suffered COVID-19. Snowball-purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. Thematic analysis method of qualitative methodology of research was used to analyze the data to find results. The overall process for leading interviews was determined from Creswell model and the major themes were generated from data was effects of COVID-19 on mental health¹⁰.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine the mental health status of the older adults affected by COVID-19. To explicate the said issue, this qualitative research methodology used thematic analysis. Major themes and responses of the respondents are presented as under:

Theme-1: COVID-19 and mental health of older adults: During the COVID-19 pandemic, people with all age groups experienced adverse affects on the mental health but the people above 60 years were supposed to be at a higher risk being most vulnerable as they already have general health issues. It was being reported that the influence of corona virus on the mental health of older adults are greater than that of young people because their mental state was not stronger than that of young people.

The participant's responses:

- *All the diseases are complicated and directly linked with the mental health but fear of COVID-19 was more complex as compared to other viral infections, because the death ratio due to this viral infection was much more and the whole world affected by this virus. Mental issues were experienced during the pandemic period.*
- *Being aged, our immune system is weak, and every disease affects us badly as compared to the adults. The impact of COVID-19 on mental health was more severe due to increased tension and anxiety.*
- *Covid-19 affected the mental health as all the time we were in tension and anxiety that what will be happened with us and our children. All family members were at stake to be affected. Fear of losing the loved ones was very disturbing and painful.*

All the respondents confirmed that the COVID-19 has severe affects on their mental health. They were of the opinion that COVID-19 was very dangerous disease and affected them dramatically. Tension, depression, anxiety and fear of losing loved ones were the main causes of psychological distress.

Theme-2: Covid-19 and Isolation in older adults: During the pandemic, the elderly people were confined to their homes and their access to social media and community support was limited. As a result, many of them were socially isolated. Isolation and loneliness always affect the mental health of people.

The participant's responses:

- *As our routine activities were reduced or demolished and we remained in the isolation and loneliness condition during the quarantine period. Family is very important for older adults because a family table talk is good for the person who faced covid-19. They have not used any technology to pass your time.*
- *Isolation and loneliness directly affected our mental health condition. When government issued directions regarding social distance and quarantine then people were completely isolated and experienced loneliness. During the stay at hospital, we were away from home and family in a critical situation. We felt alone and mentally disturbed in isolation because due to loneliness and reduced family support.*
- *We have many psychological issues during isolation/quarantine period including loneliness, social exclusion, stress, anxiety, and depression.*

The respondents confirmed that they have severe negative effects on their mental health during the quarantine period due to isolation. Corona virus seriously influenced the mental and emotional wellbeing of elderly persons due to social isolation.

Theme-3: Fear of COVID-19 virus and death in older adults: Fear of disease and death is a psychological condition which leads towards mental health issues. This psychological condition is very dangerous especially in the old age. An increasing death ratio in the world has been reported due to the COVID-19 created a fear in people.

The participant's responses:

- *We are mentally disturbed due to the fear of this virus and illness. Due to fear and anxiety, we have many negative affects on physical and mental health. Fear of disease and death grew inside us when we see and hear the negative consequences of the disease.*
- *We have the perception that if we will go to the hospital then there are few chances to cope with the disease because generically the death rate of hospitalized patients was quite high. So, the fear of virus, hospitalization, ventilation and death was the obvious thing.*

The respondents were of the opinion that fear of virus and death increased during the pandemic. Fear of hospitalization and ventilation due to Covid-19 affected the mental health of older adults.

Theme-4: COVID-19 and coping mechanisms used by older adults: Awareness and educational level played an important role during COVID-19. The educated people were aware that how to cope with this virus and took positive steps against it. They realized the critical situation of COVID-19 and did not believe in the rumors.

The participant's responses:

- *During the time of COVID-19 different rumors were spread in society, but we did not pay attention to the rumors rather focused on getting actual information that was useful and good for maintaining mental health and using coping strategies to overcome the panic situation.*
- *We were the victim of COVID-19 but maintained mental health in isolation period by using educational coping strategies like not believing in rumors, seeking social support, acceptance and self-care. We kept ourselves busy in social media and reading books etc.*
- *We experiences severe psychological issues in quarantine period as we were not in touch with media, TV, social media, mobile or any other activity. Excessive negative thoughts and fear lead us towards psychological issues.*

The responses clearly indicated that older adults who were educated, kept themselves involved in different activities such as using social media, mass media during the isolation period. Older adults need regular medical routine checkup but due to COVID-19, people could not excess hospitals for the purpose and faced different health issues but those who were educated keep getting medical checkup through on-line consultation.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study explored that the COVID-19 has negative effects on mental health of older adults who experienced this disease (Theme-1). The results of the study are in line with the findings of some other studies. The previous studies also concluded that the COVID-19 has considerable negative effects on mental health of the older adults due to loneliness and fear of disease^{11,12}.

During this modern era, older adults have a general issue of social isolation and loneliness. The WHO also confirmed that social isolation and loneliness in elderly people have been identified as a public health problem and policy issue¹³. But during COVID-19, this problem affected the elder people adversely. The findings of the study in hand explored that isolation (Theme-2) is a major causative factor which have negative effects on mental

health of the older adults. Respondents were of the opinion that during the quarantine period, isolation was the main cause of depression and anxiety. The results have been found similar as of other studies. A result of the study explored that loneliness and social isolation has been found associated with increased reactivity to stressors, depression, anxiety, adverse health consequences as well as mortality risk among older adults¹⁴. Another study also explicated the older adults have negative effects on their physical and mental health by COVID-19 and the diseases also affected their emotional, social, and financial wellbeing. The main factor behind this was isolation due to the restrictions to go out or meet others so as to control the spread of virus¹⁵. The findings of another study clearly exposed that during the COVID-19 period, mandatory quarantine and social distancing strategies have a high cost, particularly in older adults as they experienced severe acute sense of loneliness and social isolation having a big potential to lead them towards grave mental and physical health repercussions¹⁶.

Fear of COVID-19 virus and death (Theme-3) has been found as another factor affecting mental health of older adults. These findings were also found closely associated with the results of other studies. A study validated that however people with all age groups were at severe risk of COVID-19 infection but this risk was very much higher in the older adults over the age of 60 years being most vulnerable and heightened hazard of disease, going to hospital, admission in intensive care unit as well as to be died of the infection¹⁷. Another study conducted in 2021 confirmed a positive association between depression and fear of COVID-19¹⁸.

However, while identifying the coping mechanisms (Theme-4) used by the respondents, the results of the study showed that the respondents who were educated and well aware about the virus, its spread and impacts, used this awareness as coping strategy which was very successful. The respondents who were in touch with media through TV, newspaper or social media have higher level of information about the disease and experienced less loneliness, anxiety and depression during the quarantine period.

The results of the study has close co-relation with two sociological theories i.e. activity theory and disengagement theory of aging. Activity theory suggests that effective aging occurs when older adults remain active and sustain social interactions. This theory shows a positive relationship between activity and life satisfaction¹⁹. Whereas, the disengagement theory of aging states that aging is the inevitable reciprocal withdrawal or detachment that results in reduced interaction between the aged person and others in the social system to which he belongs." The theory states that withdrawing from society is a natural and acceptable thing for older people²⁰. The findings of the study in hand have very close association with these sociological theories. If we see the findings in the context of these theories, it is clear that social interactions disturbs due to social isolation, therefore, the older adults faced different types of psychological issues like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic disorder during the COVID period. This co-relation further suggests a way forward for the older adults that they should immediately re-establish the activities which were reduced or demolished by the COVID-19, so as to avoid psychological instability in future life.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 virus affected the well-being of older people with regard to social, mental, physical, and emotional. The mental and physical health problems increased in elderly population who experienced COVID-19, with stricter lockdown measures. Older people have a higher risk of death as compared to those below 60 years of age. Social isolation and loneliness have been observed as main factors affecting the mental condition of older adults during the pandemic. Older people who experienced COVID-19 faced many of the mental health issues due to being quarantined isolated

including social exclusion, stress, anxiety, depression and fear of death. Old age people generally have many biological and psychological health issues which were increased dramatically in those who experienced COVID-19. However, respondents who were educated and well aware of causes and consequences of the disease; used this information and awareness as coping strategy and such respondents had less adverse affects on mental health. Family support systems and social media can help a lot to cater the emotional stress and depression in the elders. Family should spare time for older adults especially during the period when they are ill or have health issues so they don't face isolation and loneliness which can lead towards depression, anxiety and other severe mental health issues.

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