



Research Paper

## Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on the mental well-being of Nursing Professionals in India.

Dr. Asma Farooque  
Dr. Habibuddin  
Dr. Syed Afzal Ahmad\*  
Bareen Abbas\*\*

\*Faculty,

\*\*Research Scholar

Department of Commerce & Business Management,  
Integral University, Lucknow, India

### Abstract

Medical Healthcare workers were and still have been at the forefront to fight the Corona Virus and all its variants that came along and after. From the risk of infection, being away from the family to all the hardships that accompanied the stressful extended hours in the isolation wards, the Novel Corona Virus since its first case in India has induced unprecedented stress on the healthcare workers.

It was not just the medical professionals who faced severe mental and physical stress but also the paramedical staff specifically the nurses who went through a similar trauma in those PPE kits, handling the anxious patients and being the calm and prompt help to the fatigued doctors. It was not merely the rapid increase in the workload that the paramedical workers had to undergo but the strain that came with the package. The psychological burden was because of various reasons including the intensity of the work due to the increased footfall, the trauma of being able to deliver the best despite knowing the severity of getting the infection themselves and more than that the fear of taking the infection home, all added up to the stress levels of the nurses who stood tall during one of the biggest health crisis of the century.

This study aims to understand and highlight how the course of this pandemic had an effect on the mental well-being of nurses in India. It is also to be observed that how the respective organizations listened to or addressed their concerns and made them feel valued for their contribution.

**Keywords:** Corona virus, COVID-19, Mental health, nurses, Health workers, stress, mental well-being.

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### I. Introduction

The Corona Virus pandemic that saw its first case in December 2019 emerged out to be the biggest problem we had seen globally post Second World War, impacting the entire world. Having left the lives of each one of us distraught, changed the way we look at things to a great extent. It was widely observed that the impact of Corona virus worsened because of the inability of people to deal with it mentally. Economic issues, loss of employment or a slack on salary, bereavement, fear of catching the infection, an ambiguous future all added up to weakening individuals' mental strength. The global tension that was incomprehensible for the world population who were merely fighting their own issues but the onus of fighting the unknown befell upon the healthcare workers. This pandemic also witnessed an eruption in mental health crisis.

The nursing professionals in fact were at the forefront and as per the nature of their profession, they work in close proximity to the patients and be in direct contact with them making them more prone to catching the virus themselves and risking their lives. A lot of the wellbeing of patients depend upon the good care taken by the nursing staff who on the instructions of the doctors take full charge of the patients. With utmost responsibility and professional obligation in circumstances as the pandemic, the nursing professionals faced a severe psychological impact due to the fear of dying or losing a family member to Covid or because of the work

pressure due to the obvious reasons. The frontline workers also felt that their contribution was not as appreciated or acknowledged and that too added to negativity and demotivation.

### **Objectives:**

The objectives of this research paper are as follows:

- 1- To identify the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Nursing professionals in India.
- 2- To understand the major challenges faced by the Nursing professionals that disturbed their mental health.
- 3- To identify the measures taken by the organizations to ensure a better management of the mental well-being of their staff.

## **I. Introduction:**

An article by Jan Serrano et al about the prevalence of anxiety and depression among nursing professionals highlights how Covid-19 impacted the rate of depression and anxiety among the nurses due to the difficulty to assess the medical trajectory of Corona virus and the risks associated with it. Nursing professionals being at the front line, faced an amplified challenge because of it.

The physical stress because of donning the personal protective equipment (PPE) kits for all the shift hours, the fear of doffing without catching the infection or carrying it home. The frontline workers also minimised the liquid intake to bare minimum so as to avoid the need to urinate. This all contributed to increasing the stress and hence affected the mental health. Also, seeing patients dying in quick succession, counselling them despite needing the counselling themselves, witnessing the friend or a co-worker succumb to Covid while performing his or her duty and despite all the necessary precautions made them uncertain about surviving the pandemic themselves.

The organizations too were not as efficient to help their staff cope up with the stress. The changing policies, increasing workload due to unavailability of staff because of infection or death, increased working hours contributed to deteriorating mental health of the nursing professionals in India.

This study aims to determine the effects caused by COVID-19 on the mental health of nursing professionals and how can that be better handled in case of a similar scenario.

## **II. Methods**

Using a phenomenological approach we interacted with 30 registered nurses who performed COVID duties in a Level 3 Covid Hospital in Lucknow. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone and were analysed by Colaizzi's 7-step method.

### **Study subjects**

We selected 30 staff nurses of Era's Lucknow Medical College & Hospital who performed the Covid duties in Isolation wards, ICUs and HDUs, taking care of the Covid positive patients both during the first wave (in 2020) and second wave (in 2021).

### **Interview outline**

We determine the interview outline by reviewing the related literature and consulting experts. The prime questions asked from the respondents are mentioned as under:

1. What were the three major challenges faced by you performing your duty in the Covid wards?
2. What were your coping strategies?
3. What have you learnt from your personal experience about your mental strength in reference to the pandemic?

In addition the above prime-questions, we also asked some sub-questions:

1. How are you dealing with post-pandemic scenario?
2. What was your experience regarding counselling the Covid patients?
3. How has this pandemic changed your life?
4. How did you maintain work life balance during Covid scenario, if at all you could?
5. How has this pandemic impacted your personality/personal growth?

### **Data collection**

The face to face interviews were conducted in separate and quiet room and researcher remained neutral in collecting the responses. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study in advance and only the willing individuals were interviewed. They were any time allowed to leave the conversation or refuse to answer any question they were not comfortable talking about. Some interviews were also conducted telephonically due to time or availability constraints.

### **III. Findings**

Three major challenges in Covid Wards:

a) **Unsupportive social groups**

80% of the respondents mentioned how they were barred by neighbours, relatives and friends having realized that the respondents work in a Covid prone environment. In tead of respecting their noble profession and courage to be in the front line when all others confined themselves a participant narrated that she was asked by the landlord to vacate the rented room she was staying in. Another mentioned that she was denied entry by her land lady after she went back from the hospital to her apartment.

b) **Fear for family**

Niuniu et al. (2020) concluded that Nursing professionals who had elderly individuals or children in their families were far more concerned that we also found matching to the answers of our respondents. Majority of the participants stated that more than their own lives they were concerned for their family. They maintained proper distance from family in order to avoid the risk of infecting them. Though the hospital management provided them of proper hostel rooms to self-isolate themselves for as long as they perform the Covid duties in order to avoid any risk of infecting others, the staff was still apprehensive all throughout.

c) **Physical discomfort leading to mental discomfort**

The PPE kits were sure discomforting, sweating, irritation on skin while on long working hours wearing those PPE kits made it even worse. Handling equipment, measuring with face shield and the entire attire was difficult as well.

A few participants highlighted how they avoided liquid intake before and during shift hours in order to avoid the urge to urinate because of obvious reasons. This all cumulatively added to the stress, anxiety and psychological discomfort to a great deal.

d) **Guilt**

“ICUs are critical, more when it is Covid ICU and none of the healthcare professional wants their patient to die despite all the efforts. Whenever any of the patient I was taking care of died, I used to get conscious about maybe I could have handled the patient better.”, mentioned one participant.

e) **Losing loved ones**

Amongst all the deaths, losing a family member or a colleague was the worst of all kinds. A senior nurse mentioned that she was all numb when a cardiac surgeon she has worked with for so many years succumb to Covid at the age of 40. She stated that to process that loss, it will still take her a long time.

**Coping strategies:**

Many nursing professionals mentioned that thinking about their family or talking to their loved ones made things tolerable for them. Some stated that following religious practices, remembering the Almighty gave them strength. Some said thinking positive helped. One Nursing professional explained that she used to tell herself, “I can do it. I am doing a noble job. I cannot die”. Most of them strongly believed in the nobility of their profession and that this time is to test their intents and if the demand is such, they will prove worthy of being called a warrior.

**Counselling the Covid patients:**

The respondents agreed in majority that more than medicines it was the ‘good talk’ that helped the patients recover better. In the isolation wards where they were away from loved ones, unaware of what the destiny has for them, counselling helped a great deal. The participants mentioned that they used to make sure to talk to the patients about their family, hobbies, questions like “What will you do after getting the discharge”, instilled positivity in them. Also, if when they used to find the patients breaking down mentally, they would connect them to their loved ones over vide calls, “because that’s what used to work for us as well,” mentioned one respondent.

**Work life balance during Covid scenario:**

It is a known fact that health professionals have similar problems in their personal and work life during the COVID-19 pandemic and have to deal with both the stress and psychological consequences of the pandemic (Babore et al., 2020; Trumello et al., 2020). The participants clearly highlighted that the work life balance was negatively affected due to the increased working hours. Also they mentioned that as they used to isolate at hospital hostel rooms, added to the imbalance.

#### **IV. Discussion:**

This study shows that during the period of this pandemic the nursing professionals faced a hard time maintaining a good mental health. More than 60% of the respondents stated that they had anxiety issues and difficulty to sleep peacefully. The results are in conformity with other studies conducted to assess the stress and anxiety levels of front line workers in China and Pakistan. Similarly in this study, the respondents mentioned that prolonged working hours in restrained environment. Notably, unsupportive social groups added the most to the mental health problems. Researches show that a good mental health is directly related to social support and hence an opposite of which resulted adversely.

The participants expressed their dismay on the fact that they did not feel as valued and acknowledged for their immense contribution by their organizations. A pat on the back is all we like at the end of the day and the participants felt that appreciation was an amiss during the entire period. Despite not being technologically super-efficient and unprepared for a scenario like the Covid pandemic, the staff took it on themselves, fighting the demons of their own fears and delivered the best they could, the due appreciation was not provided and this was saddening for them. Poor remuneration, no or little extra monetary benefits were given.

#### **V. Conclusion:**

Covid – 19 pandemic was a traumatizing situation and put the healthcare workers at risk hampering their mental well-being in the process. This study provides the insights of the personal experiences of the Nursing Professionals who worked day and night to take care of the Covid patients in Lucknow, India. Though the entire period was stressful and extremely frightening it gave the nursing staff a sense of pride in themselves for the commendable work they have been doing and eventually leading to a sense of satisfaction.

To the best of our knowledge with the discussions we had with the Nursing Staff that it was more of an emotional support that they craved for during the entire pandemic from their loved ones and on the professional front acknowledgement and appreciation. We have realized spiritual participants had a better resilience and mental strength to think positive during the entire period. As the pandemic is ongoing, it is necessary for the administration and organization to continue with the counselling and psychological support. They must ensure to felicitate the Covid warriors and acknowledge them for their efforts during the tough times.