**COVID-19 Blues: Mental health in times of the pandemic**

**KEY HIGHLIGHTS**

* **Nearly 65% therapists observed an increase in self-harm and suicide ideation/death wish amongst those who sought therapy, since the COVID-19 pandemic hit.**
* **Rates of relapse amongst people who had previously recovered or were recovering from mental health related issues have increased, according to 6 out of 10 therapists.**
* **Anxiety, job loss or fear of job loss, stress, isolation/loneliness and financial insecurity, top the list of concerns of people during this time**
* **More than 68% of therapists saw a hike in the number of people seeking therapy, with more people than before doing so for the first time.**
* **More than 85% (62.3% said yes and 23.3% said maybe) therapists say they have been experiencing increased caregiver fatigue, many of whom found this impacting their ability to work at their 100%**

**Introduction:**

Living up to its name, Coronavirus, the virus with a crown, came, it saw, and it conquered. It waltzed into our world and wrecked life as we knew it. Not just the virus, but the measures taken as a response to dealing with it, have brought in a whole host of their own changes. The circumstances have forced a change in living arrangements, lifestyle, routines, work habits, familial and social interaction just to name a few. While these may have been blessings in disguise for some, with new hobbies and trends being picked up, the story has been quite different for many others. The same situations have served as triggers for anxiety, stress, loneliness, depression, and other mental health concerns to surface.

Hypothesising a spike in mental health-related issues, Suicide Prevention India Foundation (SPIF) a Bangalore-based, Section-8 not-for-profit, reached out to mental health professionals (MHPs), that included psychotherapists and psychiatrists, across the country to explore common concerns people seeking therapy have been facing, the changes in help-seeking and how the pandemic is affecting the therapists personally. This survey was conducted in the month of May, towards the end of the nation-wide lockdown imposed by the Government of India.

“We believe the data will contribute to understanding COVID-19 on how it may have exacerbated mental health conditions, trends in help-seeking behaviour, key demographics impacted, and the increase in self-harm/suicide ideation during this time”, says Nelson, Founder, SPIF.

**Highlights:**

Even before COVID-19 ripped through India, the state of mental health was already in crisis with [150 million Indians](http://indianmhs.nimhans.ac.in/Docs/Summary.pdf) in need of mental health services, and only 30 million receiving any form of care (National Mental Health Survey of India, 2016). With the lengthy lockdown, forced isolation, fear of the virus, financial insecurity, domestic violence and rising anxiety the crisis has deepened and is perhaps heading towards a catastrophe.

According to COVID-19 Blues, an online survey where SPIF interviewed 159 MHPs from across the country, suicide ideation, self-harm and relapses have all risen.

What the data reveals:

* **Self-harm, suicide ideation/death wish increased:** Nearly 65% (28.9% said yes and 35.8% responded with maybe) of the therapists have observed an increase in people who have self-harmed. A whopping 71% (28.9% said yes and 42.1% maybe) of therapists said that more people have expressed suicidal ideation or a death wish to them post the outbreak.
* **Increased rates of relapse:** Nearly 6 out of 10 therapists (57.9%) who took the survey said that individuals who had previously recovered or were making a recovery, have now relapsed.
* **More people seeking therapy:** 68.6% of the therapists reported an increase in the number of people they see and in the hours they spend taking therapy, after the pandemic hit
* **First-time therapy seekers risen:** 54.7% of therapists said that number of people they see who’ve never sought therapy before have risen since the outbreak of the pandemic
* **Common problems:** Anxiety (88.7%), job loss or fear of job loss (76.1%) and stress 73.6%), isolation/loneliness and financial insecurity (73% each) top the list of common problems faced by people as reported by therapists.
* **Caregiver fatigue heightened:** 62.3% of therapists said that the current COVID-19 situation and doing only/mostly telepsychiatry has increased their caregiver fatigue.
* **Impact on work:** Worryingly, 75.8% (64.8% mildly impacted and 11% severely impacted) of the therapists reported that caregiver fatigue has impacted their ability to give their work a 100 percent.

“Being locked down in the face of the pandemic has increased the already prevalent risk related to mental illness, financial insecurity and work stress, while triggering new anxieties, feelings of not being in control, depletion of social networks, job uncertainty, abuse and social isolation. This, in turn, has led to an increase in mental health-related issues affecting almost all sections of the population regardless of economic and social backgrounds,” noted Noor Malik, Research Consultant, SPIF.

**In-depth findings**

While the pandemic has been an equaliser affecting everyone in some way, the data reveals that some groups have been impacted more than others in the context of mental health.

***Age****:* Help-seeking was highest amongst individuals aged 25-40 years, followed by those aged 18-25 years and 40-60 years, as reported by therapists.

***Gender****:* The highest increase in help-seeking through therapy was found among females followed by males. A considerable number of therapists said they experienced an increase in gender diverse individuals and a few saw an increase in trans individuals seeking therapy.

***Other groups****:* 79.9% of the therapists saw a rise in the number of working professionals opting for therapy. 59.7% of the therapists saw an increasing number of students seeking counselling. 52.2% of the therapists observed an increase in the number of individuals with a pre-existing mental health condition.

“Younger individuals, working professionals and women are seeking more help during these times. This could mean that they are most open to help-seeking but this doesn’t take away from the fact that almost all demographics are affected adversely in the current situation,” added Noor.

**The worrisome:**

A concerning finding from the study is the reported rise in the number of persons who have expressed a death wish, those who have self-harmed and those who had made a recovery but have now relapsed.

Nearly 29% of the therapists have observed an increase in clients who have self-harmed, as well as those who have expressed suicidal ideation or death wish. Over 42% of the therapists reported a possible increase in individuals presenting with suicidal ideation and 35.8% reported an increase in people having self-harmed.

Over the past few days, there have been reports of celebrities ending their life over uncontrollable issues they have been facing during the lockdown. These are only those that are covered by the media and those of completed suicide. Unreported cases are possibly much higher, with suicide attempts and ideation going unrecognised. The fears of contracting the virus as well as the personal, occupational and social impact of the lockdown have drastically impacted the lives of people and their wish to continue living. While most therapists (48.4%) said the increase in suicide ideation has been below 10%, some (22.6%) have reported an up to 50% spike. The increase in persons who have self-harmed also shows a similar pattern.

While many groups of people are vulnerable to triggers inherent in the uncertainty that comes with a pandemic, those with an existing mental health condition are at a higher risk. More than half of the therapists (57.9%) who took the survey said that individuals who had previously recovered or were making a recovery, have now relapsed. Nearly a third of them said this may be the case with people they work with too. While the majority of them (42.8%) found that the increase was below 10%, many (37.7%) observed an up to 50% hike in relapses, with one therapist having experienced a doubled rate.

“India already has the highest number of suicides globally. With the COVID-induced lockdown, self-harm and suicide ideation have upped. Other than creating awareness, reducing stigma related to help-seeking, and providing psycho-social support, the government will need to increase socio-economic safety nets, and think of ways to support those suffering abuse,” noted Nelson.

**The concerning:**

Amidst the rise in help-seeking, what becomes apparent is both, the increased stress faced by people, as well as the dire need for mental health professionals at a time like this. An aspect that is often overlooked is the burden on those providing these services - the double effects of caregiving and COVID-19 are leading to them experiencing caregiver fatigue and feeling that they aren’t able to give their 100% to work.

With longer hours spent virtually connected with their clients, the therapists’ mental and emotional investment into their work has gone up. Most therapists (62.3%) are experiencing caregiver fatigue as a result of the current COVID-19 situation, lockdown pressures and doing only/mostly telepsychiatry. The pressures of the pandemic have impacted the therapists’ personal lives as well, in turn, affecting their ability to work at their full capacity. While most (64.8%) therapists reported being mildly impacted, a portion (11%) have been severely impacted by this. Some suggested that they were not impacted by the current situation, which could imply that they have either been sheltered from the negative impacts of the pandemic or that they have been able to effectively deal with the changes.

**The good:**

There has never been a better time for mental health. A topic that was off the table, has for the first time ever, become front and centre. The pandemic has ensured that this has become a level playing field for all, with the lockdown laying bare the emotional distress, which binds us all. With the collective pain and suffering being endured by most, everyone, from the World Health Organization to sportspersons, actors, musicians, to HR managers are talking about the need to focus on mental health.

The conversation has gone mainstream.

This was reflected in the survey in two aspects. One, close to 54.7% of mental health professionals reported that there has been an increase in the number of people seeking therapy for the first time. Considering that the country has an 80 percent treatment gap, where most of those who need behavioural healthcare do not have access or are hesitant to access it due to shame or stigma, this is a green shoot.

Secondly, therapists across the country have witnessed an overall increase in help-seeking in the form of therapy. A whopping 68.6% of the therapists reported an increase in the number of clients and in the hours they spend counselling after the pandemic hit. A few others reported a possible increase.

The implications of such findings could be two-fold. On the one hand, more people may be seeking therapy as a result of increased distress levels. While this is concerning, it is reassuring that they have made the healthy choice of therapy as an attempt to resolve their issues. The shifting of most counselling to an online medium, while having posed a challenge for many who were dependent on seeing their therapist frequently, may have empowered a large number of people who previously were apprehensive of physically visiting a therapist.

The increased anonymity, accessibility and ease of use that comes with online counselling might have helped people overcome their resistance towards therapy. Additionally, the fact that a large number of therapists have considerately offered their services for free at this trying time, may have also made the choice of seeking help easier, by making it financially accessible to many more.

“This might be a good time for the government to more seriously implement the Mental Health Care Act, 2017 that promises mental healthcare for all with a rights-based approach. It is time to mainstream the mental health conversation so that there’s awareness, increase in help-seeking and shedding of stigma. It is time for a mental health movement that normalises these conversations and leads to a focus on mental well-being right from a young age,” says Nelson.

**Recommendations**

The surge in self-harm and suicide ideation, as reported by the therapists, is concerning to us as an organisation working in the area of suicide prevention. We also understand that stresses of the pandemic and pre-existing mental health concerns are difficult to deal with in themselves, and further increase the risk of suicidality. The large number of therapists offering help at such trying times is surely a sign of solidarity, and people reaching out to them is a step towards acceptance of therapy. While this is a point to celebrate, we have a few recommendations that could help, going forward.

***Self-help***

* *Don’t hesitate to seek help:*
Feeling low, stressed, anxious or suicidal? Reach out! There are multiple helplines and counsellors offering online and tele-counselling. They are here for you and ready to help. Here are a few helplines offering free counselling: <https://bit.ly/3dIIaN7>
	+ Nimhans National Helpline: 080 – 4611 0007
	+ iCall: 022-25521111 (Monday to Saturday, 10am to 8pm)
	+ mPower:
	+ Let’s Talk
	+ COVID Response: [http://COVIDresponse.in/](http://covidresponse.in/)
* *Relaxation and breath exercises:* Mindful and repetitive deep breathing for 10-15 minutes can be relaxing. This can help calm you down and make you feel grounded when anxiety seems to be getting the better of you. There are plenty of guided meditation audio clips available online.
* *Call a friend or family members*: Social connectedness, whether it’s physical or digital, is important to beat COVID blues.
* *Exercise:* Physical activity of any kind is beneficial to both the mind and the body. Running, yoga or any other form of physical exertion will release feel-good chemicals that alleviates mood and helps in boosting immunity.
* If you are feeling trapped, having trouble sleeping, self-harming, abusing alcohol/drugs, suffering severe mood swings, having recurrent thoughts of suicide, or stuck in an abusive environment, don't wait. Please call a trusted individual who could take you to meet a psychiatrist, get admitted to a hospital (if required and advised by an MHP), or make an online appointment with a psychiatrist.

***Helping others***

* *Identify signs of depression and suicidality:*The first step towards helping yourself and/or others is to identify early warning signs. Experiencing persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness and helplessness is characteristic of depression. Notice if these feelings are affecting your/others’ sleep cycles, appetite, social and occupational life. In this case, it’s important to seek help. People may not always express these feelings, so look out for behavioural changes. Withdrawal from friends and family, a lack of interest in activities that they previously enjoyed, and substance use are behavioural signs of depression. Additionally, a change in social media presence is a big sign in today’s context. The intensity and duration of these feelings and behaviours can differ for people, but recognising them as a sign for help is important.
* *Proactively check on your friends and family:*Understand that this is an unusual time for everyone, and each person is coping differently. Keep an eye out for early warning signs in your loved ones, but also proactively check on your friends and family and be there for them. Let them know that what they are going through is valid and that they can seek help if they are feeling low.
* *Ask the right questions:*It can be awkward and nerve-wracking when you have noticed signs of suicidality in someone and don’t know what to do. The best thing you can do is to ask the person directly. It can save lives.
* *Get trained:*People who are feeling suicidal, typically express it in one way or another. Being sensitive enough to pick up those signs can literally save lives. One way to prevent suicides is to be better prepared to identify warning signs and assist people who are suicidal. [Gatekeeper training](https://bit.ly/2YnFT35) can equip you with the information and skills to help someone in crisis and benefit society as a whole.
Further, some organisations offer training for lay people to provide psychosocial treatment to individuals with depression. Preliminary evidence suggests that the services provided by trained lay counsellors are as impactful as those provided by professionals in the field, and the need of the hour in a country like India.

***Self-care for therapists.***

Seeing the increase in caregiver fatigue faced by therapists, it is evident that they require support as well. It might help therapists to approach their supervisors and counsellors and receive help to ease the burden of their stressful profession. Following a routine and finding a work-life balance can also be helpful during such times.