



Timely Community Psychosocial Support during Coronavirus Outbreak: A Practical Response

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Short Communication

Communities throughout the United States are faced with a public health challenge: the novel coronavirus. The media is keeping score, the pandemic and the number of deaths is increasing, and so are population restrictions that are meant to avoid viral spread. As we confront this situation, we have to remain active, optimistic and move forward on the path to resilience. This paper introduces some theoretical background on the coronavirus, briefly addresses the psychosocial impact of quarantine and social isolation and describes how to be pro-active in your respective community.

Brooks et al. [1] conducted a review of 24 studies and developed a review focused on quarantine of individuals suspected of having a virus. By quarantine, we mean the separation and restriction of individual's movement who have been exposed to a virus to reduce community spread. The main stressors during quarantine included duration, fears of infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, and stigma (p.916). The review suggests that the psychological impact of quarantine is wide-ranging, substantial, and can be long lasting. The results of quarantine may be ameliorated if the affected individuals receive timely and accurate information, are given an explanation for the duration, are recommended meaningful activities, ensured basic supplies, and reinforced that social isolation during this time of social isolation is an act of altruism.

Three psychosocial support interventions are needed to reduce fear and promote well-being [2]. First, we need to adopt a systemic perspective. Just as it is important to appreciate and evaluate the psychosocial impact of any emerging infectious disease or nosocomial infection on patients and health care workers, it is equally important to determine the psychological effects of the disease on populations that are often unseen such as family members, nonmedical staff, medical colleagues in the community and the general public. This will enable a more comprehensive and balanced planning of efforts to alleviate psychosocial burdens or to mitigate the onset of these burdens in the future. Second, the psychological impact may persist or evolve over time and prospective research is warranted. Third, the outcomes of psychosocial interventions should be evaluated. This includes an assessment of both individual- and group-based interventions, and of other measures such as staff educational sessions, public education and the responsive communication of updated information.

As of today, the needs for mental health and psychosocial support for those affected by the 2019-NCOV epidemic has been under addressed. Persons with confirmed or suspected 2019-NCOV may experience a fear of the consequences of infection with a potentially fatal new virus, and those quarantined might experience boredom, loneliness, and anger.

Brooks et al. [1] address and reduce the psychological impact and consequences of quarantine. Some community psychosocial support methods that are recommended include: (1) Clear communication with regular and accurate updates about the 2019-NCOV to address the sense of uncertainty and fear; (2) secure services should be set up to provide psychosocial support for using electronic devices and applications by those that are infected or affected by the virus and the community at large; and (3) the vulnerable community (i.e. elderly, persons with prior mental health issues, and underrepresented communities) should receive regular screenings for depression, anxiety, and distress related to the virus and infections. For most of the community, psychosocial support workers' emotional and behavioral responses are part of an adaptive response to extraordinary stress, and stress reduction and adaptation activities are helpful.

In our work as community based psychosocial volunteers, in the context of outbreaks and epidemics where, in addition to the much-needed public health and medical approaches, a strong community based psychosocial support response is vital to address the distress that epidemics cause in the affected populations. The most common psychological reactions to stress include anxiety,

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sadness, anger, guilt, difficulty concentrating or relating to others, and fear [3]. Stigma is also a great challenge, and further contributes to the distress caused in these situations. Stigma is faced by those that have become ill, but also by their relatives, health care workers and other frontline professionals, survivors, etc. In addition to the mentioned reactions, individuals and communities have to overcome the grief of losing their loved ones and the anguish of many that undergo financial losses. Therefore, in these circumstances, psychosocial support may be useful or necessary to help individuals recover.

Actions for psychosocial volunteers

What are some general actions that organizations can take to alleviate fear and promote resilience? The following suggestions are offered: First, control of the outbreaks by enabling behavioral changes in persons exposed to infected people. Fear, misinformation, superstition and rumors can be the biggest challenges in trying to stop the spread of a disease. Community mobilization activities that focus on providing psychosocial support while enabling the dissemination of important messages that are unified will increase awareness and reducing stigma, and thus can help to stop the spread of diseases, even more than mass media campaigns [3].

Second, offer psychosocial support for broader communities. To tackle the issues brought about by the stress of dealing with an epidemic on a daily basis psychological interventions can positively impact the capacity of the families and communities to respond, adapt and cope with an epidemic.

Third, take care of yourself at this time. Try and use helpful coping strategies such as ensuring sufficient rest and respite during work or between shifts, eat sufficient and healthy food, engage in physical activity, and stay in contact with family and friends. This is a unique and unprecedented scenario for many workers, particularly if they have not been involved in similar responses. Even so, using strategies that have worked for you in the past to manage times of stress can benefit you now. You are most likely to know how to de-stress and you should not hesitate to keep yourself psychologically well. This is not a sprint, it's a marathon.

Fourth, ensure good quality communication and that accurate information updates are provided to all staff. Rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions. Partner in experienced

workers with their more experienced colleagues. The buddy system helps to provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety procedures. Ensure that outreach personnel enter the community in pairs. Initiate, encourage and monitor work breaks. Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member impacted by a stressful event. Ensure you build in time for colleagues to provide social support to each other.

Communities can be drivers of self-care and change [4].

Have you thought about developing a plan for the next fourteen days? Each person has a space, a space to "make your place in the world". Probably, the most altruistic action to include in your plan is to take a walk - this is a way of identifying and helping the most vulnerable. Our approach should facilitate families, groups, and the community to support and care for others in ways that encourage recovery and resilience. We can take actions on our block to restore or strengthen collective psychosocial structures and systems that are essential to daily life and well-being. Our individual and collective plan should articulate what services are needed. For instance, an elderly person needs groceries and a linguistically diverse person feels lonely and may need someone to talk too. We should involve all the people on our street block, our neighborhood or community, and finally, we should identify a process of working toward the well-being of all during this period of crisis.

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