



Social Support as Panacea for Psychological Symptoms of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The news of COVID 19 in the nations of the world made millions of people, young and old, rich and poor to stay indoors. Students have been out of school, markets closed down, jobs stopped while some are retrenched, even movements within and outside the states banned, all because of the pandemic. As a result, it has been observed that a lot of people have developed certain psychological symptoms of anxiety, depression, boredom, isolation, aggressive tendencies and many others. This paper therefore explores the importance of social support in curbing these psychological symptoms thereby making people psychologically stable.

Key words: Social Support, Psychological Symptoms, COVID-19

Introduction

The Coronavirus disease – 19 which is a family of SARS-CoV-2 popularly referred to as COVID-19 responsible for the ongoing pandemic is far from being over. As much as it ravages the world medically, economically, socially and otherwise with its mutative versions, its pangs and scourge may never be contained without social support at all levels including global cooperation among nations. Perhaps, the greatest consequence of the pandemic is not its fatality rate (currently at 2% of all effected persons) but the psychological symptoms such as phobia, fear, anxiety, depression etc which came with the disease. These psychological symptoms according to experts (Chew et al., 2020; Herandi et al., 2017) are persistent comorbidity factors of the disease which aggravate health and mental health depreciation upon the established correlation (Harandi et al., 2017) between physiological health and psychological health.



This psychological correlation is a known challenging factor in the management of the disease. Hence, to successfully manage the disease, there is need to enliven the psychological symptoms of victims which can help to accelerate the physiological and medical or clinical recovery. One of the proven methods of managing psychological symptoms is through improved social support for the victims and their caregivers (Menec et al., 2020; Fu et al., 2020)

The nature of pandemic with its attendant problems like other health condition requires substantial social support especially in dealing with the psychological symptoms to boost coping and recovery. Typically, social support (either of family, friends or significant others) has been known to lessen the psychological burden of patients and improve health-related quality of life (HRQoL) (Fu et al., 2020, Onyemaechi, Aroyewun, & Ifeagwazi (2017).). Given this instance, this current review contends that promotion of social support at this time of the pandemic will strongly reduce and improve the coping behaviour of psychological symptoms orchestrated by COVID-19.

Social Factors in Covid-19 Disease and the Pandemic

The tension created by the pandemic is due to its rapid spread and high contagiousness through droplets (Sen-Crowe et al., 2020) was worrisome. The global response to this panic and threat to human life saw drastic measures being taken to safeguard lives; thus, self and public isolation, quarantine, social distancing were initiated until a global lockdown became a necessary action (Anderson et al., 2020). The negative impacts there isolation



are real and adjusting to new way of life was inevitable for survival although they came with harsh reality as they characteristically changed and patterned human interaction.

Health wise, the persistence of the virus and lack of cure and vaccine created phobias, panics, anxiety and depression which became challenges to the public health as the virus case fatality rate (CFR) ensued (Shigemura et al., 2020). Although, Usher et al. (2020) contended that these measures helped to checkmate the rate of its spread, however, the CFR largely depend on changes in individual and public lifestyles which are determined by adaptation to personal and environmental practices such as personal hygiene and management of environmental hazards in form of air and water pollution and poor sanitary environment.

Considering the typical health challenges of third world countries such as Nigeria which include but not exhaustive of lack of basic health amenities, lack medical professionals, lack of medicine, adulteration of medicine due to corruption, poor environmental sanitation, inadequate water supply system, housing as per proper ventilation, and other health related challenges, the threat of the pandemic becomes frightening. There were also negative medical forecast by professionals regarding the disease impacts in the third world countries which sealed the fate of Nigerians and the rest of the third world (Umenweke, Umenweke, & Onyemaechi, 2017). In the circumstances of these projections, and given infection rate of the disease, varying degrees of psychological symptoms began manifest among the Nigerian population.



Covid-19 and Manifestations of Psychological Symptoms in Nigeria

The scourge of the pandemic was harsh and instantaneous on the countries of Europe and America although there were notable efforts and rapid response to contain the virus and reduce the skyrocketing CFR numbers. Despite these efforts, the scourge of the disease overwhelmed these developed nations as many of them became hapless and declared Nationwide State of Emergency (Kuniya, 2020). The failure of the developed nations to contain the virus and find a cure to the disease was devastating to the developing world such as Nigeria who was watching and hoping with keen interest on the development and protraction of the disease which created all manner of psychological problems for the rest of the Nigerian population. Primarily, there were manifestations of:

- i. Phobia – With the fear people not being diminished and vanquished, phobia set in. Usually, phobia is an abnormal fear of something which according to Heiat et al. (2021) emanated from the uncertain origins of Covid-19, its problematic complications and management and its unexplained high fatality. Many feared that the emergence of the disease is no longer biological. The thought of this dimension created phobia as regards human contact and infection of the disease. Many Nigerians experienced diverse ranges of phobia and are still manifesting them.
- ii. Fear of death, death anxiety – Another symptom that manifested was fear of death which was inevitable psychological response to the severe fatality rate of the disease which left 10,000 dead on daily basis globally, something that was unthinkable and imaginable given the advancement science and technology. Because the disease has short fatality duration, many feared that they are already



dead once they contracted the disease irrespective of the treatment which appears helpless on the disease at the time of the surge. The initial fear of death people have regarding the outcome of the disease if they become infected soon reached anxiety levels primarily because the coping mechanisms which were hinged on human interaction and relationships also suffered a setback as social isolation was enforced (Menzies & Menzies, 2020) globally. Although, the awareness of disease outcome tended to reduce death anxiety; however, it drove a number of maladaptive coping behaviours (Menzies, 2020) such as avoidance of diagnosis, taking medication or routine checks which all the more increased the death rate and consequently death anxiety.

- iii. Anxiety – The general public manifested notable psychological symptoms especially anxiety about the uncertainty. Traumatic events of fatality and shutting down of business, social, religious, educational and recreational activities reduced people's feeling of security. According to Mann et al. (2020) there is an economic related anxiety as people became anxious for many things including; how to sustain their livelihood as most provision vendors and market were shutdown, and how to cope financially in the post covid-19 became a problem thus stimulating death anxiety. There are also issues with employment as how to find what to do also become a source of worry to the public whose organizations have shutdown production with countless losses. Critically, there was social anxiety due to decreased social relations due to the pandemic Yildirim et al. (2021) and in compliance to the “stay home, stay safe” recommendations/prohibitions such as remaining at home and mandatory quarantine if one was exposed.
- iv. Depression – The overall experience of the pandemic left bad feelings for the public as people were sad, loss interest in their usual routines and experienced mood deterioration (Salari et al., 2020). The fact that anybody could be infected



irrespective of your social class gave people sleepless nights and depression knowing full well that, victims' chances of survival is not something that is known or guaranteed (Shevlin et al., 2020). The stress associated with the coping demands of the pandemic was also in the views of Heiat et al. (2021), the major factor which characterized depressive episodes among the public; people as a matter of fact reached their coping limit as the pandemic ensued and consequently suffered depression and other psychological conditions (Uzoma, Okonkwo, Onyemaechi & Ugwu, 2021).

The psychological symptoms enumerated above were the underlying conditions which were the consequences of the ongoing covid-19 pandemic which is yet to receive a permanent cure (WHO, 2021). It is not worthy that these manifestations were based on six cardinal realities of the diseases including:

- a) That the disease is real
- b) That it is highly infections
- c) That it is deadly with short interval mortality
- d) That there is are no cure or vaccination yet
- e) That management of the disease is costly especially with ventilators
- f) That there is no end in sight

These psychological situations where devastating and they equally created some physical and physiological health challenges such as:

- 1. Insomnia
- 2. Loss of appetite
- 3. Lethargy
- 4. Traumatic conditions, physical seizures
- 5. High blood pressure
- 6. General aggression and hostility



The combination of all these psychological, physiological and physical symptoms accelerated other challenges which were propelled by the nationwide lockdown and personal and group isolation and quarantine procedures. Some of the challenges which ensued include but not limited to:

1. Hunger
2. Insecurity
3. Domestic violence

These challenges on their own exacerbated the effects of the pandemic leaving the society more vulnerable to the depreciating human condition – a situation whose reality gradually dawned on mankind that without social support or collective efforts, the global response to the pandemic may yield minimal fruits as the psychological symptoms of the virus is killing much people faster than would the virus.

Social Support and Psychological Symptoms of Covid-19

Mostly, the problem and challenge with disease outbreaks is not just about medical solutions but more about managing the public sentiments and the consequent psychological factors to the outbreak. Most disease outbreaks have inherent and underlying psychological dimensions which mostly require education, sensitization and social support as coping strategies in addition to the medical treatment. This is because disease whether infectious or not are the major source of psychological distress and psychological distress being a public health problem is usually the concern of the stakeholders (Pont et al., 2020).



Most disease outbreaks like pandemics are the greatest source of health related psychological distress partly because of the panic and phobia associated with them and also because of the challenges inherent in containing the disease and managing the rapid spread. The recent COVID-19 pandemic which is a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak caused substantial concern among health authorities, the media, and the general public (Sim et al., 2020). Without doubt pandemics such as the COVID-19 are notable stress and stressors requiring significant coping strategy notably social support because of the psychosocial outcomes of common with infectious disease outbreaks (Pappas et al., 2009). Such psycho-social outcomes may be in form of financial cost of effective treatment (as regards ventilators), sense of shame, failure, anxiety, phobia, uncertainty of survival, over and estimation of infection; excessive caution, poor precautionary measures, shortage of medical services and personnel (Xiang et al., 2020). Considering that most of these challenges of the pandemic may not have solutions in the immediate; then, survival much depends on effective coping strategies adopted in relations to specific situations in the different phases of the pandemic.

Social support based coping for psychological symptoms of covid-19

Given the complications of covid-19 pandemic and multi-faceted problems it orchestrated, social support has been adjudged as the most effecting coping strategy in the pandemic. All dimensions of social support were found to be relevant at the pandemic (Yu et al., 2020). For instance; the lockdown require family support to galvanize synergy and collaboration for recreating the members at home and encouraging and motivating the infected family members



at quarantine units to pull through the disease and return home during the long periods of the global lockdown. Also, people (especially infected persons) need the cheering and support of their friends through mobile communication (texts, audio and video messages) to remain psychologically stable following covid-19 diagnosis, isolation and treatment such as CBT and REBT which is good for treatment of depression and anxiety (Onyemaechi, Unadike, Philip & Madu, 2022). Consider that Grey et al. (2020) found that persons passing through self-isolation had significantly higher rates of depression, irritability and loneliness (compared to those who were not) which increased the risk for elevated levels of depression which is significantly lower in persons with higher levels of social support compared to those with low perceived social support. For instance, those with significant social support experienced better quality of sleep than their counterparts with less social support. Their finding emphasized the efficacy of social support as determinant of psychological outcomes of people in the pandemic (Guo et al., 2020).

Outside family and personal attachments, people are also in need of significant others' support especially to survive the economic, social and psychological hardships occasioned by the pandemic due to global shutdown outdoor activities. Supporting this Seiter and Brophy (2021) found that online and telephone hotlines for distress calls and reports at the covid-19 pandemic provided not only health support but equally provide social support as callers spent longer durations on the call in an attempt to find soothing and encouragement regarding the pandemic.



Equally, people are in need of the collaboration of their colleagues to work from home and perform other tasks which may be essential and beneficial to the public and others. For example Seiter and Brophy (2021) found that the communication support and functions provided by social media handles such as Reddit, YouTube, and Facebook varied significantly and provided users significant support and encouragement during the lockdown.

Furthermore, Bavel et al.'s (2020) finding showed the importance of social support in ameliorating the psychological distress associated with disease outbreak such as covid-19. The authors contended that social and psychological wellbeing can be enhanced by giving and receiving support when people are connected together using social media platforms through the internet. Their study also found that the boredom proneness associated with isolation and loneliness inherent with lockdown and quarantine significantly reduced with friends and family members making video or phone calls among one another.

Theoretical Connections between Social Support and Psychological Distress

There are equally theoretical paradigms which fundamentally provide understanding of the impacts of social support in ameliorating the suffering associated with psychological distress. Most of these psychological paradigms have been consistent with empirical results as reviewed. Notably among the theories is the Terror management theory. Considering these empirical positions which support the social support paradigm in reducing the



psychological distress associated with covid-19, this review was anchored on Terror management theory by Greenberg (2012).

Terror management theory

Terror management theory (TMT) is a social psychological theory which evolved from Becker's (1973) study which is hinged on the effects death fears on human behaviour (Greenberg et al., 1992). Greenberg (2012) TMT theory contended that our awareness of our own death produces a crippling terror, and that humans have developed two distinct buffers in order to allay this fear: cultural worldviews, and self-esteem which are used as a coping mechanism against the awareness and fears of self death. TMT also proposes that humans activate two defense mechanisms suitable to whether thoughts of death are within or outside ('dual process model'). It can be 'proximal defenses' which attempt to suppress horror thoughts, denying one's vulnerability or trying to prevent death (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Alternatively, when thoughts of death are in the unconscious 'distal defenses' are activated which involve strengthening either our cultural worldviews or promoting positive feelings about the self (self-esteem). Psychological distress can make a sufferer to media reports on the pandemic as attempts to suppress reality or make one find a reason to feel that he or she is not among the vulnerable or infected group or feelings suggestive that they will be fine in spite of their risk exposures. Others might equally think that they can avoid the dangers of the pandemic by constant cleaning and adherence to WHO measures.

Implications of the Study



Literature is consistent with the relationship between social support and psychological adjustment and has also demonstrated that there is association among disease activity, psychological symptoms and social support (Okonkwo,et.al, 2023). Social support critically influences health relation quality of life among patients. Therefore, without emphasizing and sensitizing the public on the importance of social support to help reduce psychological symptoms, its effects as a comorbidity factor will reduce the coping ability of sufferers of the covid-19, reduce the efficacy of drug treatment and may equally delay their recovery (in case of survivals) of patients. In some cases uncontrolled psychological symptom manifestation among the infected persons may elevated the effects of the virus attack. For instance, anxiety and depression may affect patients' blood pressure which may in turn affect the body system negatively and thus created challenges in managing treatment and its effects.

Conclusion

The current review was focused on the use of social support as panacea for the inherent psychological symptoms which came with the COVID-19 pandemic. The psychological symptoms were traced to social factors which came with the pandemic such as lockdown, quarantine, social distance and the required isolation. These social factors were gravely associated to limiting socialization factors which created inadvertent interpersonal and interpersonal crises which still linger till today. To help patients cope with the situation, there is the need to encourage victims of the pandemic, their caregivers and other stakeholders to embrace all forms of social support in order to enliven the psychological effects and promote health-related quality of life.



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