

Draft

Best Practice

**Psycho-social Helpline for COVID 19 by Haryana Government:
Stress Mitigation through Online Counselling**

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Introduction

The current situation has proven that pandemics are far from being just a medical phenomenon. The strategies implemented by the country to curb this outbreak have disrupted personal and professional lives severely and affected people and societies on several levels. The key strategies being employed to contain an outbreak of this nature, are isolation and physical distancing – both have significant impacts on our lives and relationships.

The Challenging Ecosystem

There are myriad reasons that have contributed to the stress levels and mass hysteria among the population. One of them is exponentially increasing barrage of misinformation constantly thrown at us via social media platforms. In addition, the fear of transmission, related stigma of being quarantined, marginalisation and xenophobia is kicking in the fear among citizens. Secondly, periodical news of the current dismal state of healthcare facilities adds to the stress level in the population. It is important to note that an overabundance of (mis)information on social media possessed a major risk to public mental health as well. Thirdly, the worsening of stress level among people having prior illness history and facing the problems in accessing medical and psychiatric help. Fourthly, the multiple responsibilities like working from home, managing domestic chores, threat of job loss and domestic violence. Additionally, health anxiety, sleep disturbances, panic attacks, depression and loneliness are the other known mental health fallouts of living through a pandemic. Poverty and unemployment coupled with lockdown has multiplied the stress level. All these have affected the entire ‘basis of life’ question for many during this time of national lockdown. WHO had also warned that the coronavirus crisis and the restrictive measures that many countries are taking to contain the outbreak can have a negative impact on people's mental health and well-being.

Haryana Initiative

Reports keep on pouring about increased cases of anxiety linked stress due to social isolation in prolonged lockdown amidst the fear of pandemic. The long-term mental health impacts of this unprecedented pandemic particularly on vulnerable groups, are not yet fully realized but the potential impact may be equally unprecedented. The physical health impacts of Covid-19 have received significant attention worldwide, yet it is also important to prepare for the mental health aspects. One may not overemphasize the need for real-time monitoring and professional help including counselling on mental health issues, for general population as well as the groups which are considered at-risk groups including healthcare professionals. Thus it is imperative to explore how people can be helped to cope with the pandemic, and the steps to support the mental

wellbeing are prioritized. As a short-term measure inventive ways are found to communicate public health measures and assuage the stress. Repurposing online digital therapies may be one possible way in this direction. The helpline was started by the efforts of the Additional Chief Secretary, Health Department, Mr. Rajeev Arora.

Psycho-Social Helpline

With an objective to providing psychiatric support to the people affected by the widespread pandemic novel coronavirus, a Psycho-Social helpline with two numbers, having 120 primary rate interface 1075 (for whole of Haryana except Faridabad and Gurugram districts) and 8558893911 (for whole of Haryana) has been launched by the Haryana government for giving aid to affected persons. It has received a tremendous response from the volunteers as around 110 volunteers have offered their services for tele-counselling. The health department has set up a separate cell for mental health professionals who can be contacted on the helpline number.

Apart from addressing various problems and physical health issues, this helpline looks to resolve the issue of increasing psychological problems in the general public. There are various groups of people who are more vulnerable to psychological problems during these pandemic spreads and lockdowns such as senior citizens living alone, students, patients suffering from hypertension and other psychological ailments. The affected people, if not helped, could resort to drastic steps, or may suffer other ailments owing to mounting stress. Thus, it is imperative for the government to help these people cope up during the times of isolation and a potential disease threat. Apart from the volunteers for tele-counselling, about 1000 voluntary doctors are available for tele-medicine on the help line.

Most Questions/Queries (*Data Source: Report of State Control Room Till 21.04.2020*)

S.NO.	MAJOR FAQs IN HEALTH CATEGORY	MAJOR FAQs IN NON-HEALTH CATEGORY
1	BASIC INFORMATION OF SYMPTOMS/GENERAL HEALTH RELATED QUERY	ASSISTANCE FOR FOOD GRAIN AND COOKED FOOD
2	TELE-CONSULTANCY	RELATED TO STATUS OF OPENING OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ESSENIAL SERVICES
3	ENQUIRING ABOUT HEALTH DUE TO UNWELL FEELING	RELATED TO MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE
4	GUIDED TO HOSPITAL	FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE NOT TRANSFERRED
5	MASK AVAILABILITY	SANITIZATION ISSUES IN PANCHAYATS

From March 8 to till April 21, 2020 of the total number of calls and queries, 54 percent were relating to Food Supplies, 11 percent to Health including mental health, seven percent to Transport, six percent to Services and threepersent to other issues.

A total number of 166073 calls were received till 21.4.2020 on the helpline. Of these 159620 calls were answered. Of the total call received, 51394 were related to health, 106550 to non-health while 8132 were related to counselling.

Major Issues Conveyed by Callers/Analysis Dated 21.04.2020

S.NO.	MAJOR ISSUES	ACTION BY CS CONTROL ROOM	ANALYSIS
1	REQUIREMENT FOR FOOD GRAINS/COOKED FOOD	INFORMATION SHARED BY WHASTAPP WITH NODAL OFFICER OF FOOD DEPARTMENT AT DISTRICT LEVEL • NODAL OFFICER OF REVENUE DEPARTMENT AT DISTRICT LEVEL • REPRESENTATIVES APPOINTED BY DEPUTY COMMISSIONERS	NO. OF CALLS FOR FOOD GRAINS AND COOKED FOODS HAVE INCREASED 20.04.2020- 330 PENDING CASES 21.04.2020- 369 PENDING CASES
2.	QUERIES RELATED TO HEALTH AND CORONA	INFORMATION IS SHARED	NO OF CALLS HAVE INCREASED
3	LACK OF INFORMATION ABOUT AVAILABILTY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES/GOODS	INFORMATION IS SHARED	NO. OF CALLS HAVE DECREASED
4	INTERSTATE/INTERDISTRICT /INTRASTATE MOVEMENT	CALLER IS CONVEYED TO STAY AT HOME DURING LOCKDOWN AND MAINTAIN SOCIAL DISTANCING AWARENESS ABOUT MOVEMENT PASS IS ALSO	NO. OF CALLS HAVE DECREASED

		SHARED	
5	FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE HAS NOT BEEN TRANSFERRED/WAGES NOT RECEIVED	INFORMATION IS SHARED	NO. OF CALLS HAVE DECREASED
6	LOCKDOWN NOT FOLLOWED	DSP RANKED NODAL OFFICER OF POLICE DEPARTMENT COORDINATES WITH DISTRICT OFFICIALS OF POLICE DEPARTMENT	NO. OF CALLS HAVE INCREASED

The helpline has been functional with provisions of counselling the people by professional psychiatrists. Additionally, it guides people on stress management by suggesting them meditation and yogic methods. Also, the helpline shares several tips on maintaining one's mental health during lockdown. Right since its launch, the helpline has received a tremendous response. It is for the first time that such a helpline has been launched by the Health Department of Haryana.

Volunteer Driven Implementation

The helpline is being largely implemented through a large posse of volunteers. The very fact that people in large numbers are volunteering for this helpline is a testimony of the innate good nature of human beings who help each other in testing times like these. The helpline also boosts the morale of the general population and front-line workers by helping them manage the stress levels of the population. As per the estimates, over 3.5 lakh students are pursuing higher education in Haryana and 180 psychology teachers will counsel the students through the helpline. In order to facilitate such students who must also be feeling mental anxiety and stress which may emanate from the aftermath of lockdown and discontinuation of their studies, this helpline will work 24x7 as a guiding agent.

S. No.	Specialty	Number
•	Physician MD/DNB/Comm. Med.	61
•	Physician MBBS	124
•	ENT	14
•	Orthopaedician	20
•	Pediatrician	38
•	Gynecologist	21
•	Anesthetist	20

•	Psychiatrist	3
•	Psychologist	29
•	Dental Surgeon	97
•	AYUSH Doctors	489
•	Surgeon	15
•	Cardiologist	3
•	Ophthalmologist (Eye)	15
•	Dermatologist (Skin)	4
•	Radiologist	5
•	Physiotherapist	2
•	Pathologist	7
•	Microbiologist	6
•	Gastroenterologist	1
•	Surgical Oncology	1
•	Forensic Medicine	1
•	Chest And TB	3
•	Total 979	979

Number of calls

Numbers have been included on the basis of reports submitted to the government of Haryana by the implementing agency. There is hardly any reason to doubt veracity of data.

Impact and Outcome

The key people benefitted by the helpline include the following:

- Senior citizens
- Patients suffering from psychiatric ailments
- Students living alone in the state
- Widows
- Financially weak citizens living on pensions/meager sources of income with no family support.
- Migrant labour especially those staying in temporary camps.

The helpline is encouraging callers to resort to the following measures to combat the stress built up during the lockdown

- Practice meditation
- Practice yoga
- Mindful use of social media
- Limited viewership of news
- Developing hobbies and constructive habits

Utility, Efficacy and Sustainability

There is no ready manual to handle the magnitude and impact of the present spontaneous crisis. Strategies and solutions are being evolved on intuitive professional wisdom and experiences in emergency situations. Similarly, the sustainability and utility for replication may be limited. The study is basically analytical and uses secondary data with some inputs from government agencies. May be when things settle down a bit we may seek feedback from service providers, counsellors and those who are benefited by the helpline.

Lesson Learnt

A pandemic like situation was low at the disaster preparedness and mitigation discourse and endeavors. In general terms also, in any disaster-linked hazard there is an urgent and important need for socio-psycho support to the people for keeping their moral to fight the unforeseen calamity. The current crisis has shown that sufficient resources need to be prepared and kept in readiness to support people in the hour of distress. Self-motivated and public-spirited citizens have come forward within a short period of time to the call by state government. A database of specialist counsellors should be prepared district and zone-wise and volunteers are enlisted to support the system at ground level. Civil society may also incorporate such preparedness in their social agenda and professional may be encouraged to act as mentors and develop team of volunteers.

Conclusion

The health department is making ample efforts to contain the spread of the corona virus, however, initiatives like this helpline will support the government in taking care of the mental health of citizens till the time this pandemic spread is contained. The government is encouraging all health counsellors and clinical psychologists to volunteer toward contributing to this helpline so that it can support a large population. Though, mental health issues will not be solved merely by counseling but through a multidimensional approach which includes financial support, adequate and timely food supplies and providing shelter and clothing. However, to conclude it could be said that the helpline is proving to be very highly beneficial and a prominent step by the government to dampen the impacts of the spread of COVID 19 in Haryana and may be replicated in parts of the country.

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