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COVID-19 Pandemic and the Mental Well-Being of Parents: The Kenyan Perspective

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Abstract:

COVID-19 is an emerging, rapidly evolving situation. This pandemic has proven deadly to people who are infected, it is highly infectious and spreads through contact with infected individuals. Best practice world over is to test, isolate and treat. This disease has had tremendous and profound effects globally. Due to epidemiology of Covid-19, several measures have been put in place to curb the spread of the disease. This paper is highly relevant at this distressing time. Specifically, it addresses anxiety disorders that can develop or can be exacerbated by the various measures that governments world over have taken to curb the spread of the pandemic. In addition, the important role that counsellors need to play in order to help restore normalcy, mental health, and psychological wellbeing is also highlighted.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, mental health, anxiety disorders, panic disorder

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has been quite the enigma since it was discovered in late 2019. World health organization [WHO] (2020) stated that Covid-19 is a respiratory disease that is caused by the newest corona virus strain known as 2019 SARS-CoV 2. The manifestation of Covid19 in human being had been reported to exhibit symptoms such as cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing or with fever, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pains, headache, sore throat, and loss of taste or smell (Center for disease control, 2019). This disease has proven deadly to people who are infected, it is highly infectious and spreads through contact with infected individuals (Huang,Wang,Li,et al., 2020).In addition, there has been no known cure for it. The WHO towards the beginning of March 2020 classified COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), in other words, a pandemic. According to Morganstein, Fullerton, Ursano, Donato, and Holloway (2017) pandemics and other infectious disease outbreaks result in psychological stressors and behavioral responses. In addition, the protracted and evolving nature of events can result in escalating worry and distress. In such distressing and challenging times, the media plays a significant role in shaping public perception. Also, trust in government authorities and perceptions regarding their ability to manage an outbreak directly impact the degree to which the public participates in health risk behaviors designed to avoid infection, treat illness, and prevent spread of disease.

There is a worldwide concern about the new coronavirus 2019-nCoV as a global public health threat(Benvenuto, Giovanetti, Ciccozzi, Spoto, Angeletti, &Ciccozzi, 2020).The world is experiencing unprecedented times due to the pandemic spread of coronavirus (Covid-19). There is no doubt that this disease has had tremendous and profound effects in almost every aspect of people's livelihoods. WHO (2020) announced that over 3 million people have been infected by covid-19 virus and over 230 thousand deaths had occurred at the time of developing this paper.

Due to epidemiology of Covid-19, several measures have been put in place to curb the spread of the disease (Wang, Horby, Hayden, &Gao, 2020; Wang, 2020). Kenya, for instance, has closed its borders to foreigners, enforced a curfew between the hours of 1600 - 0200 GMT; put the 'hotspot' towns (Nairobi, Kilifi, Mombasa and Kwale) on lockdown. In times of tensions as these, there are several mental health issues that might spring about from the population. More specifically, disorders such as anxiety disorders and depression can develop or can be exacerbated by the various measures that governments have taken to curb the spread of the pandemic.

1.1. Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a normal and necessary basic emotion without which individual survival would be impossible. However, pathologically increased anxiety can also be a warning signal of potential harm in somatic illnesses. Anxiety disorders are marked by excessive fear (and avoidance), often in response to specific objects or situations and in the absence of true danger, and they are extremely common in the general population (Ströhle, Gensichen&Domschke, 2018,Shin &Liberzon, 2010).

Anxiety disorders can exhibit themselves among parents who are concerned for the safety of their children. The DSM 5 defines anxiety disorders as those that cause fear and anxiety (2013). Fear, according to DSM 5 (2013) is defined as an affective feeling towards a perceived oncoming threat. Most parents of children in countries, for example, Kenya are undergoing a fearful response in a crisis that they are likely not fully cognizant of.

Anxiety is the feeling of expecting a future threat. This is further exacerbated by the way the pandemic is reported in the media as well as how people in other countries are reacting to the way the disease is handled. These include the various means of panic buying seen in America, where there is a genuine feeling of not getting vital homely supplies (Cockerell, 2020).

The fear of not being able to obtain vital supplies for their children and the anticipation of not being able to get the same supplies is what can profoundly cause the emergence of several anxiety disorders. Considering this, there are several anxiety disorders that will exhibit themselves during this pandemic, in reference to the DSM 5.

1.2. Panic Disorder

A mental disorder that can emerge as a result of COVID-19 is panic disorder. Panic disorder, according to the DSM 5 is characterised by an unending and sudden panic attack. Referring to the parents of children in Kenya, this problem is expedited by the methods the government and the media employ to curb the virus. The problem comes about when misinformation and disinformation is spread rampantly on social media. As a result of panic induced, parents go into a defensive mode to protect the family from harm. By fearing the threat that COVID-19 may affect them negatively, the parents may develop symptoms such as accelerated heart rates, trembling, nausea, chest discomfort, irritable bowels, or shortness of breath. They may fear dying as they are unsure who will take care of their children.

By observing how other countries react to COVID-19, it is possible to predict the behaviour of how Kenya will adjust to it. As established, parents will take measures that will ensure the survival of their children. One way this is done is by purchasing and hoarding often unnecessary goods (Cockerell, 2020). This can result in panic buying of goods. Panic buying can be detrimental to the public as it might deplete the supply of vital goods, including medicine, food stuff, and dietary supplements for others.

1.3. Separation Anxiety

This is developmentally inappropriate fear of detachment from home or from attachment figures (DSM 5, 2013). This is mostly seen during adolescence but is also prevalent in adults. Separation anxiety symptoms include the individuals' irrational fear of being separated from their homes or from attachment figures, the constant worry about the state of health of attachment figures and the persistent need to be in constant communication with them. This is a key symptom for parents in Kenya amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. From the social media reports, it is evident that there is fear of dying of the disease especially with older parents who are still depended on by their adolescent children.

This can be observed when parents who are deemed vital workers are needed for their services. These services include medical, food supply, transportation, and those who workday jobs and cannot afford to stay home. Here, the parents are forced to leave their homes and may develop separation anxiety from their partners or their children.

1.4. Theoretical Perspectives of Panic Disorder and Separation Anxiety Behavioural Perspective

Arch, Landy and Craske (2013) state that there are maladaptive behaviours that are tied to panic attacks that include avoiding situations that cause them. This includes avoiding behaviours or sensations that could induce the panic symptoms. As a result of this, agoraphobia can develop, but not always (Arch, Landy & Craske, 2013). Safety behaviours are dysfunctional mental or physical actions that one takes in order to avoid disaster altogether. In reference to panic disorder, these are actions that people take to make them feel safer amidst a global pandemic. These, as observed, include the panic buying of foodstuff, medicine and toiletries.

1.5. Cognitive Features

Sufferers of panic disorders, according to Arch, Landy and Craske (2013), associate body sensations relating to panic attacks with the strong beliefs they have about fears of bodily and mental harm. This can manifest itself with parents who sometimes get afflicted by bodily aches and associate them with various symptoms of COVID-19, sparking panic.

Regarding separation anxiety, the core feature of this among parents is persistent fear or anxiety that their children may engage in behaviours that could bring the disease into the home if they are not there to personally protect them from that harm.

1.6. Emotional Perspective

The temperament of Neuroticism, that is, the susceptibility to negative emotion affects sufferers of panic disorder (Arch, Landy, & Craske, 2013). This involves coming up with negative emotions in various situations where an objective stressor is absent. For example, a parent can go out of their way to ensure that there is food to last months, medicine to last for the duration of a potential quarantine; but will start panicking that what they have is not sufficient enough.

1.6. The Role of Counselling and Psychotherapy in the Management of Mental Disorders

Treatment and the reduction of symptoms is the goal of psychotherapy within Kenya and elsewhere for parents. The role of counselling and psychotherapy is unprecedented and must be seen as an essential tool that indirectly reduces the spread of the highly infectious COVID-19. Aside from that, there are numerous benefits of the therapeutic process that can be applied to parents who are affected either directly or indirectly.

It is evident that Covid-19 is inflicting heavy psychosocial and economic burdens on survivors. There is despair, anxiety, fear, confusion, death, sudden destitution, upsurge of domestic violence and the breakup of families among others. Research evidence indicates there are effective psychotherapies that have extensive and strong empirical support. The

people exposed to the traumatic, overwhelming and distressing experiences of Covid-19 need such psycho-social interventions in order to deal with their psychosocial needs, recover and rebuild their lives.

There are specific cognitive therapies that can aid in the reduction of panic disorder. These, according to Arch, Landy and Craske (2013), include panic control treatment (PCT) and Clark's Cognitive treatment for panic disorder. Both of these therapies focus mainly on the process of psycho-education. This is important as parents and guardians can be made aware of and be cognisant of their day-to-day actions. This sensitization provides an insight on how they can have better livelihoods and strive for positivity in their families. Therefore, goal setting, personal targets, and encouraging productivity are fundamental benefits that enable parents to improve their lives and reduce the panic and anxiety levels in their households. The cognitive therapies also offer ways of cognitive restructuring. They are instrumental in the changing of distorted ways of thinking. They emphasize on introspective measures to understand feared bodily sensations. These therapies are effective and have a success rate of about 70%-80% (Arch, Landy & Craske, 2013).

Generally, therapy can help ease confusions and bring unhealthy patterns to light. It helps parents untangle years of unknown anxieties and stresses in safe environment that fosters growth and development (Tartarovsky, 2019).

Lastly, therapy can enable parents and guardians to become even better in their own roles as parents (Howes, 2014). Psycho-education and exercises provided by therapists provide a platform for parents to enhance their communication and leadership skills. In this time of Covid-19, it is important that parenting is done at an effective and efficient way. Parents should be able to restore calm in their families amidst the chaos going on in the outside-world.

2. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic can bring about several mental illnesses or expedite those that already exist. It is therefore paramount for mental health workers to be prepared for such eventualities. Having a theoretical and historical background for the illnesses assists in knowing how to go about healing parents who are afflicted by them. Parents are an essential part of the society as they are the ones who are bringing up future generations of leaders in our countries. Having this knowledge will be instrumental in preventing mental illness cases from going beyond levels that are uncontrollable. Early detection and prevention should be the norm with counsellors. The role played by counsellors is crucial in this dire time. It is therefore important for therapists to have a firm grasp of mental disorders using all the resources available to them.

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