

# Counselling Approaches For Mitigating The Psychological Reactions To Covid-19 Pademic in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

*Counseling is a helping profession. It is an essential part of the response to COVID-19 crisis ravaging the entire globe. The COVID-19 pandemic poses a major threat to the entire world's economy and health. The virus garnered heightened attention from the media. Individuals may have difficulty delineating between misinformation and authentic information about the disease. Many individuals and the general public are fearful (or may become fearful) of contracting the novel virus. The psychological reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of mental health may include stress, anxiety, depression, fear, uncertainty, panic behavior, the feeling of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal behavior. Counselling is one of the most needed services at this period when the pandemic is ravaging the entire globe. This paper, therefore, highlighted various counseling approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy and reframing, solution-focused therapy, meditation and mindfulness, and building emotional resilience for mitigating the psychological reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. Relevant suggestions were made to further mitigate the psychological reactions of individuals.*

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## Introduction

'Good health is wealth' perhaps because only a healthy body is productive. A healthy body is defined as the overall ability of the body to function well. It includes the physical, mental, emotional, and social health of all individuals. The prime source of happiness and bliss is good health (Prasanna, 2020). Better health is central to human happiness and well-being.

It also makes an important contribution to economic progress, as healthy populations not only live longer but are also productive (World Health Organization, 2020). As a result of the outbreak of Covid-19 which was caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection in the Chinese city of Wuhan, a situation of socio-economic crisis and psychological distress rapidly occurred worldwide (Serafini, Parmigiani, Amerio, Aguglia, Sher, & Amore 2020).

The outbreak of Corona Virus Disease in the years 2019 has created global health concerns and devastated the entire world. Many psychological problems in terms of mental health including stress, anxiety, panic, depression, frustration, and uncertainty during the COVID-19 outbreak emerged progressively. Common psychological reactions related to the mass quarantine which was imposed to attenuate the COVID-19 spread are generalized fear and pervasive community anxiety which are typically associated with the outbreak of the disease and increased with the escalation of new cases together with inadequate, anxiety-provoking information which was provided by media (Duan & Zhu 2020).

Importantly, other health measures may be compromised by abnormally elevated anxiety (Snehal, 2020). As the general population became increasingly exposed, anxiety-provoking topics related to this emergence of the health and socio-economic crisis need to be rapidly identified to early detect dysfunctional processes and maladaptive lifestyle changes; potentially leading to the onset of psychiatric conditions (Zhai & Du, 2020). The counseling approaches for mitigating the psychological reactions to Covid-19 are the counselling-based interventions aimed at reducing the psychological reactions to Covid-19 to avoid getting oneself into chronic mental health conditions which may produce unpleasant psychological side effects (Nwoke, 2004).

## **Psychological Reactions to Corona Virus Disease**

### **Uncontrolled Fears (Phobia)**

This is one of the most common psychological reactions to pandemics. Several existing studies demonstrated that those who have been exposed to the risk of infection may develop pervasive fear about their health, about losing their lives, and worried about infecting others, most importantly their family members. Females, younger age groups, and respondents with lower education had greater fear of COVID-19. Females are more prone to phobic fears, and they perceive greater threats than men perhaps because of the differences in their brain

chemistry and hormone fluctuation (Perrone, Giordano, Meoli, Deolmi, Marinelli, Messina, Lugani, Moretti, & Esposito 2020). Individuals between the ages of 18- to 34-year age group had the greatest fear of the pandemic, probably because social distancing and isolation might seriously disrupt their normal socializing activities for extended periods, and being children then in 2003, they lacked the successful experience of overcoming the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong. Respondents with lower education had greater fear, which was also found in previous studies, most likely due to limited knowledge and understanding of the virus (Dong, Tian, He, Zhu, Wang, Liu, & Yang 2020). Those living with others had greater fear than those living alone, perhaps because of fear of infecting others with COVID-19 and vice versa. Other studies reported that pregnant women and individuals with young children are the most at risk to develop the fear of becoming infected or transmitting the virus (Martins-Filho, Santos, & Santos. 2020)

### **Pervasive Anxiety**

Social isolation related to restrictions and lockdown measures is linked to feelings of uncertainty for the future, and fear of new and unknown infective agents resulting in abnormally increased anxiety. Anxiety may be directly related to sensorial deprivation and pervasive loneliness, in this case, people are likely to experience insomnia, depression, and post-traumatic stress. In addition, anxiety is closely associated with fatigue and reduced performance in healthcare workers while boredom and loneliness are directly related to anger, frustration, and sufferings linked to quarantine restrictions (Stickley & Koyanagi, 2016).

### **Frustration and Boredom**

Distress, boredom, social isolation, and frustration are directly related to confinement, because of abnormally reduced social/physical contact with others, and loss of habits. Torales, O'Higgins, Castaldelli, and Ventriglio (2020) reported that frustration and pervasive loneliness seem to derive from the inhibition from daily activities, the sudden interruption of social necessities, and not taking part in usual social networking activities. Frustration and boredom related to the isolation of quarantine involve loss of one's usual routine e.g., regular home and work activities, restriction of movement, shopping for necessities, and limited social and physical contact with others (Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, 2020).

## **Disabling Loneliness**

The final effect of social isolation is pervasive loneliness and boredom, which have potentially dramatic effects on both the physical and mental well-being of an individual. Pervasive loneliness may be significantly associated with increased depression and suicidal behavior. However, the isolation is progressively enhanced by anxiety, panic, or collective hysteria. Cognitive functions and decision-making are firstly impaired by hyperarousal and anxiety and later by disabling feelings of loneliness (Engel-Yeger, Muzio, Rinosi, Solano, Geoffroy & Pompili, 2016). In addition, social isolation and loneliness are also associated with alcohol and drug abuse. Both frustration and pervasive loneliness seem to derive the inhibition from daily activities, interruption of social necessities, and inability to take part in usual social networking activities enhancing the risk of hopelessness and suicidal behavior in this specific context (Khan, Siddique, Li, Ali, Shereen, Bashir, 2020). Overall, it is well known that long periods of social isolation or quarantine for specific illnesses may have detrimental effects on mental well-being (Orsolini, Latini, Pompili, Serafini, Volpe & Vellante, 2020).

## **Concept of Counselling**

Counseling is a special kind of relationship that involves an interaction between the client and the counselor. The counselor tries to use his or her professional training, skills, expertise, and experience to help the client to overcome an area of conflict or block which hitherto has hindered the growth and development of the inter and intra-personal relationship (Umoh, 2004). In the same vein, according to Willey and Andrew (2011), Counselling involves two individuals one seeking help and the other a professionally trained person who helps to solve problems, orient and direct him towards a goal which leads to his maximum development and growth. Counselling being a helping profession is a veritable source of intervention to the menace of Covid-19. COVID-19 is now spreading rapidly and has a negative impact on mental health. At this period in which the pandemic is ravaging the whole globe, counsellors by virtue of their profession are likely to be called upon or should ideally be called upon to rekindle hopes in COVI-19 patients. Individuals seek psychotherapy because they believe the therapeutic process and experience can provide relief from their suffering.

However, there is no universally acceptable treatment for managing this disease currently. Symptomatic treatment and supportive care are considered the major treatment

methods. Therefore, psychological interventions are being considered as adjuvant therapy to provide more help for COVID-19 patients. Psychotherapeutic methods are used to educate and treat patients suffering from covid-19 disease. It can eliminate physical symptoms and improve mental health (Brebach R, Sharpe L, Costa DS, et al. 2016). COVID-19 may cause public panic and mental stress. Some COVID-19 patients feel anxious and difficult to reintegrate into society. In addition, quarantine has been used in the COVID-19 outbreak (Bao, Sun, Meng, et al. 2019). It will have negative emotions such as fear, depression, and boredom in the patients, etc. Using psychological intervention will reduce psychological stress and help to integrate COVID-19 patients into society (Brooks, Webster, Smith LE, et al 2020). At this period of the pandemic, counselors need to support the generality of people going through major life changes related to the pandemic, helping them to grapple with the upheaval that has been thrust upon all. The counseling tools for mitigating the psychological reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic can be found in virtually all psychotherapeutic disciplines such as:

### **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Reframe**

This can be used to modify maladaptive negative thoughts about the pandemic, including excessive fears of contracting the disease and fear of infecting others as well as hopelessness about maintaining social connections during periods of quarantine. In cognitive-based psychologies, the practitioner works to help the client reframe limiting, unhelpful, and/or irrational thoughts, replacing them with more adaptive, realistic ones. Thus, thoughts such as, *"I'm sure I'll lose my job in this pandemic, and I'll never work again"* are reviewed and evidence is sought for them. Even if the person is working or has been working in an industry that is closing up during the pandemic (for example the aviation and hospitality industries), there is no evidence to suggest that these industries will not roar into life again when lockdowns are lifted and people have not been able to put the pandemic away. Beyond that, the client can be probed to examine if he/she has ever lost a job before, for whatever reason. If so and the person has been working recently, there is clear counter-evidence to the assertion, *"I will never work again"* (Beck & Weishaar, 1995).

### **Solution-Focused Therapy**

In this therapy, as its name implies, the practitioner is expected to help the client to focus on solutions to the current problems (Ackerman, 2017). The client may not be able to go to the gym, but can consider an option of exercising at home. Online yoga workouts, fit

balls, and dumbbells may offer heretofore ignored possibilities for keeping fit. Beyond that, the practitioner can probe for how the client may have coped with similar situations (in whatever way) in the past (Ackerman, 2017). A solution-focused can be used to help the client ease the stress of the pandemic by helping the client to find solutions to the problem rather than focusing on the problem. It starts with sharing ideas of the solution focused on COVID-19 with individuals/clients. In this case, it means looking beyond the problem. Such a mindset is like what caring adults do for each other when someone they love gets hurt or suffers loss or tragedy. They use the human touch of understanding, engagement, compassion, and kindness to engage, and support their loved ones, adapt to simple hygiene measures with some other measures to ease the stress and tension of the pandemic.

### **Meditation and Mindfulness**

Meditation and mindfulness are practices that can support the general public during times of crisis such as the current global pandemic caused by Covid-19. Mindfulness and meditation practices translate well to different populations across the life span and range of ability. Introducing mindfulness and meditation practices during this pandemic has the potential to complement treatment as they are not only effective but efficient cost-wise as a method of providing support for anxiety for all. Meditation usually refers to a formal practice that could calm the mind and enhance an individual's awareness of himself, his mind, and his environment of our- selves, our minds, and our environment. Meditation in its many guises has been practiced over millennia by different groups of people in many different societies and traditions (Behen, 2020).

Previously practiced primarily in Eastern traditions, meditation has spread into Western society and is increasingly being used as a therapeutic modality. Mindfulness simply means being aware of the present moment. Meditation comes under the umbrella of 'mindfulness' which is a broader concept. Formal meditation practices include mindfulness of breathing, compassion or loving kindness-focused meditation, and the use of mantras or phrases as the focus for meditation, amongst many others. Being aware of what is happening at the present moment allows the individual to observe what is arising and what is falling away. By doing this and by allowing thoughts to come and go without attachment, without trying to hold on to them, individuals learn that calm and stillness follows (Behen, 2020).

## **Building Emotional Resilience**

Emotional resilience refers to one's ability to adjust to stressful situations or crises. More resilient people can "roll with the punches" and adapt to adversity without lasting difficulties; less resilient people have a harder time with stress and life changes, both major and minor (Elizabeth, 2020). Resilient people are always thinking about how they can bounce forward when life knocks them down. Bouncing forward is all about being able to find a positive meaning in a seemingly stressful situation. When an individual operates from this state of being, such an individual is no longer living from a place of survival. Instead, such an individual is thriving (Elizabeth, 2020). Blue (2020) reminds people to remind themselves that the pandemic crisis is a temporary period. The social isolation, the restrictions on freedom, the health threats, and also the massive unemployment, will not last forever. Beyond Blue is taking a leaf from the positive psychology playbook here.

Martin Seligman, the "father" of positive psychology, noted that an optimistic explanatory style contributes greatly to one's happiness. It consists of noticing that even as bad as any particular event is, a person can reflect that the event will not be all of the following: *permanent* (that is, most things will pass), *pervasive* (e.g., even if you lose your job, you may still have sustaining relationships), and *personal* (i.e., you may hate being under lockdown, but it's nothing personal; you are not alone, we're all in this together) (Seligman, 1992). Understandably, clients may feel anxious about this situation. Counselors should normalize and validate clients' fears. Counselors should also talk to clients about factors that are beyond their control. Some factors that clients can control include getting regular exercise, making plans to meet with friends and loved ones over virtual platforms, determining their exposure to news sources, practicing good personal hygiene, and limiting the time spent in places such as grocery stores where there may be larger crowds.

If clients appear stressed and anxious about the situation, it is a good idea for counselors to help them gain the facts so that clients can accurately determine their risks in collaboration with their healthcare providers and take reasonable precautions. Additionally, it is ideal to assist clients in developing and enhancing adaptive coping skills, such as grounding techniques or breathing exercises, so that they can effectively manage their anxiety (Yoon & Katharine 2020).

## **Suggestions**

Based on the presentations in this paper, the following recommendations are made to further mitigate the psychological reactions of people to the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. Government should encourage the establishment of public and private counseling centres across Nigeria in order to help individuals who are psychologically disturbed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and other likely pandemics.
2. Counsellors should intensify continuous awareness and education on Covid-19 to the general public, especially on the need to develop emotional resilience and mindfulness toward the pandemic.
3. Government should intensify efforts in the creation of awareness about the Covid-19 pandemic to the generality of people.
4. Counsellors should encourage every individual to take full responsibility for waging war against the spread of Covid-19.
5. Counsellors should encourage the general public to accept the reality of the pandemic and move on in life.

### **Conclusion**

Universal health coverage for Covid-19 should not be taken for granted. Covid-19 is real, and it has changed the whole globe. The Corona Virus pandemic news updates can significantly affect mental health. Individuals should learn to live with this reality by accepting it as a fact. Acceptance is to simply acknowledge the facts of the world as they are and to acknowledge the demands of the present moment. It is the act of confronting the (un)comfortable truths of reality. To radically accept is to acknowledge reality completely and totally with body, heart, and mind. Acceptance is not approval and it is not giving in or giving up. It is a choice that every individual has to make to accept the reality of the moment. Denial of the pandemic will not solve the psychological reactions that people are likely to face. To solve those problems, the virus needs to be acknowledged, as existing. Acceptance of emotions, thoughts, and struggles is a powerful way to cope in the context of the pandemic. Therefore, nondenial of covid-19 pandemic would result in positive compliance with Covid-19 safety measures, and this would equally help in flattening the curve and spread of the virus. Flattening the curve of covid-19 should be a personal responsibility of each and every one. If the counseling approaches for mitigating the psychological reactions to covid-19 are well followed and put into action, it would go a long way in mitigating the psychological effects of the pandemic on individuals.

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