

CHAPTER SEVEN

COVID-19 Pandemic: Improving Mental Health and Psychological Well Being of Students in Nigeria**Melvina N. Amalu**Department of Educational Foundations
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The uncertainties surrounding COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt disruption of academic activities in Nigeria may evoke in the student's unique challenges that may lead to poor mental health. It is against this back drop that the chapter explores the steps on how the students can improve their mental health amidst the crisis. It also highlights the origin, causes, consequences and prevention of COVID-19. It further suggests among others that when schools re-open, the counselling units of various educational institutions should organize counselling sessions, seminars and workshops for both teachers and students on the impact of COVID-19 and how they can improve their mental health and psychological wellbeing because some of the effect of the pandemic may still linger on some of them after the outbreak.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Psychological, Mental Health, Well Being**Introduction**

Education is the key to national development. But unfortunately, Nigerian educational system has been plagued with myriads and convoluted challenges such as poor funding, inadequate and decaying educational infrastructure, examination malpractice, corruption, cultism, paucity of quality teachers among others. And recently, the outbreak of COVID-19 which led to life changes and closure of schools for some time now has crippled the educational activities in Nigeria and prompted concern about students' mental health and well-being during the pandemic. It is therefore imperative that some information be provided for the students to understand the nature of the disease, how to reduce the spread and the mental health problems associated with the global health crisis.

Origin/History of COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 otherwise known as corona virus, 2019-n COVID-19 is a pathogen viral infection and highly transmittable. COVID-19 caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome corona virus 2(SARS-COVID-2). It was reported in December, 2019 in Wuhan, China and has since spread throughout the world resulting in an ongoing pandemic (Hui, Azhar, Madani, Ntoumi, Kock, Dar, Ippolito, Mchugh, Memish and Drosten, 2020). In Nigeria, the first confirmed case relating to the COVID-19 was announced on 27th February, 2020 when a 44year old Italian citizen that returned from Italy to Lagos tested positive for the virus and on 9th March, 2020, the second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, a Nigerian who had contact with the Italian citizen in February, 2020. But following care, he was discharged from the hospital on the 13th March, 2020(Nigeria Centre for Disease and Control, NCDC, 2020).

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World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) announced that the official name of the 2019 novel coronavirus is COVID-19 and then declared the outbreak of a new corona virus disease to be a public health emergency of international health concern and went further to state that there is a high risk of COVID-19 spreading to other countries around the world. Then in March, 2020, WHO made assessment that COVID-19 outbreak can be characterized as a pandemic which according to Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC,2020) is an epidemic of disease that has spread across a large region, multiple continents or worldwide, affecting substantial number of people. Genomic analysis revealed that coronavirus is genetically related to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-like (SARS-like) bat viruses. Therefore, bat could be the possible primary reservoir. Anti-viral drugs and vaccine to be used against COVID-19 is not yet available. As at the time of writing, recorded cases and death according to statistics from Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC, 2020) globally, confirmed cases were 8,295,151; recovered, 4,346,863 deaths 446,746, while in Nigeria, confirmed cases were 17,148, recovered, 5,623 and 455 deaths.

The emergence of the disease as a public health emergency by WHO has led to number of precautionary measures such as quarantine, social distancing or in some cases total lockdown in region or countries around the world, closure of schools As a result of these restrictions, people have to adjust to new realities were the future is unpredictable. Furthermore, limited access to normal daily activities, social interactions with others provokes mental health issues and weakens physical health for those who already struggle to maintain good health and well being.

Concept of Mental Health

Mental health is the state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his community. Nordquist (2015) defined mental health as a state of mental psychological and emotional wellbeing in which an individual is able to use his cognitive and emotional capabilities to function in the society and meet every day's life demand. A mentally healthy person has control over his feelings and it is the state of mental health that determines an individual's attitude to himself and others. A person struggling with mental health may experience stress, depression, anxiety, relationship problem, grief, addiction, ADHD or learning disabilities, mood disorder, eating disorder, sociopathic disorder or other mental illness of varying degrees. Whatever affects the mental health of an individual will directly or indirectly affect his general wellbeing, (Njoku, 2017).

Well-being

Wellbeing is a dynamic and multifaceted concept that includes choices and activities aimed at achieving physical vitality, mental alacrity, social satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment and personal fulfilment (Naci, Ioamdis and John 2015). Rehman, Shafi and Rizvi (2016) see well being as a positive and sustainable condition that allows individuals, groups or nation to thrive and flourish. Well-being comprised subjective, physical, social, economic, emotional, life satisfaction and psychological dimensions as well as health related behaviour. Psychological dimension of well-being is the combination of positive affective state such as happiness and functioning with optimal effectiveness in individual and social life (Amalu, 2018). It involves the combination of feeling good and functioning. People with high psychological well-being report feeling happy, capable,

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well supported, satisfied with life because positive psychological well-being is crucial for successfully navigating a new environment, engaging in meaningful relationship and realizing one's fullest potential throughout one's life span (Akhter, 2015). Psychological well-being according to Ryff(1989) consists of six dimensions namely self acceptance (positive valuation of one's self and one's past life), positive relations (quality, interpersonal relationship), autonomy (sense of self determination), environmental mastery(ability to effectively manage one's life and world around), personal growth(sense of development as a person) and purpose in life(belief that one's life is useful and has a sense).

Cause of COVID-19

COVID-19 is caused by a virus known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome corona virus 2(SARSCoV-2). The virus spreads easily from person to person among those in close contacts, it spreads by respiratory droplets released when someone with the virus coughs, sneezes or talks. These droplets can be inhaled or land in the mouth or nose of a person nearby. The virus can also spread if a person touches a surface with the virus on it and then touches his mouth, nose, eye or face.

Signs and Symptoms of COVID-19

According to WHO (2020), most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness.

Other symptoms include fever, cough, fatigue, shortness of breath, loss of taste and smell. Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS), multi-organ failure, septic shock, blood clot.

Consequences of COVID-19 Pandemic

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that can impact on students' mental health and psychological well-being as a result physical/social distancing and isolation measures, closure of schools, public and work places include the following:

Anxiety: The coronavirus pandemic causing COVID-19 understandably makes most people anxious. Anxiety according to Njoku (2017) is a maladaptive behaviour pattern that is dominated by excessive fear, worry and resentment that can adversely interfere with normal life activities. Everyone feels anxious at one time or the other. Sometime, a little feeling of anxiety is necessary to give one a push and improve alertness. However, when anxiety becomes severe it can be distressing and disabling.

Depression: With coronavirus pandemic separating people, limiting interaction and hammering economy, common anxiety and stress could tip into depression. Depression is a common mental health that presents with depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, decreased energy, feeling of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite and poor concentration (Olfson,Blanco and Marcus, 2016). Moreover, depression often comes with symptoms of anxiety. These problems can

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become chronic or recurrent and lead to substantial impairment in an individual's ability to take care of his everyday responsibilities. At its worst, depression can lead to suicide.

Stress: Stress is among the important factors threatening mental health and individuals are faced with numerous social, cognitive and physiological stressors and experiencing varying degrees of stress in their everyday lives. Njoku and Omeire (2016) define stress as a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Accumulation of daily stress and occurrence of unpleasant life events that makes one feel frustrated and nervous like social distancing, the loss of loved ones, economic problem, closure of schools as a result of COVID-19 pandemic would affect an individuals' physical and mental health and in the long - term can lead to physical and mental health disorder such as anxiety and depression (Bhurga, Till and Sartorius,2013). Stress is not always bad. In the short term, it can help one overcome a challenge or dangerous situation but when stress is chronic and remains unchecked it can raise blood pressure, suppress immune system, increases the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Loneliness: People who embrace solitude are more likely to adapt to current circumstances related to social distancing, given that it is not outside the normal realm of how they live. However, for those students who generally choose to be more social, a sudden need to be physically distant from others can lead to feelings of emotional distance, loneliness and isolation. There is increasing evidence that lonely individuals feel less healthy, have higher risk of hypertension and metabolic syndrome. Furthermore, when loneliness goes unaddressed over a long term it can affect physical wellbeing and lead to mental health problems such as psychosis, suicide and depression (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris and Stephenson, 2015) Loneliness is also associated with increased morbidity and mortality risk, lower capacity for self-regulation. As a consequence, lower self-regulation goes along with worsened lifestyle. Lonely individuals are less physically active, are more often affected by alcohol abuse and are more often obese than non-lonely persons (Richard Rohrmann, Vandeleur, Schmid, Barth and Eicholzer, 2017).

Insomnia: Sleep reduces inflammation, stress and the risk of depression, improves cognitive function, helps the body repair itself and ward off illness (Amalu and Ntamu, 2018). But because of the pandemic that has led to increased anxiety level, elevated stress overload of information, inconsistent bed times and wake times, loss of day time structure, the body arousal system can be elevated triggering insomnia (Van Someren, Cirelli, Dijk, Van Cauter, Schwartz and Chee, 2015).

Fear: Fear is a natural, powerful and primitive emotion that is adaptive and critical for survival when it is short-lived but can lead to mental health conditions such as social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobia and post-traumatic stress disorder when chronic (Quirk, 2017). It involves a universal biochemical response as well as a high individual emotional response to a definite threat. Fear about COVID-19 can take an emotional toll especially for those already living with an anxiety disorder. When circumstances are out of an individual's control, it is easy to become overwhelmed by fear and negative emotions, one may think that bottling up how he feels, trying to put up on a brave face or forcing himself to be positive will provide the best outcome (Carleton, 2016). But denying or suppressing your emotions will only increase stress and anxiety and make one more vulnerable to depression.

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Prevention/Control of COVID-19

There is no vaccine preventing COVID-19. The best prevention is to avoid being exposed to it (Wang, Tang, and Wei 2020). Airborne precautions and other protective measures that may reduce the risk of exposure have been proposed. They include the following:

1. Use of face masks
2. Covering coughs and sneezes with tissue, then safely dispose of it or if no tissues are available, use flexed elbow to cover the cough or sneeze
3. Regular hand washing with soap or disinfection with hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol.
4. Prohibition of national and international travels.
5. Physical and social distancing
6. Refraining from touching eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands
7. Prohibition of educational, social, religious and political gathering
8. Imposition of curfews and sometimes total lockdown except for essential services

Improvement of Students' Mental Health and Psychological Wellbeing amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

With the fear and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic and calls for social distancing and closure of schools, many may be experiencing increased stress, anxiety and depression. In order to avoid the mental health effect of COVID-19 pandemic and help students improve their mental health and psychological wellbeing, the following suggestions are made as follows:

- i. **Get Enough Sleep and Rest:** Sleep is a biological process that is essential for life and optimal health. Sleep plays a critical role in brain function, metabolism, appetite regulation, functioning of immune, hormonal and cardiovascular system. Normal healthy sleep is characterized by sufficient duration, good quality, appropriate timing and regularity (Goran, Micheline and Hemel, 2017) and absence of sleep disturbances and disorders. Lack of sleep or poor quality sleep can contribute to poorer mental health, increased stress, somatic pain, reduced quality of life, emotional distress, mood disorder and performance deficit (Kim, Jeony, Hong, 2015). Keep to the usual sleep routine even when the daily life has been disrupted, it is helpful. Aim to get seven to nine hours of sleep a night.
- ii. **Nutrition:** Nutrition refers to sum of all processes involved in how individuals obtain nutrients, metabolize them and use them to support all of life's processes. It provides energy for the body to perform various tasks in routine life. Different kind of diseases, weakness and disability are closely related with the intake of insufficient amount of food nutrients (Alagmgir, Sami, Salahuddin, Syed, Naimatullah and Manzoor, 2018) Try to eat a well-balanced diet rich in vegetables, fruits and nutrients. Where possible avoid processed food and those high in saturated fat and refine carbohydrate which have been linked to poorer mental health.
- iii. **Stay Connected to Others:** Being connected to friends and families during stress times is important for individual's mental and physical wellbeing and can protect against anxiety and depression as a result of restriction and self- isolation, keep in touch with them through

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alternative way like phone calls, video calls, email, texting (Lai, Lin, Chen, Gwung and Li, 2013).

- iv. **Exercise:** Physical exercise is an essential component of improving both physical and mental health. Stay active by engaging in physical activity. Exercise releases endorphin that boost one's mood and make one feel good. Exercise can serve as valuable distraction to one's daily worries. Regular exercise pays such dividends in form of physical and mental fitness (Nnachi, 2016). Physical activity decreases anxiety, stress and depression and can be used as a treatment plan for people with mental illness. Regular exercise improves the function of your immune system, ability to sleep, alertness and concentration, decreases inflammation, cognitive functioning and also effective at reducing fatigue, Find different ways of exercising.
- v. **Find Source of Comfort:** Try to do something you enjoy every day such as watching favourite television shows, reading favourite books, painting, working in the garden, listening to favourite music, engaging in online adventures and even if one is feeling lonely, can help lift an individual's mood, calm anxiety and fear(Paul & McCrimmon, 2020).
- vi. **Gather Information:** Stay informed but set limit for news and social media. Avoid sensationalized, dramatic information about the pandemic. Constant stream of social media news report about coronavirus could cause an individual to feel worried. Too much time on social media may increase his worry and level of anxiety. Gather accurate, factual information from trusted source such as WHO websites, or government authority platform to better understand the situation and distinguish facts from rumors. Facts minimize fear. Avoid the spread of erroneous information on the internet.
- vii. **Avoid Substance Use:** During self- isolation, an individual may be tempted to indulge in drugs, alcohol and stress from social isolation and other COVID related life changes can lead to or worsen substance use and misuse but bear in mind they can trigger mental health problem or make them worse. It weakens the immune system and puts stress on the body's cardiovascular and respiratory systems (Green, Brattherg and Finnell) and may increase susceptibility to COVID-19 as well as complications.
- viii. **Online Courses/Classes:** In response to COVID-19 pandemic, schools and classrooms nationwide have shut down indefinitely Where possible enroll in an online course or classes, which provides a safe and effective alternative to classroom and helps you to build vital skills in the future. You can even learn how to protect yourself, your family and others from coronavirus risks (Daniel, 2020).
- ix. **Relaxation Technique:** It is a process that decreases the effect of stress in the body and mind. Relaxation can help one cope with stress related health problems. It reduces stress, the remunerative thinking of depression and anxiety in healthy people (Ucheagwu & Ossai - Ugokwe, 2015). Students can manage stress and anxiety by activating their natural response by practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, rhythmic exercise, yoga, repetitive prayer, guided imagery.
- x. **Mindfulness:** Practice meditation or other mindfulness exercise which encourages one to notice what is happening with feeling in the moment in a non-judgemental way. Mindfulness is the process of being present in the moment in a non-judgemental and non-reactive manner which fosters the ability to observe internal experiencing (thoughts,

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feeling and emotions) rather than identify with it (Gheshlagh, Sayehmiri, Ebadi & Tabrizi, 2017). Mindfulness can improve mood and sleep quality through enhancing control over the body's arousal system and focus as well as managing anxiety and concerns.

- xi. Psychological Resilience:** This is the ability to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis or to return to pre- crisis status quickly. Resilience exists when the person uses mental processes and behaviours in promoting personal assets and protecting self from the potential negative effect of stressors. Research has shown that those that are more resilient are better able to maintain stable mental health during and after exposure to adversity such as COVID-19 pandemic or better able to return to psychological homeostasis compared to those low in resilience (Page Milner, Martin, Turrell, Giles corti & LaMontagne (2014).
- xii. Seek out for Mental Health Treatment:** Continue with the correct plan if you are currently undergoing mental health treatment, but be careful of approaches in order to minimize contact with others. Consult mental health professionals if what you are experiencing becomes severe.

Conclusion

The chapter is very informative as it has provided relevant information on the global threat on human health and wellbeing called COVID-19 and its related challenges. It identified origin, causes, consequences, preventive measure and suggestions on how the students' can improve their mental health and psychological wellbeing amidst the pandemic. It is expected that the information provided in this chapter will help students build and maintain better mental health.

Suggestions

To further emphasize the importance of boosting mental health and wellbeing for psychological stability and better-quality life. The following suggestions are made:

1. The counselling units in the various educational institutions should organize counselling sessions, seminars and workshops for students on the impact of COVID-19 and how they can improve mental health and psychological wellbeing when schools re-open. This is important because some of effect of the pandemic may still linger on some of them after the outbreak.
2. Teachers can reach out to individual students via email or cell phone and ask how they are doing and engage them in active conversation that shows the students are cared for even if they are not in the classroom.
3. Schools should develop a clear plan for maintaining academic, social and psychological wellbeing by hiring experts such as school psychologists to help support vulnerable students.

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