

Economic Recession and Mental Health – critical issues in the wake of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a huge impact on the financial stability of people, cities and nations alike. There have been job cuts, lack of pay and no income due to the extended lockdown that lasted over 4-6 months. An economic recession is understood as a fall in the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or simply, the national output. A typical recession is characterized by high unemployment, falling average incomes, increased inequality and higher government borrowing. Thus, effects of a recession include a slump in the stock market, an increase in unemployment rate and increase in the overall national debt [1]. The impact of a recession depends on how long it lasts and the depth of the fall in output. Unemployment rates tend to increase with economic recessions [2]. The visibility of the impact is seen specifically more in younger adults, as they are more prone to experiencing the prolonged negative outcomes due to low wages and difficulties in finding employment [3]. Some indicators may improve during crises but a diversity of mortality and morbidity outcomes has shown to be affected making a ripple effect on the individual's mental health and consequently the nation's happiness index [4]. In case of COVID-19, it has been believed that the economy has taken a hit by 5 years and will need 1-2 years to recover. All this has led to the belief that the next pandemic after COVID-19 shall be a mental health pandemic.

The potential of impact of economic recession on the global population's mental health has been on an increasing trend. Mental illnesses are interlinked with the trends of the national economic situation, both in the short term and long term periods [5]. Numerous negative effects of economic downturns have been recorded in literature. It is essential to consider that there are a certain category of populations that tend to be more vulnerable to the negative impacts of recession (and unemployment) that includes younger people, children and adolescents, those who are least educated, low income individuals/families, those at risk for poverty before downturn, single parent families, precarious workers, people with a history of mental illness, ethnic minorities, and migrants.

We have already seen extensive effects of COVID-19 on mental health and now we shall see the effects of the economic recession due to COVID upon mental health. Mental health and economic recession have an inter-dependent relationship and impact on individuals. As easily understood, sound mental health provides the fundamental base for optimal operations and functionality, greater productivity at workplace, better decision capacities, opportunities to take up challenges and niche for excellence and promotion- on the contrary, mental illnesses may disrupt the aforementioned [6]. Economic recession has the potential to create a negative impact on an individual's mental health. Work changes due to economic turndowns can lead onto an increase in the cognitive and emotional demands of work. This, therefore, leads onto absenteeism and withdrawal from the labor market because of stress, anxiety, and depression-related disorders, thereby leading to potential unemployment [7]. It has also been seen that the unemployment rate is a measure of economic well-being of population. Chances of becoming ill, specifically those who become unemployed are twice as likely to develop a 'limiting illness', (i.e., a health condition or disability that limits one's ability to work) and are 60% less likely to recover. The risk of developing mental illness increases as the duration of unemployment increases, especially among young adult males [8]. Depression anxiety and suicide will rise as is already seen during the current pandemic.

It is well known that a link with increased mental health problems with poorer psychological well-being is reported. The main common mental disorders reported include depression, anxiety, sleep problems, marital dissatisfaction, family conflicts, and cognitive decline. Psychiatric comorbidities have been studied

through various methods viz. cross-sectional assessment, longitudinal assessment and assessment of self-help behaviors as surrogate markers [9]. The group that needs to be identified is the most vulnerable one with past history of psychiatric illness, family history of psychiatric illness and those already on psychiatric treatment who will be the most prone.

Alcohol abuse (sometimes leading to alcohol dependence or binge drinking), smoking cigarettes, chewing tobacco and more recently, the intake of cannabis has been one of the most studied health behaviors among employees, as outcomes of macroeconomic fluctuations. With the prevailing economic recession, drinking usually decreases (most likely due to pricing effects); however, a subsample increase in binge-drinking, harm, and dependence and the same has been reported [10]. Various factors mediating this risk entail male gender, duration of unemployment, severity of economic loss, pre-existing individual vulnerability, quality of social and family support, and pre-existing economic disparity. For illicit substances, a consistent pattern has been seen with low socioeconomic strata but an inconsistent pattern has been observed with periods of economic crises due to flexibility of the illegal market. For nicotine, a consistent increase is seen in adolescents, younger adults and adults. Overall, a complex relation between substance use patterns and consequence and economic downfall is seen [11].

The largest number of studies has focused on the association between suicide and the rates of unemployment, deliberating on a positive correlation between the rates of unemployment and the rates of suicide. Numerous studies have shown an increase in suicide rates in the first 5 years following economic recessions (after 2008). Though rates of suicide may subside with time, they can continue to remain high for up to 16 years after a recession [12]. We have already seen a spate of suicides in the pandemic and the numbers continue to rise.

The financial strain that results from retiring or losing a job can affect marital satisfaction and further reduce mental well-being. Financial strain can result in the loss of personal control which further inhibits emotional functioning and physical health. Financial strain can lead to reduced social support and negative relationships with family. Finally, workplaces are often a source of social support; therefore, job loss can negatively affect psychological well-being [13].

Suicides, as discussed have generally found to increase during times of economic troubles, and according to experts, Asians are likely to be particularly susceptible as the region has among the world's highest suicide rates. Studies have claimed that the suicide rate in South Korea nearly doubled during the Asian financial crisis 10 years ago, with experts blaming the increase on stress caused by job and income losses [14]. India is particularly vulnerable because economic crunches in the past 15 years had raised expectations enormously, and many people have consequently faced severe problems accepting their loss of income and status. Several recent suicides resulting from job losses have highlighted the increased need for mental health services in the country. Debt and distress had also driven tens of thousands of Indian farmers to commit suicide in the past two decades and farmer suicides have become a roaring problem in the face of mental health issues in India in the last decades [15].

Mental health professionals from all sectors including psychiatrists and psychotherapists can work in tandem in order to promote positive mental health among employees and workers. The medical care of psychiatrists and counseling services offered by psychologists can provide for supportive care for employees during the time of crises helping them cope with stress and emotional distress. Mental health professionals play a role in building resilience and providing support that reduces the vulnerability to crawl into full blown episodes of mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety attacks or (possibly) psychotic episodes. Mental health awareness programs may also be conducted along with various programs such as stress reduction and corporate counseling in order to promote well-being within the company [16].

The management staff at workplaces can play a crucial role in providing of a grievances cell within companies along with an active HR department where employees can discuss conflicts, challenges and stresses that employees face in times of recessions. Economic crises have a magnifying impact on employees and addressing their issues can help manage wellbeing at an individual level while productivity at the workplace. Efficient management, team building and stress reduction among employees can maintain the flow of work in times of crunch [17].

A support group within the company can help employees identify with one another's problems. Such a process helps build belongingness and sense of healthy dependence among the workers, especially in a

crisis situation where all can share the burden. An emotional understanding and empathic approach among working fellows promote mental health of everyone in the work space, providing for healthier and more competent working atmospheres in times of crises such as recessions. Job redundancy and unemployment rates are crucial phases when the family provides the required social support and emotional backbone for the employees who get affected by such crises. A healthy family support offers for lesser chance for developing mental illnesses as the emotional cushioning is present [18].

Policy workers may consider providing employees with a day off when they may find it difficult to cope with the work or related stress at the workplace as it affects their mental health and daily functioning and in-house mental health support may be provided. This helps offer acknowledgment of the problem that the working professional is suffering from. A fulltime psychologist on board the HR department to address the personal grievances of the employees that may interfere with work. Policy makers may keep in mind the varied impacts of economic recession on males and females in order to draft for better prevention and management programs. Better organizational behavior promotion techniques which are in line with the mental health status of employees. Application of motivational theories, art of leadership and skill of redesigning jobs and modification to organizational structure. Mental health problems being brought under general health insurance shall help ease the burden on the employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not leaving us and we have to bear with it for some time till cases wane. There is a need for us to be vigilant and look towards combating the effects of economic recession and the need to start preventive programs to help us combat the effects of the pandemic on mental health that will ensue.

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