



Challenges Faced by Elderly During Covid-19 Pandemic: An Overview

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Abstract

While in developed nations the adult who is 65 years or above is considered to be elderly. There would be around 2 billion people belonging to the old age segment across the world by 2050. The rise in the ageing population poses a number of challenges and this pandemic has increased the number of challenges. Several studies have been done for assessing the impact of the pandemic on overall health of elderly which is much more as compared to the others. Studies from across the globe show that risk of the pandemic is much more in elderly. Elders are specifically influenced by the social vulnerability, especially during the lockdown or quarantine. They felt lonely, anxious and uncertain which give rise to insomnia and depressive disorders. Many elderly people live alone because their children maybe working in some other city or country.

Keywords: COVID-19; Mental Health; Impact on Elderly; Depression

Introduction

In December, 2019, China gave the report of a few pneumonia cases to WHO (World Health Organisation) about an unidentified cause from the Wuhan province of Hubei. Basically, SARS-CoV-2 is not like the other corona virus. It affects people of any and every age group, but the age group which is at the highest risk of getting a severe infection influences the elderly and people who have some underlying medical conditions. For children and adults, it might not cause a severe threat. However, in case of the aged population, it is a different situation during this pandemic. They have faced psychological and physical issues due to social distancing and lockdown. They were not able to do their day to day activities and they also faced restriction for accessing the basic services. Because of the restrictions, the elderly had a lot of mental issues. These situations resulted in an aggravation of the chronic diseases and immobility made them face disorder in their physique. They felt that being isolated might isolate them from mainstream in the society [1].

Generally speaking elderly feel lonely and they needed someone to talk to and share their feelings and thoughts. For some people, they were visited by their friends, grandkids, etc., but social distancing and lockdown hampered this practice too. The situations made them frustrated and in case the financial condition of the family wasn't good, it gave them extra stress. Another problem that the elderly were facing is that, since they kept getting scary news about the pandemic which scared them that since their immunity is also low, the virus could infect them easily. The increased risk of the virus for elderly was evident from the national data. Elderly living in old age facilities, rehabilitation centres, hospitals due to some reason were specifically vulnerable to the infection.

Apart from the infection, the other issues that the elderly faced include mental issues. Since the elderly acted as the caregivers for their grandchildren when their parents were out for work, this kind of mingle wouldn't be possible. The isolation, quarantine, and social distancing measures had restricted these activities leaving the elder

population without any relaxation. Thus, specific interventions are needed for supporting the elderly. More than the physical well-being, the mental well-being of people especially the elderly needs to be taken care of. The Governments of several countries have set up specific helplines for people suffering from mental issues and other psychological issues. They may call on the helpline and get some help. A lot of organisations serving the vulnerable seniors are also scrambling for regulating and minimising the possible damage [2].

Methodology of the Study

The study revolves around the elderly people. A large number of elderly people lived alone and faced a variety of social, economic problems and challenges pertaining to dementia, health and well-being, mental health etc. Hence, the major objective of the study is to measure the various challenges faced by elderly during covid-19 pandemic.

The study is empirical in nature with a descriptive research design. In this study, the data was collected from 224 elderly people who were living alone during the pandemic. A structured questionnaire was prepared and personal interview was conducted to collect the data, following all the COVID-19 safety protocols, as per the Government rules and regulations. The results were analysed with the help of percentage and mean. Five point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire along with the dichotomous and determinant choice questions.

Elderly during covid-19 pandemic

Isolation and family ignorance of elderly population already exists in the society. It is seen that the elderly people live alone because of various reasons. Sometimes, their kids are working far away or are married in other locations because of which they have to live alone. It was seen during the pandemic that children working and living in different locations were not able to visit their parents or provide them the necessary support as connectivity between states and countries was restricted, people were not allowed to travel, etc. [3]. Because of this the elderly were not able to see their children or visit them. This wreaked havoc in the lives of this particular segment of the society. People of other age groups were able to manage things better as they had access to internet and other services. But, the elderly who are not so tech savvy and some of them also do not have proper access to resources because

of which they had to suffer a lot. However, people did come forward to support such elderly during the tough times [4].

Restrictions due to the pandemic might have deprived them of the routine health check-ups and other facilities which increased the health risks amongst the elder population. They are facing memory issues, sensory issues, mental issues and mobility issues. The issues that elderly face the most are social deprivation and loneliness in case they have to be quarantined because of the pandemic. Apart from the physical well-being, elderly population is also affected directly by different psychological evils. Fear of losing life, health related anxiety, loneliness are some of the issues. Further, they might even be stressed because of the news they get every day about the virus and how aggressively it is spreading and devastating lives. It causes even more panic about the future of these people and their family and their safety in every sense. The panic amongst elderly population increase depression and their fear about life. They were vulnerable to being misinformed and such psychological and mental health troubles. The questions like "What after me", "end of life", "care for the family", etc. arose due to the pandemic in their minds. Elderly population is susceptible to the psychological as well as physical challenges [5]. Age as well as ageism are being considered to be crucial in the context of COVID-19. A number of studies have been done for assessing the vulnerability of psychological care and needs of old age population. The focus of these papers is specifically on the mental health issues amongst the elderly during this pandemic. The mortality rate amongst the elders has increased because of the respiratory infections and geriatric age-group is also having socio-psychological, physical and other vulnerabilities in the environment. The additional issue arising due to this pandemic is loneliness, isolation, depression, abuse, anxiety, social and family ignorance are the related evils because of social distancing. It could become even more problematic globally especially for elderly staying in institutions such as old age homes. Emotional support, ensuring nutrition and physical activity may help in reducing the psychological and the physical issues amongst the elderly. Elders staying in the old-age institutions or in isolation need tele-counselling for avoiding mental issues. Most of the elderly across the world live in the developing nations [6].

It has been seen that ignorance and mistreatment are some of the ignored issues in the developing nations. There are about 14.8% people which have been affected by the virus belonging to

the age group of 80 and above and about 8% of elders belong to the age group of 70 to 79. About 1.3% of the population affected by the virus belong to the age group of 60 to 69 and 4% of the population affected belongs to age group of 40 to 49. About 6% of the affected are below 40 years of age. Elders are much more vulnerable to the pandemic which is because of the social as well as physical reasons [7].

With the pandemic in place, we might witness a differential economic impact on different types of incomes and costs across different segments of elderly population consistent with the current disparities. People coping with high cost of living in some communities are being exposed simultaneously to high rate of infection. For instance, in highest 3rd of the countries regarding the prevalence of the pandemic, average rent for one bedroom apartment was \$726 in 2019 as compared to \$602 in lowest 3rd of the countries. Housing affordability is a huge challenge for the elderly and the increasing share of the elderly home owners still have mortgage. Also a lot of elderly people faced a very high out of the pocket medical cost for the medicines they take for their chronic medical conditions, high cost of medicines and gap in coverage offered by the supplemental and the medicare plans [8].

Health isn't just the physical well-being, it's even intertwined socially. Measures of social distancing affects social security, loss of experiences in the social roles, depleted social networking and other such factors are the additional reasons for health issues amongst the elderly. On one hand, elderly don't have that strong immune system for fighting health issues and thus they are highly vulnerable to the infectious diseases and on the other, they are facing the challenges of isolation and reduced social mobility. At some places they are not even able to find proper food or other such necessities. In Indian and some other developing nations, most of the senior citizens live in utter poverty which worsens the situation. As per the data given by the Government of India, about 51.2% of the fatalities which happened because of COVID-19 were amongst the elderly who were above 60 years of age [9]. Elderly population living alone is more prone to feeling helpless and lonely. Their affliction inevitably causes a burden on the health-care system as well as containment. As compared to the young generation, because of the limited access to facilities and internet for updates and news promptly, the elderly population might not be prepared or informed for COVID-19 pandemic [10]. Digital

divide is the economic inequality amongst the social groups, which has been constructed broadly regarding the access to knowledge and communication technologies based on the social, economic, political and cultural factors. Between the information about poor and the rich is the social divide because of the digital divide as well as the social divide. Use of the latest technological and advanced devices is difficult for the elderly. They have completely lost their informal as well as formal social networks. Age neglect and discrimination are also increasing in the time of this crisis [11].

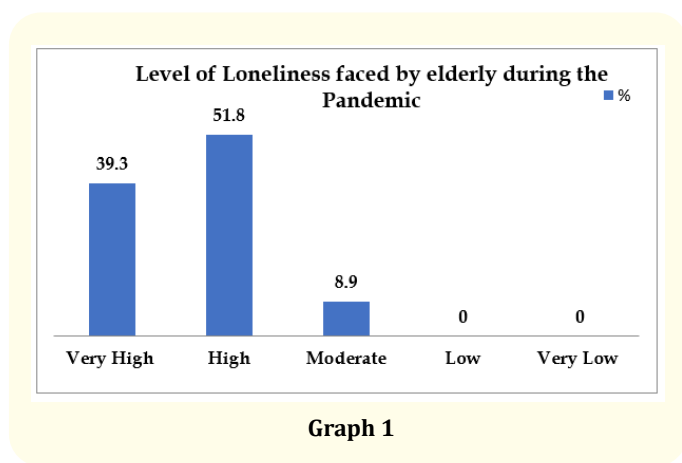
Generally, people having dementia are considered to be the dependent and most vulnerable part of the society. They rely on care given by either their family members or the professional caregivers for their routine activities and survival. During this pandemic, their vulnerability has been exaggerated because of a direct impact on them and indirect impact of the disease on social support as well as healthcare system. The elderly having dementia have little or no information or an understanding about the pandemic. The healthcare system safeguarding processes like hand washing, social distancing, wearing mask, reporting the early symptoms might be difficult to comprehend for these people. This exposes them to a greater risk. With restrictions like social distancing, people having dementia might not have access to the care givers which might aggravate isolation and cause anxiety and depression in these individuals [12].

Every Indian household has elders. Rest of the countries also have elderly but not many have such dense population. Isolation could be normal and not so challenging for the other age-groups, but it causes a lot of harm to the senior population. In today's world the elderly are considered to be futile, non-productive as well as burdensome for their society, families and their surroundings. They are generally isolated by the society and are even considered to be the object of sympathy. But, the elderly wish to take part in the social gatherings, to have people around. The issue of isolation amongst the elderly may be still manageable in the developed nations but, in case of the developing nations, it's a huge barrier especially in the densely populated nations such as India. Economy and health are the conjoined components for overall development of a nation [13].

There are certain solutions including using digital media channels like video conferencing for raising awareness regarding mental health concerns amongst the elderly, setting up the

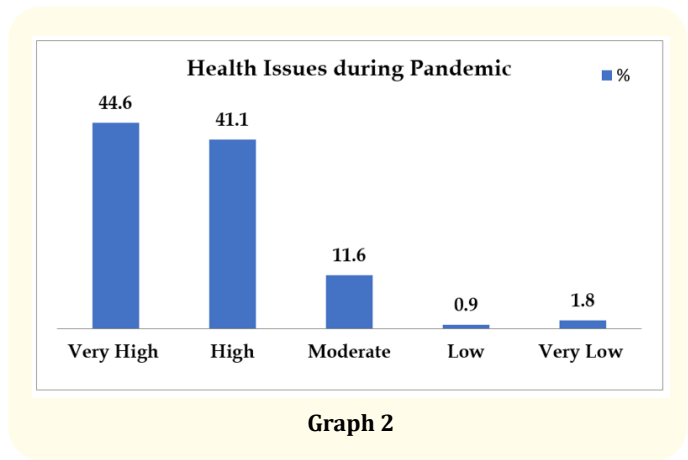
helplines for elderly, tele consultations by healthcare professionals for addressing minor psychiatric problems, etc. The elderly having some pre-existing psychiatric issues may be reached on the schedule appointments through phone call or video conference. Brief tools maybe used like the telephonic version of mini mental status assessment, cognitive examination for assessment during the telephone interview, using electronic prescription to give medication, referrals to the nearby healthcare professional for elderly who need depot antipsychotic, home visit for wheelchair bound or bedridden elderly having mental issues, in person examination for elderly adults having some psychiatric emergency and offering online support programmes. These are some of the practical and effective measures which may be taken for helping the elderly population during these tough times [14]. Also, the positive aspect of ageing maybe considered regarding resilience amongst the elderly population. It was quite evident from resilience which was shown by the elderly population during the floods of 1997 in North Dakota in USA. Contrary to popular notion that the elder adults are at the risk of the psycho-social adversities in times of a disaster, the hypothesis of inoculation shows that the prior experience of the natural disaster tends to insulate or protect the individuals from strong emotional reactions for the natural disasters of the future. Many of the elderly, having a reasonable support system or a high resilience may overcome this situation of crisis with a little support of wisdom as well learnings of their past experience of the epidemics and disaster situations [15].

Data analysis

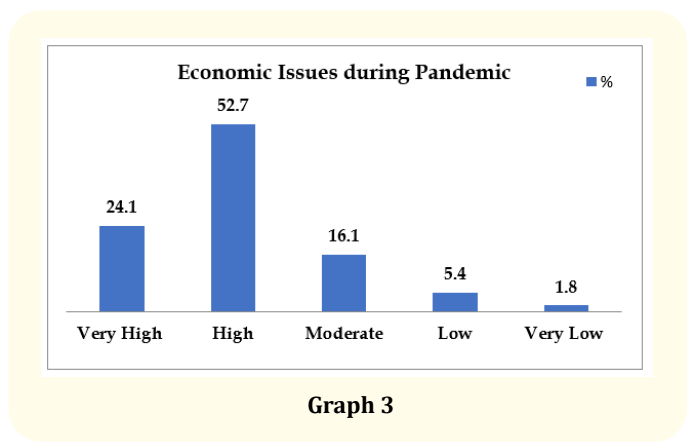


The graph 1 shows the responses of elderly people for level of loneliness faced by elderly during the Pandemic. It was found that

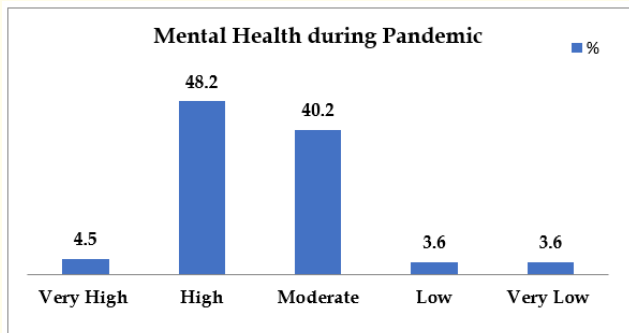
39.3% of them faced this challenge to a very high level followed by 51.8% who faced to high level and 8.9% faced it to moderate level. There was no respondent who faced it to at a low and very low level.



The graph 2 shows the responses of elderly people for health issues during pandemic. It was found that 44.6% of them faced this challenge to a very high level followed by 41.1% who faced to high level and 11.6% faced it to moderate level. Only 2.7% faced it to at low and very low levels.

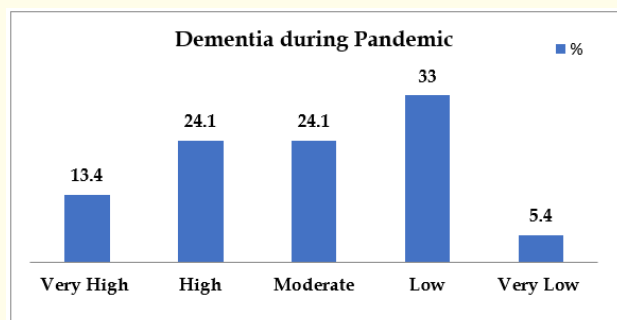


Graph 3 shows the responses of elderly people for economic issues during pandemic. It was found that 24.1% of them faced this challenge to a very high level whereas 52.7% faced to high level and 16.1% faced it to moderate level. Only a total number of 7.2% elderly people faced it to at low and very low levels.



Graph 4

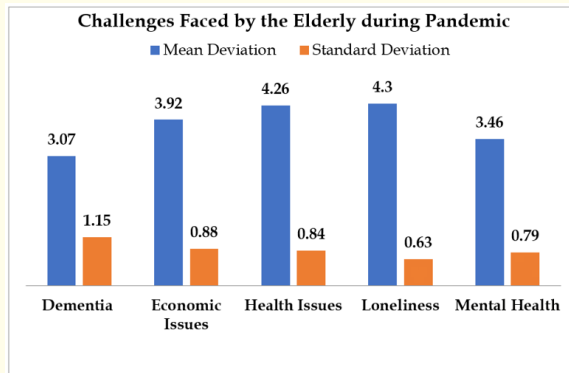
Graph 4 shows the responses of elderly people for mental health during pandemic. It was found that only 4.5% of elderly faced this challenge to a very high level whereas 48.5% faced to high level and 40.2% faced it to moderate level. Only a total number of 7.2% elderly people faced it to at low and very low levels.



Graph 5

The graph 5 shows the responses of elderly people for dementia during pandemic. It was found that only 13.4% of the elderly faced this challenge to a very high level whereas 24.1% faced to high level and 24.1% faced it to moderate level. 33% of the elderly people found a low level of dementia issue during pandemic and only 5.4% faced very low level.

Graph 6 shows the 'Mean Deviation and Standard Deviation' values for the challenges faced by the elderly. As per the data, high mean value 4.3 for experiencing loneliness and high standard value 1.15 for dementia was found in the study. Other statistics of the graph show that 4.26 was the mean deviation to health



Graph 6

issues, 3.92 to economic issues, 3.46 to mental health and 3.07 to dementia in elderly. Similarly for the challenges faced by elderly during pandemic, standard deviation of 0.88 was for economic issues, 0.84 for health issues, 0.79 for the mental health and 0.63 for experiencing loneliness.

Results

As per the data collected, the researcher could identify and assimilate the results that about 51.8% of the elderly faced a high level of loneliness during the pandemic and 44.6% of them experienced a very high level of health issues during pandemic. In terms of financial stability, 52.7% of the elderly faced a high level of economic issues during pandemic. As far as mental health of the elderly is concerned, 48.5% faced to high level of issues/problems with their mental health during pandemic and 33% of the elderly also found a low level of dementia. The mean deviation and standard deviation of the data collected depict that a sense of loneliness and dementia were experienced by most of the elderly during the pandemic. It can be anticipated that the pandemic has affected the mental, physical as well as the social well-being of the elderly.

Discussion and Suggestions

The study raises the eyebrows towards many critical aspects of the challenges for elderly people during COVID-19 pandemic. Loneliness was the major challenge faced by the elderly. It was observed from the results that health issue was quite common in elderly people during this pandemic. Most of the elderly persons had limited sources of income, and if not supported by the kids

they had to face the financial difficulty, which was also found in the study to a large extent. Moreover, the mental health issues including dementia were only found to a moderate extent. Overall, it was observed that the restrictions of COVID-19 posed some serious challenges for the elderly.

Government, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Society have the prominent responsibility of taking care of the elderly people during the situation like pandemic. The most significant aspect was to report and make an exhaustive list of such elderly people who were living alone and had limited access to the financial sources. It was important to make a profile of the elderly people living in the particular area. The profile could include their personal details with contact number, age, and diseases they were suffering from. The study suggests that the NGOs and Government representatives should be in regular touch with such people so that they can save their lives and provide them the necessary help as and when they require/desire. During this pandemic the NGOs such as Uttishtha Foundation, Help Age International, Help Age India and many such provided meals, kits and other help to the elderly people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only this, but many group housing society in the metro cities and self-help groups in the semi-urban and urban areas provided desired medicines, food, and other supply of necessities to the elderly people.

Conclusion

The available evidence suggests that elderly population was at a higher risk of severe illness as well as fatality from COVID-19 because of their weak immunity, restricted access to healthcare facilities and co-morbidities. They faced social isolation which impacted their mental as well as physical well-being. Moreover, they even suffered socio-economic challenges. Thus, it is very important for the governments to prioritize needs of elderly population in planning welfare schemes during these kinds of disasters. Solidarity and social support between generations, contesting discriminations against the elderly, protecting right to their healthcare as well as access to right information is crucial.

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Conflict of Interest

I (The author) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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