

COVID-19 death and its impact on the family

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Novel corona virus started creating a havoc for more than a year and has caused a global panic. It has almost reached each and every nook and corner of the world in such a short span. The world has changed since its arrival and a great fear of what might happen has been instigated to the people for they don't know the uncertainty and cruelty of the virus. All the other health issue and ailments have taken a back-seat and the focus is exclusively towards the virus. Its impact is not only towards the physical health but also effected the psychological and economical well-being. People do respond differently towards the pandemic. Some people are natural worriers and a symptom which is slightly similar to the virus created a lot of stress and tests are repeatedly done as a form of seeking reassurance. Some are easygoing and doesn't pay much precautions towards the risk prevention which could be one reason for rapid spread. Thus, people have different reaction towards the virus and the individual difference is quite evident.

Death, in itself, is a tragic event, COVID or not. The lose of a loved one created psychological disturbances which can lead to varied emotional reactions such as extreme sadness, remorse, anhedonia, etc., which was due to the void created by the demise. Kubler-Ross has given a theory of the stages of grief people goes through when they experience a loss. The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. When a person reached acceptance, that is when they restore peace to the disequilibrium. The mortality rate of the virus is less than 3 percent in India and even lesser in Manipur. The recovery rate is more than 70 percent. However, death is feared by all. If you are given 100 candies and was informed that there are 3 candies that is poisonous and will make you die after consumption. The chances of death are 3 out of 100 and there are 97 chances that you will not die after consuming the candies. But still, we would avoid taking the risk because we don't know. Just like that, people do fear that after contracting the virus, will they be lucky enough to survive or not because of the unpredictability that is involved.

The loss of a loved one due to COVID-19 have created a lot of confusion and strangeness towards the surviving family members, for they have not experienced a loss like this before. It has a lot of other attachment which is not found in other deaths, both natural and unnatural. Some family members reported that they could not comprehend such loss due to varied reasons. It was sudden, unexpected and quick and its like the situation was right in front of them and they couldn't do anything about it and left them with feeling of regret and helplessness and hoping that they could have done something to save them.

Grief and Emotional reaction: Grief is a process which represents a form of psychosocial and spiritual transition from the moment of a life-altering loss through a period where the person goes through tumultuous adjustment to a point of stability beyond the period of acute bereavement. Bereavement is the suffering caused due to the death of a loved one. A developmental model of grief goes through three periods: a) Early grief also known as reacting which happen weeks after loss, b) Middle grief also known as reconstructing which goes for months after loss and c) Later grief also known as reorienting which goes for years after loss.

This is the normal grief process. However, a recent interview among the family members that has experienced loss due to COVID related a different grief process. They seem to be still stucked at the early grief process even after months have passed. When the loss happened, they were still involved with lot of other formalities that they felt that they didn't even think about reacting to the death. The event following the death due to COVID is different as the family member has to go through a totally new protocol. They felt that they were not given enough time and energy to process the death because they were busy with many other things such as how to handle the body, how to bring it home or other queries such as "Am I positive too", "Do I have to quarantine myself", "Will I be a threat to others", "Will I survive". The emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, guilt and remorse are there but they felt that the platform to express it was never really there.

Some even felt that they have to be strong for the other members and expressing emotion means showing weakness. The emotional processing is not healthy. Some of the them are still replaying the image where their loved one died in front of their eyes gasping for breath and they were helpless as to how to help and whom to approach. There was self-blame such as “I could have done this”, “I must have brought in the virus”. At the same time, the blame was also towards the negligence of the authorities, such as “They could have done this”. Some were also repenting about how they took care of their family member before they die. Since they were taking care of them with all the gears such as face-shield, gloves, sanitizer, etc. as per the requirements and felt that it has created a barrier and hindrance towards thoroughly taking care of them. Thus, there were still not processing the aftermath of the death but on the death and the events leading towards it. The whole event has created a scar leading to an emotional trauma.

Most of the surviving family members of COVID-19 death has not gone through the normal grief process even after months which is not a healthy sign. Suppression of emotional reactions towards the death and delayed reaction are also seen as they felt that they cannot afford to react in the current situation because they have many other priorities to handle at the moment and cannot afford to be weak. Some members even reported that they haven't cried. They do feel the emptiness and sadness but expression could not be done. They were still in the reacting phase of grief and never given thought to the later stage of reconstructing and reorienting. In order to encompass this phase. psychological aid such as emotion regulation will be needed. This will help them pass through the normal phase of emotional reaction when a loss occurred. Prolonged and delayed emotional reaction can later cause psychological distress.

Rituals and Rites : Final goodbye is always hard but in the case of COVID death, its harder. Family members reported that the restrictions and challenges they faced with the funeral and the rites after the death didn't make it easier for them to accept that the death has occurred. Funeral rites and rituals are performed to provide a healthy mourning of the loved one's death and finally accepting the demise. The segments that take place in rites such as dressing the body, offering flowers, mourning for a specific period of time, wearing a different attire (white clothes), people coming to pay their regards, etc. all hold a meaning and aids to channelize their emotion.

With COVID, the rites are performed in a such a different way that they have not experienced before. The body was directly taken to the funeral pyre by the concerned authority even before bringing it to their home and not performing the rituals which was a final goodbye. In some case, when they went to attend the funeral, they were chased home and even shouted at by the concerned authority in spite of them informing that the person who died was his mother. Some of the other challenges that they faced is that there were no one available to perform the necessary rites (Brahmin, Pala, Arangpham, etc.) because of the fear associated with Covid. One of them reported that since she was Covid positive during the time of the rituals, she was wearing gloves and offering flowers to the picture which doesn't make sense at all and felt that it should not be how things end. She felt that proper ceremony should be held so that she could cry out loud and ventilate all the suppressed emotion that she has been holding on to. Thus, rites and rituals are held to bring a closure and making them accept the fact that their loved one is no more, which was incomplete in Covid death.

Stigma : The negative attitude shown by others is again one disheartening feeling faced by the surviving family members. Though they receive love and support by some of their relatives, friends and some members of the locality, they also receive social distaste and social unease from others. One of them reported that after coming from the hospital after the death of their loved one, one of the relative who was at home scolded very badly for coming back home. People even use to show disgust and the fear was evident when they came out to the locality and face them. For some of them, it even reaches the point that they are not suppose to throw out waste to the locality. All of these was happening even after they were tested negative of the virus. Some of their relatives even didn't give them a call when the unfortunate event has occurred. Thus, the stigma they felt was real which makes it even harder to process their emotion after the death occurred. There was lack of compassion and empathy as shown by the people.

II. CONCLUSION

The mental dilemma and distress caused by Covid-19 has encompasses almost all aspects of lives. It has caused disequilibrium to the psychological, sociological, biological and occupational functioning. The surviving members of a family of Covid-19 death has to undergo a whole different scenario of loss for which they have never experienced before. Thus, it is important to reach out to them to give them psychological support to make it easier for them to relieve the traumatic experience they are going through.

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