

## How the COVID Pandemic has taught me to be a better doctor/psychiatrist

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The year 2019 was quite perturbing with the Coronavirus disease (COVID), claiming many near and dear ones at an individual level and destroying the economy and healthcare systems globally.<sup>1,2</sup> Apart from the direct effects of the COVID, associated lockdown and social distancing have been reported to take a toll on mental health.<sup>3</sup> Rather than adopting a "black and white" perspective of the situation, I believe that it is prudent to reflect on the experiences which the pandemic taught us. As a psychiatrist, who had moved to the United Kingdom from India in the middle of the pandemic, I had an opportunity to interact with patients across various phases of the pandemic in both nations. As a result of the pandemic, I must admit that my skills as a doctor and a psychiatrist have improved.

I believe my interactions with the patients suffering from COVID have improved my ability to listen and empathise further. The mental agony they described was unfathomable. The uncertainty about their outcome, accessibility to patient care in the background of long hours of waiting time for the emergency services, and full occupancy in the hospitals was unsettling. I am sure that I will be able to empathise with patients in anxiety even better because of the profound influence of those conversations with COVID survivors on me.

I consider myself becoming more resilient in managing patients in these difficult times with a scarcity of resources. With lesser face-face appointments of mental health professionals and the limited physical support of the family, many of the patients had hit a panic button. It was initially quite overwhelming for me to handle it with a toddler in "terrible twos" at home. Then, I reflected on my experiences and improved my resilience by adopting mindfulness, a healthy life style, and effective problem-solving techniques. So, I believe that the pandemic has helped me grow as a person, and I think this improves the quality of care I impart to the patients.

I reckon that the pandemic had improved the way I interact with patients. I have utilised every consultation as an opportunity to alleviate patient's anxiety, clear myths about COVID, and the need to maintain a healthy lifestyle, which is necessary for physical and mental health. I also reiterated the need to follow the COVID safety precautions during the interaction. This holistic approach in pandemic times has made me a better doctor rather than a psychiatrist who has a keyhole vision focussing only on mental health.

One of the other important things that the pandemic had taught me was utilising technology to improve patient care. Due to the lockdown and limited access to the outpatient clinics, I was initially concerned with the relapse of psychiatric illness in patients and the emergence of new illnesses. However, with the help of virtual team meetings and online consultations, I am happy that I could effectively handle this problem with coordination and support from my team. The silver lining was the patient feedback that they felt reassured with a sense of connectivity. The majority of the patients reported that they would prefer virtual consultations in the future as they saved time and money for the commute to the clinic, highlighting the environmental benefits with the reduction of carbon footprints.

I believe that to become a good psychiatrist, one must be passionate about learning and research. During the pandemic, I was able to participate in several international webinars as well as conferences. If not for the COVID, I would not have attended in person as they are associated with travel and high registration fees. By participating in these events, I listened to some great lectures, network with several psychiatrists globally expanding my knowledge, and learned about some recent advances. Furthermore, I am happy to have made a small contribution to the mammoth body of research on mental health and COVID-19 by publishing the literature on the potential role of Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors in COVID.<sup>4</sup>

As Albert Einstein said, "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity", my experiences during the pandemic stands as testimonial to this statement. It has made me a better doctor, improving my clinical and technological skills, and expanding my academic horizons. Though the pandemic is showing no signs of waning currently, I am now more confident that I can adapt to this tumultuous situation by utilising available resources with ease. In case I win the prize, I plan to contribute to the trust where I am currently employed and work closely with them to develop a program to promote positive mental health during the pandemic.

## References

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