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Letter to the Editor

**Researcher burnout: An overlooked aspect in mental health research in times of COVID-19**

The SARS-CoV-2 related lockdown has not only adversely affected the mental health but also behavioral and mental health research (Torales et al., 2020). However, continued lockdown and physical distancing measures pose a challenge to conduct behavioral research as most of it requires in-person, detailed assessment, and clinical interviews. The challenges have been observed in the form of delay in getting expedited ethical clearance for conducting research (Ma et al., 2020). The choice of an appropriate sampling strategy either online or offline or a combination is getting affected due to difficulty in the collection of data because of the implementation of social distancing measures. As a result, behavioral science researchers find it very difficult to convince people to participate in their research studies. The COVID-19 related lockdown has also decreased the accessibility to research participants, in addition to existing challenges such as funding not coming through in time, the pressure to achieve results, to write grants, revise grant applications, and face non-acceptance of research grants proposals. The studies which involve qualitative research methods are impacted even more significantly in comparison to quantitative research. The existing guidelines on social distancing is making it difficult for researchers to conduct interviews with the participants and even if the lockdown is being relaxed with certain conditions, people are continuing to wear masks that is interfering in collecting the nonverbal information as the face is understood to be the index of mind (Mehta et al., 2020). To overcome, these existing challenges in research, there is a spurt in data collection via digital platforms. However, it has been criticized for the applicability of obtained results, low response rates, and privacy and confidentiality issues existing with open source software programs (Ameen and Prahraj, 2020). It also contributed towards the excessive use of digital devices and digital platforms to manage research work in times of COVID-19. Also the boundaries for work and leisure activities have also become blurred as for both activities the modality requires digital presence which can lead to the maintenance of stress and burnout. The on-going uncertain situations concerning COVID-19 and uncertainties related to research progress appear to be a major contributor towards stress which is likely manifesting itself in researchers and their teams in terms of sleep disturbance, poor appetite, increased interpersonal problems, decreased motivation to continue with research demands, procrastination, absence of other offline leisure activities and experiencing guilt feelings for not completing work. The authors have presented here an experiential account of the challenges experienced by around 15 researchers working in the field of behavioral research in the times of COVID-19. The likely on-going stress among researchers of under accomplishment in the times of COVID-19 can cause them to get trapped in the burnout cycle which starts with feelings of heightened and prolonged stress with decreased interest. It is followed by short-term enhancement of attention, energy levels, and experience of anxiety and exhaustion. If the stressful

situation does not improve, the final stage usually starts with the experience of despair, bleak and pessimistic views which eventually contribute to a feeling of burn out (Burisch, 2014). It is understood that poor levels of workplace well-being can lead to reduced productivity among researchers via both absenteeism and more crucially through presenteeism, where despite present at the workplace the productivity levels are lower. When such concerns remain unresolved it can impact the quality of research and the levels of commitment towards their research and to their institutions (Susan et al., 2017).

It is true that the COVID-19 is presenting itself as an extraordinary threat to the psychological well-being of clinical and community population and its impact on mental health is just beginning to be understood. COVID-19 pandemic has caused a transitory pause in a number of on-going or planned researches. The researchers and research funding agencies can consider taking a number of steps which can help the researchers avoid experience of researcher burnout and can help them to continue being efficient in conducting research. A few of these perspectives can include researchers reprioritizing their research and also view it as an opportunity to explore the interface between COVID-19 and mental health.

The researchers need to consider making pragmatic decisions to reprioritize the on-going clinical research. These decisions can be made by evaluating situations in terms of risk benefit ratios of continuing with research study visits, interviews, assessing risk of pandemic at their study site, optimizing the staff functioning and seeking local and national guidance from health departments to minimize risk to both participants and study teams. Besides this research funding agencies and ethics committees to be approached for taking permission for revision of study protocols to allow for data collection using online applications such as Skype, Microsoft Teams and other digital applications. However, if a participant visit is required then it should be conducted by implementing all protective measures as per the advisories of international and national health agencies (Keshavan, 2020). The available evidence indicates that many participants appear to be supportive towards continuation of medical research during the epidemics (Padala et al., 2020).

As an alternative perspective, the researchers and research institutions can view the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to design research studies which can facilitate to better comprehend the causes, epidemiology, presentations, treatments, trajectories of outcome in mental health conditions caused or precipitated due to COVID-19 pandemic. Further, interdisciplinary collaborations between researchers across various fields of mental health are needed to rapidly comprehend and share the new knowledge and observations emerging with respect to the mental health impact of COVID-19 and newer models of mental health care delivery (Keshavan, 2020). In view of etiological and epidemiological research, there appear to be many questions for

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which researchers can design research studies such as what is impact of comorbid medical conditions in individuals with mental health disorders on the risk for COVID-19 infection? Whether restricted social mobility increases the probability of intimate partner violence, domestic violence? Whether mental health disorders worsen during the COVID-19? How people with already existing mental illness are coping during COVID-19? Whether social distancing is likely to increase the experience of loneliness and precipitate mental health symptoms (Narita et al., 2020). In addition, neuropsychiatric and neuropsychological research is also needed to understand how COVID-19 affects the neurological and neuropsychological functions of the brain. At present, there is emerging evidence which indicates that SARS-CoV-2 impacts the brain (Li et al., 2020). The research also suggests that neuropsychiatric symptoms were observed in 36 % of hospitalized patients (Mao et al., 2020). Besides, a mental health pandemic may emerge which results from the experience of trauma, grief, social isolation, loneliness and as well from secondary impact of COVID-19 related quarantine and its associations with abrupt changes in lifestyle. Emergence of this research data driven insights will help health professionals become prepared for an effective response to the on-going as well as future pandemics.

In addition to repositioning research by researchers, the journals need to encourage the researchers for submitting research articles reporting the mental health impact of COVID-19 and interventions implemented to address its impact. Besides this there can be special focus given to research emerging out of Asia as the COVID-19 pandemic started from Asia and different Asian countries have taken different approaches to manage this challenge. The outcomes across Asian countries and from rest of the world are likely to vary and there is much to learn from each other. This will help the relevant information to be made available to researchers and the health professionals in a timely manner (Tandon, 2020).

Researcher's burnout and mental health needs unlike burnout among members of the health care and teaching professions, have likely not been studied in other epidemics as well like MERS and SARS and the evidence is limited (Susan et al., 2017). The authors in their search could not locate much research on researcher burnout. However, there is emerging evidence that COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on the mental health of healthcare professionals responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2020). This indicates that COVID-19 is relevant to the field of mental health and mental health aspects of COVID-19 need to be investigated among all kinds of health professionals including researchers working in the field of mental health research (Tandon, 2020). Thus, there appears to be a need for novel and innovative research approaches to explore the burnout and mental health needs among mental health researchers and to actively create mechanisms for its management and especially during the challenging times of a pandemic like COVID-19. Research focus in this aspect of mental health will be beneficial for enhancing researcher's well-being and productivity and will help in being better prepared during similar other unpredictable situations that may arise in the future.

Contribution

MKS conceptualized the idea; PS and AV drafted the first version; NA, MKS IM, PCT and TK explored review and drafted the subsequent version.

Compliance with ethical standard

There was no conflict of interest in relation to present work as well as informed consent of the human subjects had been taken prior to inclusion in the study.

Statement of human right

The studies have been approved by the Institutional and/or national

research ethics committee.

Research involving human participants and/or animals

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Declaration of Competing Interest

All authors involved in this research communication do not have any financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence (bias) their work.

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