

Psychological Impact Of Covid-19 And Prevention Strategies: A Buddhist Solution

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Abstract

As a major virus outbreak in the twenty-first century, the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has posed unprecedented risks to global mental health. Because of the severity of the virus, people were forced to isolate themselves and confine themselves to their homes. This was linked to people's inability to work, seek help from loved ones, and participate in their communities. Stressors that contribute to anxiety and depression include loneliness, fear of infection, suffering and death for oneself and loved ones, bereavement grief, and financial worries. As a result, covid 19 is a source of psychological distress. This paper investigates the impact of these stressors on all age groups in society, including today's youth, the elderly, and even health workers.

Because Buddhism has a longstanding experience with medicine and preaches calmness and acceptance of fear, it is not surprising that Buddhist ideas come to the aid of those in need during times of crisis. However, it receives little attention. Thus, this paper focuses on theories such as mindfulness meditations, engaged Buddhism, and cultivating compassion, all of which can aid in increasing positive emotions and thus reducing stressors.

Keywords- Covid 19, Mental impact, Anxiety, Buddhism, Mindfulness meditation, Compassion.

Introduction

Dictionary of Epidemiology defines pandemics as an epidemic that occurs on an enough scale to cross international borders, usually affecting people all over the world. It is so contagious that it kills a large number of people.(Porta(ed), 2008) COVID-19 is considered one of the deadliest pandemics. Since its outbreak in the Chinese city of Wuhan in November 2019, the coronavirus pandemic has spread to every country and region on the planet. As of March 24, 2022, the virus had infected over 473 million people and killed over 6 million.(Falak, Asrar, & Parrikh, 2022)The COVID-19 pandemic may have brought many changes to how people live their lives, including uncertainty, altered daily routines, financial pressures, and social isolation at times. The most recent Global Economic Prospects report from the World Bank states that the global economy is entering a significant slowdown, owing to new threats from COVID-19 variants, as well as an increase in inflation, debt, and income inequality, which could jeopardise the recovery in emerging and developing economies.(Global Growth to Slow through 2023, Adding to Risk of 'Hard Landing' in Developing Economies, 2022)

Pandemics are more than just a medical occurrence; they have a wide-ranging impact on individuals and society, causing disruptions. The daily commute, movie screening, In-person doctor visits, attending and dancing at concerts, Trying out a hot new restaurant. All of these activities that were completely normal for all of us two years ago have now been altered as a result of COVID-19.Two aspects of the societal impact of pandemic infectious outbreaks are stigma and xenophobia. Outbreaks have also been linked to panic and stress. This is frequently followed by anxiety-related behaviours, sleep disturbances, and a general decrease in perceived health.(Moukaddam & Shah, 2020)

The obvious precautions like Self-isolation and quarantine are likely to have a negative impact on one's mental health. According to a review published in *The Lancet*, separation from loved ones, loss of freedom, boredom, and uncertainty can all lead to a decline in an individual's mental health. (Yao, Chen, & Xu, 2020)

The teachings of Buddha have the potential to become true mentors for all people in this crisis. This teaching is documented in Pali literature as prose and poetry. It not only discusses spirituality but also attempts to answer all of the questions that arise in our daily lives. It may offer potential solutions to overcome psychological and physical challenges encountered during Covid-19.

Buddhism is an ancient religion and life philosophy that is practised all over the world. Buddhist-derived concepts have been highlighted as beneficial to health and well-being in recent Western interest in mindfulness as a practise and intervention. As a result, there is a greater desire to comprehend Buddhism in its entirety. For the first time in a half-century, psychologists attempted to understand Buddhism by examining its traditions and ideals and incorporating its ideas into Western discourse. (Segall, 2012) It has been described as a "religion of no-religion." (Watts, 1996), as well as a way of life and a cultural institution (Safarn, 2003)

The covid-19 pandemic's psychological and social impact on the general population

The psychological effects of pandemics such as SARS, Ebola, H1N1, Equine Flu, and the current COVID-19 are not limited to the fear of contracting the virus, according to studies of pandemics such as SARS, Ebola, H1N1, Equine Flu, and the current COVID-19. (Barbisch, Koenig, & Shih, 2015) Some aspects of the pandemic affect the population more than others, such as separation from loved ones, loss of freedom, uncertainty about the disease's progression, and a sense of helplessness.

The COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in a public and global mental health crisis, as well as a massive psychosocial experiment. It has impacted various aspects of people's lives and caused numerous psychiatric individual and collective issues such as panic, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suspicion, cacophony, xenophobia, racism, and so on. (Jakovljevic, Bjedov, Jaksic, & Jakovljevic, 2020)

Apart from these mental health issues, Covid 19 has also had an impact on livelihood and our food system. Tens of millions of people were on the verge of falling into extreme poverty, and the number of undernourished people, which is currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could rise by up to 132 million by the end of the year 2020.

Millions of businesses are facing extinction. Almost half of the world's 3.3 billion workforce is at risk of losing their jobs. Workers in the informal economy are particularly vulnerable because the majority lack social protection, access to quality health care, and productive assets. Many people are unable to feed themselves and their families during lockdowns because they lack the means to earn a living. For most people, no income means no food, or at best, less food that is less nutritious. (ILO, 2020)

A study of emotional indicators in a group of Weibo users before and after the declaration of COVID-19 on 20 January 2020 discovered that negative emotions (anxiety, depression, and indignation) and sensitivity to social risks increased, while positive emotions and life satisfaction decreased. People were more concerned with their health and family than with leisure and friends. (Li, Wang, Xue, Zhao, & Zhu, 2020) Long periods of quarantine instil infection fears, frustration, and boredom. Following insufficient supplies, confusing and/or misinterpreted news/data/information, financial loss, and mental stigma, the later stage of quarantine causes a wide range of psychological stress and disorder symptoms. Thousands of people took to Twitter to share their unusual #pandemic dreams. Many of them involve disease, fear, or unusual circumstances. (Center, 2018)

Researchers have generally agreed that prolonged isolation has an effect on behavioural changes. The emotional symptoms were boredom, loneliness, paranoia, panic, frustration, and fear; the physiological symptoms were sweating, shortness of breath, and chest muscle tension. Some people experience depersonalization, or the feeling that their bodies and minds no longer belong to them. Given these serious consequences, if people are isolated from social interaction for an extended period of time, COVID-19 may have a far more profound impact on the mind and body than we anticipated. (Dey, et al., 2020)

Through our above discussion we can say that denial, panic, mass hysteria, and rational acceptance are the four stages of our emotional response to any new, potentially fatal disease. Accepting that everything is subtle, fragile, and ever-changing, including this pandemic. As a result, we can reduce the potential threat posed by our futile behaviour in response to a sudden and obscured circumstance such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Buddhist ideology can assist in dealing with the uncertainty, fear, and anxiety that has accompanied the spread of Covid-19.

Effect on children and adolescents

Sound mental health is just as important as physical health during childhood for reaching developmental milestones. It improves children's emotional well-being and social skills. Furthermore, mentally healthy children perform well at home, school, and in their communities, and they have a better chance of leading a happy and successful life. While children with poor mental health find it difficult to socialise and even how to manage one's emotions.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a complex set of challenges, with mental health consequences for everyone, including children and adolescents. Grief, fear, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen time, and parental fatigue have all had a negative impact on children's mental health. (The impact of COVID-19 on children's mental health, 2022)

Fear, disappointment, sadness, anxiety, anger, loss, and other negative emotions are common in children. However, the COVID-19 pandemic's prolonged, restrictive, and widespread nature has exacerbated the situation. Buddhist path is necessary to keep the mind healthy, to stay balanced in adversity, and to help heal mental agonies or ailments. If they are well analysed and applied in daily practise, one will be able to enjoy and regain health in the event of illness, as well as make ones lives meaningful through familiar strategies.

To help offset negative behaviours, requires parents to remain calm, deal with the situation wisely, and answer all of the child's questions to the best of their abilities. Parents can help their children to realise the importance of a stable mind. Life, according to Buddhism, is in constant flux. As a result, stability is derived not from external circumstances, but from how we respond to constantly changing circumstances: we can choose to cultivate a stable mind. (Pozatek, 2015)

Dhammapada chapter 1 mentions "All that we are is the result of what we have thought. It is founded on our thoughts. It is made up of our thoughts. If one speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows one, like a shadow that never leaves." (Müller & Fausböll, 1881)

It is important to teach children an important Buddhist ideology that they must no longer sell their happiness. They must stop blaming their problems on other people and circumstances. In other words, one must stop blaming others for one's unhappiness and stop attributing happiness to what is going on around. Happiness will be unstable and elusive if one continues to do so. The second task which can help in easing the anxiety of children is to intentionally cultivate a source of serenity and happiness within themselves. "Because happiness and unhappiness are states of mind, the true causes of either cannot be determined outside the mind." (Nyema, 2014)

Effect on elders

Because of clinical and social factors such as a weakened immune system or other underlying health conditions, the elderly is more vulnerable to the COVID19 outbreak. It is altering the daily routines of older people, as well as the care and support they receive, their ability to remain socially connected, and how they are perceived. Early studies have already found an increase in anxiety and depression in the general population, particularly among those subjected to prolonged lockdowns and these effects are exacerbated in the elderly population. (Yang, et al., 2020)

Prior research has also found that, even outside of crisis situations, the elderly population has relatively high rates of depressive symptoms which is concerning given evidence that those with pre-existing mental health conditions

have been disproportionately impacted by the negative psychological consequences of lockdowns.(Hao, et al., 2020)

According to research, depression in the elderly is linked to cognitive decline and the risk of Alzheimer's disease.(Sachs-Ericsson, Joiner, Plant, & Blazer, 2005) This means that, while many societies are now facing the immediate threat of rising mental health concerns, the long-term consequences could be disastrous, as depression and stress cause the older generation to experience accelerated cognitive decline and higher rates of Alzheimer's disease. This problem will almost certainly be exacerbated by physical restrictions placed on people's movement outside of their homes, resulting in fewer exercise opportunities for many people.

To alleviate suffering and enable individuals to feel alive again, Buddhist compassion ideology is required. Buddhism as a religion is distinguished by its ethical devotion. According to the Nirvana Sutra, Buddha attained "complete enlightenment and became a supreme healer."(Tay, 1981). His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote in *The Essence of the Heart Sutra*, "According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind in which one wishes for the well-being of others. It is not passive — it is not simply empathy — but rather an empathetic altruism that actively seeks to relieve the suffering of others."(O'Brien, 2018)

Even the World Health Organization suggests that family members should regularly check on elderly people living in their homes and nursing homes.(Hafner, 2020)Buddha also give importance to the caregivers, He stated repeatedly that "those who care for the sick are of great service."(Stone, 2005)

Another practice that can do wonders is Mindfulness Meditation. Meditation is all about cultivating awareness, presence, and non judgment. By calming the mind and body, mental training practise provides a different way of dealing with stress. Spiritual life, according to studies, can improve positive ageing and health. According to research, whether through spirituality or formal religion, a spiritual connection improves the well-being of senior citizens.(Intriago, 2021)Although it may appear difficult to persuade older people to begin a new practise or habit later in life, the good news is that meditation can come in a variety of forms.Mindfulness can also be found in activities like gardening, painting, and housecleaning. Paying attention still requires energy, to be sure, but it can help to overcome any resistance to being physically active.

Effect on health workers

Studies have consistently shown that the health professions undergo greater levels of job stress than the general population; stress in doctors is connected with both physical and mental health problems, even under normal circumstances.(Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalski, & Silber, 2002)COVID-19, like any other pandemic, has posed an unprecedented threat to the physical and mental health of doctors.

Health care providers perceive a higher risk to themselves as a result of their exposure to the sickest patients, the scarcity of personal protective equipment (PPE) that developed during the pandemic adds to the stress. Another source of stress is the increased risk of infection for the families of front-line healthcare professionals. Previous research from epidemics/pandemics (such as the SARS outbreak in 2003, the MERS epidemic in 2012, or Ebola outbreaks in West Africa) shows that healthcare professionals can experience a wide range of psychological morbidities, including trauma,(Styra, et al., 2008) that can last for months after the outbreak.

To achieve the best possible outcomes for the patient and family, doctors and nurses must be in excellent physical and mental health. According to the American Nurses Association's Health Risk Appraisal survey, 82% of nurses believe they are at a high risk of illness as a result of work stress.(Executive summary: American Nurses Association health risk appraisal, 2017)When dealing with difficult people and situations, Buddhist ideology of mindfulness practise can help them reach a more positive ending Recent reviews attest to the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions for work stress and suicidal ideation.(Burton, Burgess, Dean, Koutsopoulou, & Hugh-Jones, 2016)

The practitioner acknowledges that anxiety is unnecessary and that problems can be dealt with more effectively. Mindfulness-based training can help them develop skills to deal with clinical stress and improve their health, as well as increase overall attention, empathy, and presence with patients and families, and experience work satisfaction, peace, less unintentional overtime, and less job burnout. Mindfulness skills are particularly suited to

high-stress work settings because they can be practised privately or in groups, in almost any environment, and as briefly as time allows. Negative automatic cognitions are a major cause of stress reactions.(Feldmana, Greeson, & Senville, 2010)

Buddhist teachings that can aid in the therapies of coronavirus anxiety

As discussed before, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with an unexpected physical, mental, emotional, social, and economic challenge. The economic challenges have made millions of people extremely concerned about their livelihoods, death, and the uncertainties of the future. As a result, the pandemic has caused a lot of worry, anxiety, and stress in all aspects of our lives, forcing humanity to reconsider their way of living and being. Buddhist leaders argue that their teachings can help confront the uncertainty, fear, and anxiety that has accompanied the spread of COVID-19. This is not the first time Buddhists have offered their teachings to help those in need. The following are the approaches that can help with negative impact on mental health due to corona virus.

Engaged Buddhism

The term "engaged Buddhism" was coined by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. When faced with the choice of practising in isolated monasteries or engaging with the suffering Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War, he chose to do both. Some people associate Buddhism, particularly Buddhist meditation, with turning inward and away from the world. Many argue, however, that the Buddhist tradition, with its emphasis on clearly seeing the nature of suffering and thus cultivating compassion, has a strong impetus for active participation in the world's struggles. This activist school of Buddhism became known as "Engaged Buddhism"—Buddhism that is actively involved in social issues.

Suffering, it is said, is the doorway to compassion. Buddhist practise cultivates the qualities of attention, loving-kindness, and inner renewal that sustain a life of service through deep insight into the nature of individual and social suffering. Interdependence, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, is central to a Buddhist view of the universe—the "interbeing" of people, nations, and the entire ecological fabric of the natural world. "The most important task we have," he says, "is to develop correct insight."(Buddhism and Social Action: Engaged Buddhism, 2020)

If we look deeply into the existence of interbeing, that which all things 'inter-are,' we will quit criticizing, arguing, and brutalising and become friends with all. To perform nonviolence, we must first learn to deal with ourselves in a peaceful manner." The key message of engaged Buddhism is not simply "making peace," but "being peace." And thus, this approach can help individuals to find peace within themselves which further can lower the load of negative emotions in one's mind.

Acknowledge the fear

Suffering, illness, and death are all expected, understood, and acknowledged in Buddhist teachings. Ignorance of the nature of reality, as well as craving and clinging to something illusory, is the root cause of our suffering and anxiety. That is referred to as ego, and fear is the gasoline in the ego's vehicle. Because the ego thrives on fear, we will never understand or embody any sense of egolessness or selflessness unless we address the issue of fear.(Lief, 2017)

Doing so makes an individual calm his nerves down. Acceptance of the problem is the most difficult yet crucial part. Expecting impermanence, lack of control, and unpredictability is part of making peace with our reality, no matter what. From a Buddhist perspective, thinking that things should be different causes unnecessary suffering. Buddhist teachers advise working with fear rather than reacting to it.

Mindfulness Meditation

Buddhist Mindfulness is a traditional wisdom that can be put into practise to achieve this goal. It is a scientific evidence-based approach to dealing with these types of situations in which simply remaining calm and alert can reduce an unprecedented array of mental, emotional, and social threats to the individual. Mindfulness practise has been linked to numerous benefits such as reduced anxiety, stress, and depression.(Davis & Hayes ,

2011) Mindfulness practise is regarded as a skill or resource for dealing with life's challenges, bringing balance between skills or resources and challenges, i.e., well-being.

Meditation is, of course, an essential requirement for mindfulness, but it is not sufficient. Mindfulness is the technique of paying full attention to the present moment, moment by moment, and without judgement. It shapes our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, resulting in cognitive, affective, and self-regulatory changes. (Fodor & Hooker, 2008)

Following some simple yet powerful mindfulness techniques can help people in this pandemic situation.

- Breathing consciousness - Gently close the eyes and mouth while keeping the body straight but not stiff in any way. Take three deep, slow breaths. Concentrate your entire attention on the area between the two nostrils. Become aware of each and every breath that enters and exits your body. Every incoming and outgoing breath should be felt. Take three deep breaths after ten minutes and feel relaxed and happy. Then slowly open your eyes.
- Make use of pauses - Pause for a moment during the day, whatever you are doing or thinking. Taking a few slow and deep breaths through the nostrils, inhale and exhale and notice the sensation of each.
- Scan of the body - Sit up straight. Focus your entire attention like a searchlight (body scan) from head to toe and feel the sensations of each part of your body for a few seconds before accepting them as they are.
- Handwashing with care - It is critical to do so in the current situation. During handwashing, you will focus your entire attention on it, observing the fingers, water, soap foam, and feeling the hand movements and sensations.
- Walking with awareness - Keeping track of your steps and counting them whenever possible. Feel the muscle sensations as you lift and lower your feet.
- Eating with awareness - concentrating solely on the act of eating Using sense organs to notice colour, taste, texture, and smell as much as possible. Using physical sensation, distinguish between true and false hunger cues. (Mindful Eating 101 — A Beginner's Guide, 2019)

Regular meditation can help you recognise your fears, anger, and uncertainty. This acknowledgement can help you recognise these feelings as fleeting reactions to an impermanent situation and any amount of mindful practise in daily life has been shown to benefit people. (Kober, Buhle, Weber, Ochsner, & Wager, 2019)

Cultivating compassion

Compassionate organisations make people feel seen and known, as well as less alone. Furthermore, compassion affects the "felt connection" between co-workers and is linked to a variety of positive attitudes, behaviours, and feelings in organisations. We see compassion in organisations as a process and a relationship. It is common to think of it as an individual trait, with a person being either "compassionate" or "uncompassionate." Compassion is also viewed as a state induced by the suffering of another, a "painful emotion" that one person feels for another. Compassion, on the other hand, is viewed as a dynamic process or set of sub-processes that can be found in both individuals and collectivises. These sub-processes are referred to as "noticing," "feeling," and "responding," with each contributing uniquely to the process of compassion." (J M Kanov, et al., 2004)

The "four immeasurable" of Buddhism are loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These four attitudes, according to Buddhist teachers, can replace anxious and fearful states of mind. When feelings of fear or anxiety become overwhelming, Buddhist teachers advise recalling examples of compassion, kindness, and empathy. The pattern of fearful and despairing thoughts can be broken by returning to a sense of caring for others.

Compassion is a reaction to suffering, the unavoidable adversity that all humans will face in their lives, whether it is the pain embedded in the fabric of ageing, sickness, and death, or psychological and emotional afflictions that cripple the mind. Compassion is the recognition that not all pain can be 'fixed' or 'solved,' but that all suffering is made more approachable in a compassionate landscape.

Compassion is a multifaceted reaction to suffering, sorrow, and anguish. Kindness, empathy, generosity, and acceptance are all part of it. Courage, tolerance, and equanimity are all woven into the fabric of compassion.

Above all, compassion is the ability to accept the reality of suffering and aspire to its resolution. It becomes one of the basic principles for all of us in this time to crisis. To be able to be there for each other, help each other in times of need brings a sense of relief and increase positive emotions.

CONCLUSION

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic began in Wuhan, China, and has since spread throughout the world, posing significant health and safety risks. The COVID19 crisis has increased the risk factors associated with poor mental health, such as financial insecurity, unemployment, and fear, while decreasing the protective factors, such as social connection, employment and educational engagement, access to physical exercise, daily routine, and access to health services. This has resulted in a significant and unprecedented deterioration in population mental health. It has impacted various aspects of people's lives and caused numerous psychiatric individual and collective issues such as panic, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suspicion, infomediary, cacophony, xenophobia, racism, and so on. COVID-19 has caused a public and global mental health crisis.

Buddhist wisdom is a universal and eternal philosophical thought that began around 2600 years ago and has continued to influence mankind's life throughout the ages. Even in the face of a pandemic, it has proven its worth. As a result, if we want to change our behaviour pattern in this pandemic situation, we must first change our thinking pattern. This is the fundamental principle of modern cognitive behavioural psychology for dealing with stress.

Theory such as "Acknowledge the fear" is the first step toward healing. Engaged Buddhism emphasises cultivating a source of peace within, which can further reduce the load of negative emotions in one's mind. Being compassionate not only makes us feel less alone, but it also increases our empathy, allowing us to help others and develop a sense of connection with them. Mindfulness helps people recognise the subtle, fragile, and ever-changing nature of life, causing them to alter their thinking patterns. It is one type of process for changing human behaviour that falls under the purview of cognitive psychology. As a result, if people want to be happier, calmer, and more content in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, they must practise this type of mindfulness, i.e., mindfulness in their daily lives.

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