Abstract

The biggest challenge humanity is facing right now is to curtail the outbreak of COVID-19. To make this successful, people need to adopt precautions of social interaction and health hygiene, as recommended by WHO. Recent evidence indicates that the public tends to take a casual approach towards this recommendation, especially those which pertain to social distancing. Using the health belief model as a guiding theory, we recommend public awareness campaigns to focus on creating awareness regarding the potential benefits of the preventive approach, seriousness, and susceptibility of disease. Besides, authorities should also create an environment so that people face fewer barriers in adopting preventive measures. We also highlighted the potential role of positive psychology during COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, Preventive Behavior, Health Belief Model, Awareness Campaign, Social Distancing

Despite the pandemic COVID-19 caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus is not the first in the 21st century, it has already surpassed the outreach and death toll of all previous pandemics. According to the WHO situation report published on 7th May 2020, there are approximately 3.5 million cases of COVID-19 and 250 thousand deaths worldwide. Even though there is about 86% similarity between the genetic structures of SARS, which first appeared in 2003 (LeDuc and Barry, 2004) and SARS-COV-2, the latter has proven to be highly contagious. Not only does it transfer through direct body contact or being very close to the infected patients, but there are also indications that it can transfer within 6 to 12 feet of contact (Lai et al., 2020). Initial evidence also indicated that it could survive on inanimate objects, and a person can catch the virus if it touches the contaminated surface. Although the virus cannot penetrate the skin, yet if the contaminated hands touch the mouth, nose, or eyes, one can easily get infected (Centers for Disease Control, 2020).

Early experiences with other types of recent outbreaks involving novel viruses such as MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), SARS, Swine Flu, H1N1, and others have taught us that “being prepared” is just an illusion. When faced with a new type of virus, countries are always looking for new but urgent public health strategies to minimize and eventually contain the spread of the pandemic. However, all sorts of the epidemics that involve highly communicable viruses have shown that an individual needs to play an essential role in the containment and mitigation of the spread (Leung et al., 2005), especially when there is no vaccination as in the case of COVID-19 (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, international and local health agencies, as well as governments, are emphasizing the citizens to follow the precautionary guidelines recommended by the World Health Organization. These guidelines for unaffected individuals include thoroughly washing hands with soap or alcoholic sanitizer; maintaining a minimum of three feet (six feet is preferred) distance with another person at a social place; covering the face (with tissue or elbow) when coughing or sneezing and hence maintaining a good respiratory hygiene; avoiding crowded places, and to the extent possible maintaining social isolation by staying at home. For those who feel they have symptoms of some respiratory disease such as fever, cough, or difficulty in breathing, the direction given is to contact health professionals (Wilder-Smith et al., 2020).

COVID-19 is significantly different from many previous contamination diseases due to its unlimited infectious period, severe transmissibility, clinical severity, and the extent of its spread in the community. Even a healthy individual can be a passive carrier and responsible for the transmission of disease in the community. That is why social isolation, as a crucial means and effective way of breaking the chain of infection (Huremović, 2019), is suggested for the entire community (or country) rather than for the infected individuals only. Governments, all over the world, are putting their best efforts to mitigate the disease. They have taken steps such as imposing lockdowns, closing airports, restricting social gatherings and movements, and establishing health care and quarantine facilities (Ren et al., 2020). In addition, various awareness campaigns are launched to educate the public about COVID-19 and the importance of adopting precautionary measures against it. But can the governments maintain lockdowns for a long time? Is it not possible as it is hurting the economy. Trade and commerce activities have come to a halt, consequently giving rise to unemployment and reduction in income (Wilder-Smith et al., 2020). International Monetary Fund (2020) estimates that the current recession is comparable to the great recession that occurred in the 1920s. Governments need to make a balance between their lives and livelihoods. Many countries have decided to relax lockdown restrictions. So there will be resuming of some economic and social activities too. In such a scenario, the role of an individual to prevent themselves from the prevalent disease is going to be undoubtedly very important.
With the relaxation in the restrictions of lockdown, new operating rules, including social distancing, are being established for the safety of the people with the warning that failure to take precautionary action can lead to the severity of the situation and then people will be in lockdown once more. Here some questions arise. Is it possible for people to resume social and economic activities while maintaining some form of social distancing and healthy practices to limit the outbreak? And when hope and worry are being mingled, would they be able to cope with the situation mentally and psychologically? It seems most of the community is feeling relaxed with the relaxation in the lockdown restrictions. There are two reasons that people are not letting go the social life. First is that they do not understand the gravity of the situation and want to enjoy their social freedom, as we witnessed in some of the developed countries like the U.S.A. and Europe (Pinkser, 2020). The last pandemic of nearly such intensity occurred a century ago; the contemporary public cannot comprehend the disastrous aftermath an exponential spread of disease can result in. Adjustment and anchoring heuristics can be used to explain this judgmental bias in this type of scenario. The second possible reason is that there are people who have a challenge of survival when there is no income. For them, the disease would not be the priority but to feed themselves and their families.

Media plays a vital role in sharing information all around the world as well as in regulating the emotions of the public. It often happens that it corrupts the message with wrong details, manipulates the perception, or using a sensational tone, which stokes unnecessary fear and panic among the public. The reactions and responses of media coverage of the current ongoing outbreak of Coronavirus are variant. On the one hand, there is an attack of anxiety and restlessness in people who are hyper-vigilant and over-cautious. News about the spread of pandemic gives them the understanding that they are facing a traumatic event. They experience headaches, muscle aches, and stomach-aches. Their sleeping and eating pattern disrupts.

On the other hand, some people do not take the news seriously as they already have low trust in media and aware of the notoriety of media information. It was observed that such individuals, even in some developed countries like the U.S.A. and parts of Europe, were not willing to let go of their social interactions even during the high peak of pandemic in their countries. They might spread the virus unknowingly.

In addition to imposing rules and regulations regarding social interactions, authorities can launch large scale interventions to educate the masses towards adopting a preventive lifestyle. Public health agencies can utilize the psychologist to design awareness campaigns so that the public willingly follow all the protocols of social interaction that are required to minimize the spread of COVID-19. A preventive health behavior framework that can provide the guidelines in this regard is the health belief model (HBM: Rosenstock, 1974). In H.B.M., there are four determinants of preventive health behavior, perceived susceptibility (P-Sus), perceived severity (P-Sev), perceived benefits (P-ben), and perceived barriers (P-bar) to disease. P-Sus and P-Sev of the disease often enhance preventive behaviors by increasing an individual’s threat appraisal for the disease. Until people are not aware of how serious the disease or the extent to which they are physically vulnerable to get infected, they would not be too eager to save themselves from COVID-19. P-ben and P-bar are collectively known as coping appraisals. If people are well aware of how beneficial it is for them to follow the precautionary protocols, there is a higher chance they would adopt those behaviors. Similarly, authorities need to create a supportive environment so that people perceive that there are low practical barriers in observing preventive behaviors. We recommend psychological researchers to explore this framework during the outbreak to test the efficacy of this model for COVID-19 preventive behavior.

This is the time that governments need to mobilize all forms of communication mediums to create awareness among the public. People need to understand that there is no vaccination for COVID-19 (until now); neither lockdowns can be imposed much longer. In this regard, the media can be a useful tool, but it needs to understand a difference between sensational messages and false information, which creates largescale panic and informative news to enhance the four components of H.B.M. Although media helps create awareness, it often happens that it corrupts the message with wrong information or sensational tone, which creates unnecessary panic among the public. Dramatic and fake information often underplays the importance of media, especially social media, as a useful communication medium (Depoux et al., 2020). Regulatory authorities can keep a check and balance in this situation.

We also suggest psychology researchers to explore the role of positive psychological characteristics during this pandemic. Previous research has shown that people who are high in health-based positive psychological capital are not only more satisfied with their health; they also have low B.M.I. and cholesterol levels (Luthans, Youssef, Sweetman, & Harms, 2013). It seems positive personality types such as psychological capital can act as a key resource in guiding individuals during the challenging times (Chen & Lim, 2012). It will enable them to handle the stressful situation with an optimistic, confident, hopeful and resilient mindset (Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009) as a personality resource people with high psychological capital are excellent managers of resources. They can effectively utilize existing resources according to the prevalent situation and gather more useful resources for the future to use when demands arise (Teo, Roche, Pick, & Newton, 2014).

Coronavirus is a big challenge for a human being. People must be given a deep and thorough understanding of the deadly pandemic. They must be prepared for their current as well as prolonged post-pandemic effects on their lives and livings. Decisions of some countries are, to some extent, in the right direction. Restricted and extended lockdown is not the solution to this drastic scenario because it has proved to be economically disastrous. The revival of social and economic activities is undeniable. Still, along with that, people should be well aware of how they need to play their part and keep the balance in their outdoor activities and life-saving measures to protect themselves and their community. In that respect, the media and governing bodies are bound to do their duties honestly and vigilantly in the welfare of human beings and humanities.

References