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## Appraisal of impact of covid-19 pandemic on mental health of people in Nigeria: Conceptual approach

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### **Abstract**

*The study appraised the impact of covid-19 pandemic on mental health of people in Nigeria. The study became necessary based on the ravaging effects of covid-19 on Nigerian people. The study investigated how isolation, proximity to death, economic and social uncertainty during covid-19 outbreak, impacts negatively on the mental health of the Nigerian people. To achieve this, conceptual approach was adopted to carry out the study where relevant documents and information from the media were gathered and used to accomplish the study. From the findings, it has been revealed that the covid-19 pandemic has impacted negatively on the mental health of the people. This is manifested in the form of anxiety, depression, fear of death, financial stress, and high cost of living due to fewer goods in circulation. It has been recommended that the government should put measures in place to ease economic pressure by gradually reducing total lockdown*

**Keyword:** Isolation, anxiety, depression, economic uncertainty, fear of death

### **Introduction**

Coronavirus also known as COVID-19 broke out in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. This further spread to other nations of the world such as Italy, Spain, France, South Korea, Iran, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and United States of America with Nigeria inclusive. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), according to WHO (2020), is an infectious disease caused by the newly discovered coronavirus. It spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Nigeria's first conformed case of coronavirus pandemic was on February 27, 2020, when an Italian citizen tested positive in Lagos for the virus, attributed to SARS-CoV-2. The second case manifested ten days later on March 9, 2020 at Ewekoro, Ogun State. Since then, coronavirus has affected more than 1,000 persons in Nigeria out of which 222 have recovered while 33 have so far died (NCDC, 2020).

This discovery came with extreme fear, anxiety, confusion and uncertainties by the government, people and organisations across the different states in Nigeria. This situation

was quite worrisome, especially as the country lacked medical facilities such as ventilators and test kits as well as vaccines to combat the pandemic. The strategy of the government of Nigeria to test, treat, trace and isolate since the first case was detected has been crippled by lack of equipment (Guardian, 2020). Although, intervention from stakeholders, individuals, government and development partners has yielded minimum efforts to curb the spread of the virus. But much collaborative effort is still required as the curve of the infection rate is still rising. As part of the effort to contain the spread of the virus, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) came out with health guidelines. These health guidelines according to their daily update include; regular washing of hands with soap and water or use of alcohol-based sanitizer if water and soap are unavailable; social distancing through use of no-touch greetings, maintaining at least 2 metres distance between yourself and anyone coughing or sneezing, staying at home if you feel unwell with symptoms like fever, cough or difficulty in breathing, avoiding/postponing events with large gatherings of people including schools, workplaces, places of worship, crowded supermarkets and pharmacies, social and sporting events; persons with persistent cough or sneezing should stay at home until they recover; making sure that you and people around observe hand and respiratory hygiene; and avoiding all non-essential travels to all countries.

Considering the sociological, psychological and economic implications of the outbreak of the virus on human society, it is therefore expedient to explore the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the people in Nigeria. Mental health is a vital aspect of human health that addresses issues patterning to emotional and cognitive aspect of human life as it affects the general wellbeing of people. MentalHealth.gov (2019) posits that mental health includes the emotional, psychological and social well-being of individuals. It affects how they think, feel and act. To this effect, the analysis of Feldman (2000) identified numerous behaviour disorders associated with feelings from environment and biological conditions. Some of such behaviour disorders that are in congruent with the precarious pandemic situation in Nigeria are anxiety, depression and panic disorder. These psychological onslaughts are as the result of the psychical imbalance due to different paradox of the pandemic such as isolation, proximity to death, economic and social uncertainty.

From the forgoing, this study is therefore designed to answer the following questions: How isolation of people during the COVID-19 pandemic impacts negatively on the mental health of people in Nigeria? How does the fear of proximity to death due to COVID-19 impact

negatively on the mental health of people and what are the consequences of the uncertainty of the economic and social condition of the people in Nigeria?

### **Isolation and mental health of people in Nigeria**

Isolation of individuals during COVID-19 is a strategy adopted all over the world to curb the spread of the dreaded coronavirus. This attempt was meant to reduce the rate of infection, but caution is required when introducing a strategy to solve a problem. This goes to suggest that plans on how to tackle the outcome of any health problem, should be accompanied with measures on how to handle the negative consequences that may arise there in. Isolation, adopted by the government as a technique, is a safety measures but its negative effects on the individuals varies based on the age, individual stress coping ability and the health condition of the people. The study of Santino and colleagues as observed by Armitage and Nellum (2020) demonstrated that social disconnection puts older adults at greater risk of depression and anxiety. The view of Guardian

(2020) also observes clearly that the pattern of death due to covid-19 widely is that, elderly people are dying more and further maintains that the deaths started happening when the lockdown was on ground. In the similar vein, Palinkas (2019) contends that depression and anxiety are particularly intense during coronavirus related isolation.

Anxiety comes as the result of the uncertainty surrounding the period of time one is expected to be in isolation. Palinkas (2019) reveals that some people that were isolated for three months, experienced changes in their sleep, changes to their immune system, endocrine, neurocognitive systems and alteration to their metabolism. Regarding the relationship between covid-19 and mental health of individuals, Centers for Disease Control and prevention (2020) explains that the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) may be stressful for people, fear and anxiety about the disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotion in adults and children. In furtherance of this, CDC (2020) identified the types of stress associated with infectious disease outbreak. They include: 1. Fear and about your own health and the health of your love ones, 2. Changes in sleep and eating pattern, 3. Difficulties in sleeping or concentrating, 4. Worsening of chronic health problems, 5. Worsening of mental health conditions and 6. Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

Existential theory by Roger (1951) argued that anxiety may arise through a threat to individual's self-concept, part of which may include his sexuality, inability to perform certain task, fear of not coping with environment and home. Serious anxiety reduces once ability to

guide his or her life and may end up feeling that life is meaningless. The findings of Roger corroborate with the Nigeria situation in this period of coronavirus outbreak, most especially as people are disconnected from their families, economic and social activities and worship centres. When people's feelings, thoughts and mood are affected, it will lead to depletion of their physical and social energies as well as inducement of mental stress.

Depression has been identified as one of the psychological problems associated with COVID-19 pandemic. Depression reflect an unhappy mood experienced by people due to a prolong situation that has affected the morale of individuals, that may resort to self-inflicted injury or suicide. Many scholars have argued that there is a correlation between depression and the cognitive ability of an individual. In affirmation, Molianen (1993) maintains that the student's cognitive thoughts were shown to be affecting them and as a result, they developed symptoms of depression. Cognitive factors especially the way people interpret or think about stressful events, play a vital role in the etiology of anxiety (Barlow, et al., 1996; Fischner, 1970).

Culturally, people interact with their family members, contribute to the up keep of their family members and build strong family ties. Naturally, people have sentimental attachment to their families which is likened to the relationship between fish and water. A breakdown in family ties is like removing a fish from the river which is a threat to its existence. Individuals from onset, are created to live in group settings. In support of this, Mbotto (2001) notes that people act together to promote common interest which can be achieved through shared goals. All human activities revolves round social interaction which is the nerve center of human relationship. When life becomes individualistic or people are been detached from group functions or social activities, it could lead to people committing egoistic suicide (Levine, Maiolo and Jendrasiak, 1991)

### **Proximity to death during covid-19**

Death rate emanating from the ravaging effects of coronavirus pandemic globally, is on high increase as most countries are experiencing acute shortage of medical facilities, isolation centres, health workers and fund to cope with pressure posed by the rising number infected persons and how to sustain the lockdown. This situation has exacerbated fear and tension on people. From the time the pandemic spread to Nigeria, life has not been the same. This is further enunciated by Long (2020) thus "covid-19 has refocused the world's attention, however briefly on the transient nature of life. The threat of death hangs in the air, and many

people fear the worst”. This can be seen from the hopelessness, depression, hunger, frustration, fear and agitations expressed on national televisions and social media. Everyone is affected both the young and the old, rich and the poor, employed and unemployed. Especially as there is an impression that there is, no cure for coronavirus disease, insufficient ventilators and the virus infection on the frontline health workers which is due to lack of adequate protection and training. To attest to this, NCDC (2020) daily update reveals that 40 frontline health workers tested positive to covid-19, which spells a negative signal that other individuals and their family members that come across them could be endangered. This situation is becoming worrisome and alarming as the index cases across the affected states in Nigeria are escalating. As of 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2020, Confirmed cases of covid-19 are 1337, active cases are 1042, those that are discharged are 255 and deaths 40 (Channel Television News, 2020)

There is no alternative means of livelihood to Nigerians. People have been disconnected from their businesses and jobs which has created a serious survival challenge due to prolong lockdown order by the government. There is a possibility that this situation can lead to outbreak of other sicknesses that are associated with poor nutrition and hunger.

### **Economic and social uncertainties during Covid-19 pandemic**

The Federal Government of Nigeria in a bid to curtail the spiralling spread of the virus in Lagos and Ogun states and Abuja introduced a total lockdown in those areas (*Guardian*, 2020). This implies no movement of humans and vehicles and complete stoppage of economic activities within the affected areas except those on essential duties. Additionally, other state governments, eager to prevent the virus from making in-road into their states, also introduced internal lockdowns which curtailed movement and paralysed economic and social activities. Ebonyi State Government (2020) in a broadcast by the State Governor, David Umahi, announced on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020 that “there shall be a full lockdown of communities and villages from 7.00pm to 7.00am. All borders, entry and exit points shall be closed down against all movements including those on essential services with effect from today, 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2020.” This is in addition to earlier statement banning motorcycles (known as Okada) in all parts of the state. In Lagos state where the lockdown is total, *Punch* (2020) reports lamentations from the people on the effect of the lockdown. A pregnant woman agonizes that they feed from hand to mouth. “Imagine to eat once a day. Breakfast and dinner are unaffordable; and even the food we manage to eat is mainly rice concoction. The situation is

making me restless and I risk anaemia and premature birth.” In the same vein, food stuff traders in all parts of the country have been recounting their woes too. Though exempted from the lockdown, they still find it difficult to operate under limited transport and other conditions. Some traders interviewed in Lagos (*Punch*, 2020) described their condition as hellish, adding that transport fares had doubled while some of their foodstuff get bad due to low patronage.

The Federal Government had included dealers of food items in the concession given to those on essential duties whose movement is less affected by the lockdown put in place as part of measures to curb the spread of the virus in the country. But the restriction of movement is affecting transporters and so they find it difficult to move about to replenish their stock. Even when they do, it was always ‘hellish’ as they face harassment from the various Anti-Covid-19 Task forces and security operatives at road blocks.

On social uncertainty, it is argued that criminals are likely to take advantage of inadequate number of law enforcement agents to perpetrate crimes in the society. The *Guardian* (2020) notes that “criminals will stay away from housing and residential areas because everyone is at home and concentrate on industrial estates”. It added that there will be the likelihood of increase in the number of domestic violence in the families, and cybercrimes as fraudsters will try to exploit some with the baits of federal government cash grants and other palliatives so far announced.

There is no doubt that these measures are good in tackling the coronavirus pandemic but they are inflicting economic and social wounds on the low income group in the society who depend on daily income for existence. Oji (2020) notes that “beyond the health hazards and human consequences, the economic uncertainties and disruptions have come at a significant cost.” Prior to the pandemic, the Nigerian government was already battling with a weak economy made so by the 2014 oil price dip, a GDP revolving around 2.3 percent in 2019 and a growing debt profile which had been a source of concern for the administration. This is also coupled with a steep nose-dive in the price of oil which is the mainstay of the country’s economy. These domestic issues are now compounded by the outbreak of the virus.

The lockdown and restriction of movement have no doubt resulted in a fall in household consumption in Nigeria because households are now constrained to spend primarily on essential goods. Onyekwena and Ekeruche (2020) agree that movement restrictions have not only reduced the consumption of non-essential commodities in general, but have affected the

income-generating capacity of different income groups, thus reducing their consumption expenditures, while the closure of the borders foreshadow a decline in exports. Already, countries around the world have closed their borders to non-essential traffic, thus disrupting the global supply chain just as the closure of internal boundaries recently announced by the Nigerian Governors' Forum (Business Day, 2020) has disrupted the national supply chain.

The uncertainty in the lockdown of economic and social operations is very worrisome in a country like Nigeria whose unemployment rate is already tapering at 33.5% (NBS, 2019). The ban on the operations of motorcycles provides the most unsettling economic and social uncertainties especially its operations constitute the major source of income generation and transportation in both the urban and rural areas where the scarce taxis, buses and *Keke* tricycles hardly penetrate. Soludo (2020), a renowned economist laments that “millions of poor farmers will be hard hit. Their perishable products that need the informal public transport to reach the cities will be wasted; while millions that need transport to their farms cannot do so.” He also stated that since agriculture in Africa is “rain-fed and seasonal”, that the lockdown coming in the period of planting season would constitute a threat to food security in months ahead resulting in inflation and critical shortages in the years ahead.

Another pronounced uncertainty is that most States in Nigeria are economically unviable. Without the monthly allocation from the Federation Accounts Allocation Committee (FAAC), most states cannot pay salaries or provide essential services, thus it is expected that within 30 days of diminished allocation from the centre, most states will be on “life support”. Within three months, most states will be bankrupt as well. It is only imaginable the chaos that would ensue across the country when that happens. This is quite unlike in the developed nations like the United States of America that has a rich generous welfare package and is taking care of its citizens with a huge welfare package of US\$2.2trillion stimulus package (Soludo, 2020), while Nigeria is offering its citizens next to nothing.

With the lockdown, millions of Nigerians are expected to go through hard times. A high percentage of Nigerians are likely to lose their jobs, especially in the aviation, oil and gas, manufacturing and hospitality sectors. Local manufacturing will be mostly affected because most industries have imported foreign components. But most especially, the low income group and the vulnerable ones will be hardest hit and this will escalate crime and violence in the society.

## **Conclusion/Recommendations**



The outbreak of covid-19 came with a lot of negative impacts on the mental health of people in Nigeria, ranging from the consequences of isolation, proximity to death and economic uncertainty. It has been observed from the findings that isolation leads to anxiety, stressful conditions, confusion and depression. Further investigation also reveals that there is panic fear which can lead to behavior disorder and other psychological problems. To this effect, it has been recommended that: There is a need for network of solidarity to be formed, to provide support around to the vulnerable groups such as the elderly, widows, people with disabilities, artisans, the unemployed and many more. This can be done through food, material and cash donations as palliative measures.

The government, comprising of the federal, the state and the local government, should consider developing counselling units to work with the frontline health workers providing counselling services to calm down anxiety, fear and economic pressure. This is to avoid further health complications that may arise from lockdown and isolation as strategies to curb covid-19.

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