

The Covid 19 pandemic and its impact on human well-being

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Dr.Radhika Mohan Gupta¹, Dr. Mani Sachdev²

¹Assistant Professor, Manipal University Jaipur

²Professor, Manipal University Jaipur

Email: ¹radhikamohan.gupta@jaipur.manipal.edu, ²mani.sachdev@jaipur.manipal.edu

ABSTRACT: The COVID 19 pandemic wrought immense destruction to people's well-being as it altered their lifestyle to a very large extent. This was all comprehensive at various levels: social, economic, psychological, personal and physical. This was true for all age groups and categories of people. All aspects of life were adversely affected. However, at the same time, there were several positive repercussions on personal well-being as well. There were improvements in well being on various fronts too, personal and professional. These helped people to cope with the adverse impact of the pandemic, maintain continuity in their lives and fight the pallor of doom cast about by the pandemic. This paper attempts to look at both sides.

KEYWORDS: pandemic, well-being, adverse impact, positive impact.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic came like a storm and caused tremendous destruction in its wake. One of the components of life that was affected the most was individual well-being. This means the ease with which one lives life and the enjoyment that it causes us. Life in all forms was affected, for all ages and categories of people. People were affected professionally as well as personally. A socio-cultural stagnation seemed to affect the society at large as life reached a standstill. Amidst all this doom, well being of people was certainly affected as human beings were snatched out of their comfort zones by Mother nature. There were major adverse impacts upon the people, be they social, economic, physical, psychological or any other. This paper will try to study some of these.

However, while this negative repercussion of the pandemic on well-being is true, one also saw a contrasting version of this which had a positive effect on well-being. Human beings displayed a strong coping mechanism that seemingly had several positive affects on their life in the same spheres where the negative effects had been seen earlier. Due to this coping mechanism, some even viewed the pandemic as a boon rather than a curse.

This paper will explore both angles. Also, it will examine these positive and negative effects effect from various angles : mental, physical, social etc.

Negative effect of the pandemic on personal well being

The negative consequences of the pandemic on the well-being of people can be seen in various spheres and at both professional and personal levels.

Adverse impact on the mental well-being of individuals

Professionally, as offices shut down during lockdown and work from home was introduced, it had a severe impact upon the lifestyles of people. Now, people had to be home the entire time. This blocked a way out of the domestic doldrums of the house as it restricted individuals to their houses. There was no escape from the domestic drudgery now. This became especially painful for women for whom the domestic chores seemed never ending now and in fact increased. All this had a severe effect on the mental well being of individuals. People may not have spent so much time together earlier as they did now . 'Empty kettles make much noise' is an old adage. This came true in most households as people now had very less worthwhile things to do also because people were living in a state of waiting, hoping that the pandemic would end very soon. So, people had left everything , thinking these way of things were temporary and everything will be normal again. But in that waiting , there was fear and insecurity that often played out in the minds of the people that resulted in a lot of domestic violence.

Also, There were many who lost their jobs or whose salaries got reduced. The insecurity generated in the minds of people when they lost their jobs caused psychological issues for the breadwinner and in the minds of their families. This too impacted the mental well being of thousands of people during the pandemic.

Thus, the pandemic caused tremendous emotional and psychological issues that were rooted in problems caused by the pandemic. "The uncertainty, and worries related to finances, childcare, elderly parents, and job security"ⁱ(Harvard.edu) coupled with "the ceaseless news coverage and constant social media driven flood of messages"ⁱⁱⁱ (Harvard.edu) compromised upon a sense of well-being.

The pandemic also required people to self-isolate themselves. “Perceived social isolation was associated with poor life satisfaction across all domains, as well as work-related stress, and lower trust of institutions. Higher levels of substance use as a coping strategy was also related to higher perceived social isolation.”ⁱⁱⁱ(Gordon & Kroon 2021) According to Butscher, Burtcher& Millet, “periods of isolation and confinement away from the day-to-day work, reduced access to daily needs/finances, sense of insecurity in combination with fear of contagion, quarantine, and stigma, as well as with potential (mis)information overload (‘infodemic’)”(Butscher, Burtcher& Millet,2020). According to Coutinho, this “can all lead to psychological stress and anxiety. This can elevate glucocorticoids such as cortisol and can inhibit many critical functions of our immune system, increasing host susceptibility infection and also aggravation of non-communicable disease (NCD) risk” (Coutinho, 2011).Such health issues would have definitely affected the physical wellbeing of people.

We see that professional problems caused by the pandemic had a direct impact upon the personal lives of people. On the personal level, the pandemic affected various categories of people adversely. Apart from work professionals, some such categories were students, young children, the aged and many others.

For the students, it became particularly hard as schools and higher education institutions closed down. Albeit classes shifted to the online mode readily enough as educational institutions tried their level best to maintain the continuity in education, the online form of education was not an easy transformation to make for students. There were psychological impacts on this group of people. Man is a social animal. To be stuck inside their homes was a punishment that this generation had to undergo as having physical friends is so important, ones that they can see, touch, laugh and cry with. This social isolation combined with insecurities of education not being received properly or an insecurity of academic years being lost and parents’ money being wasted would have caused psychological trauma. The academic gap felt by a number of students was of great worry to them. Many could not comprehend online classes and felt their year getting wasted. Others had problems like bad connectivity, remote location and no internet access, all of which affected their personal wellbeing. Not only this, incidents of domestic violence or deaths and suffering due to COVID would have further put a strain on their mental health. Physically too, students suffered as many used to go for training and sports to stadia outside their homes. This was no longer available to them. This robbed them of fitness as well as the good effect of endomorphins that was doubly bad as depression and trauma was already on the rise amongst them.

For the aged too, the fear and uncertainty of the situation added to their already disabled conditions. This age also generally requires constant medical treatment. With imposed lockdowns and constant fear of infection upon stirring outside, the aged also suffered an impact on their well-being. Many who walk in this age group as a common form of exercise adding to their well-being were adversely impacted here as well as the government restricted any movement outside the house except for priority reasons.

For people of the lower income group, the ‘stays at home’ stints imposed by the governments proved particularly hard. The composition of this group was mainly maids, milkmen, vegetable and fruit vendors and others such of this category. While some financial support may have been provided to them by their employers for a few days, the longevity of the situation deemed that impossible after some time. In such a morbid condition and big families to feed, had an effect on their well-being.

Compounding to this feeling of inadequacy was that education shifted to online mode. Most children of this group of people attend government schools that never were able to start classes in online mode owing to paucity of infrastructure. Children attending online expensive private school was another category from this social group but here again they faced problems as they lacked systems on which to take classes regularly and also could not pay for wi-fi. They would invariably take classes on the phone with cheap pre-paid connections which was not a sustainable arrangement. The third category of children from this cadre of people not going to school at all all . All these conditions adversely affected the well being of students.

The paucity of groceries and necessary items in the beginning of the pandemic further compounded the situation of fear and insecurity for all. The constant feed of the media during the pandemic was at most times extremely saddening as it talked of the rise of the pandemic across the world, the apparent inability of governments to fight it swiftly, the lack of hospital supplies to save lives, the various repercussions like Mucomycosis that spoke of a never ending story of doom, the huge loss of lives in the second wave, all highlighted the pallor of doom around in the world that had a tremendous effect on public mental health and well-being.

Adverse impact on the physical well-being of people

The impact on the well-being of individuals was not merely mental but physical as well. Before the pandemic struck, most people had a physical routine that involved habitual visits to the gym, morning and evening walks and the like that involved getting out of the house. That was compromised during the lockdowns.

Also, the process of all things shifting online on an almost complete level had severe implications on health. For instance, children and young adults shifted to the online mode of education. Apart from this, most forms of entertainment were also shifted to the online mode. Children living in apartment buildings especially and even those that were living in bungalows were now isolated as they were forbidden to step outside their homes to seek their friends outside their homes. This set of people resorted to social media, social networking, online gaming and

other such modes of entertainment. The problem with this was that this resulted in enormous amounts of 'sitting in front of a screen'. This resulted in general inactivity among children, leading to a spike in obesity and obesity related issues. Not only that addiction to gaming and online engagements increased tremendously, further stunting their mental growth that is much needed at this time. Also, it has led to problems of eyesight as well. Children began getting spectacles much earlier now than the case earlier before the pandemic.

Not only this but the impact that the virus had on the health of an infected person is of extreme significance also. The pandemic had severe health implications on the infected person not only during the time that he was infected but also for a long time after that as well. The difficulty in breathing before and after and trailing respiratory ailments were a common repercussion of the pandemic. Apart from that too, a host of other issues like stomach and heart problems, skin problems etc became much common especially after the second wave. All this had a severe repercussion on health not only at that moment but much later also.

Positive effect on well being

While the impact of the pandemic on human well being was largely negative as discussed above, I posit that there was also a large amount of positive impact generated as well. I have categorized this into largely three categories: creativity, skill enhancement and technical competency.

Technical competency

There has been a huge surge in technical literacy in almost all age groups and categories of people since the pandemic struck. Humans have a natural tendency to adjust to any situation. People took to the online platform like fish to water to continue their lives in whatever way it was possible. Students from well off families were easily able to transition to the online mode of education as these families were able to afford or possess computers and laptops to take classes on. This continuity in education was a great relief to educational institutions, students and parents as it meant that there would not be a break in their studies. This provided for a feeling of well-being amongst such categories of population even during the pandemic.

Not only at the level of the students but all sections of the population, including the aged as well as women who had not had any exposure to technology as they did not feel the need for it in their lives up till now had to turn to using it in a more elaborate manner. Examples include grocery shopping or all other types of shopping which now had to be conducted from the house, especially during the lockdowns. Also, quite a few women began to start their own blogs and websites to do business from home through online websites as the volume in online shopping skyrocketed and all this required them to become handy with technology. Even the aged began using technology more to communicate with their friends and family as movements were restricted. Also, to use technology for entertainment as meeting people got restricted.

All these factors contributed to a sense of well-being amongst these groups of people as it led them to avoid the sense of doom that the pandemic continuously brought with itself.

Creativity

There was a surge in creativity levels as people began to find more time for their own selves. There are several courses offered by platforms like Udemy and others. These courses aim to enhance the latent creative skills in individuals. There were many who took such courses during this time out of interest or because they had excess time on their hands.

Cooking became a new hobby for lots of people, from children to the middle aged. With a lot of time on one's hands a number of culinary classes began that were attended by a host of people and children were involved in them as well. more and more use of the social media and gain of technical competency, people enjoyed sharing pictures of their culinary delights with the world that motivated them further to enjoy this art. Some even found a profession in them as they began catering services that contributed to their well-being.

Skill enhancement

"When individuals are able to use the crisis in a transformative way to develop new practices, new processes, and new outlooks, there comes a *building effect* which fosters personal growth and helps individuals improve mental health" (Algoe& Dutton,2021)

Skill enhancement happened both professionally and personal level. Professionally, as work from home became the new norm, all kinds of upskilling programmes were introduced by the industry for their employees to cope with the new normal and continue to provide the same productivity levels to the company. Companies realised that it was worth investing in such projects because not only did it meet the short term goal during the pandemic but also fulfilled the long term goals of the industry. According to a Forbes study, "it would be ignorant, however, to see upskilling just as a way to keep the company afloat in these difficult times. In the long run, upskilling and reskilling programs can improve employee engagement and retention, attract new talent, increase collaboration between departments and speed up the adoption of new trends within the company"^{iv}.(Elfond,2020)

Personally, many began to develop their hobbies and interests during the pandemic and upskilled themselves in that regard too. Many converted these skills into work as well like developing terrace gardening and selling that organic produce, or knitting or cooking.

Work from home and well being

As the pandemic grew, work from home became the natural solution for professional life to continue through the harnessing of technology. This was a transition but brought with it a number of advantages that contributed to well-being. People now had flexible timings that made it easier for them to manage work and home life. This was a relief for women especially those with younger children who were now not going to school. It became easy for such mothers to regulate their online classes while undertaking their own work as well. This led to a feeling of well-being in them and their children. This feeling of well-being even extended to the larger family that involved the spouse and aging parents that could now be taken care of on a 24*7 basis. Also, the working person could now work from the comfort of their homes in the environment of their choosing that would add to their personal satisfaction and well-being. (Abdulaali, Usman, Hanafiah, Abdulhasan, Hamzah, & Nazal, 2020).

Exercise and well being

Exercise is known to boost physical health. In fact, it is one of the prime determinants of health. During the pandemic, many people resorted to exercise for various reasons. As people found that they had a lot of time on their hands as offices closed down initially during the first wave, apart from other things discussed above, they even pledged themselves to exercise mainly for the purpose of losing weight. Exercise itself releases endorphins, the feel good hormone that would have contributed to a feeling of well-being. Apart from that, the sense of well-being got from losing the weight itself would have been cherished by the person adding to his or her happiness.

Also, exercise is also supposed to have tremendous other good benefits for the body. It also improves the immune system of the body that is so important in the pandemic times. "An acute exercise bout (moderate-to-vigorous intensity aerobic exercise, less than 60 min) compared to being inactive is known to stimulate the ongoing exchange and redeployment of distinct and highly active immune cell subtypes between the circulation and peripheral tissues (e.g. mucosal surfaces including respiratory and gut epithelia), which conduct immune surveillance and strengthen the innate immune response" (Nieman & Wentz, 2019)

CONCLUSION

Covid 19 has proved to be no ordinary pandemic. It has 'shaken and stirred' one and all whether the lower or the upper class of people and all groups of people, the young, middle aged and old. Mostly, one tends to concentrate on the adverse impact of the pandemic on one and all. These adverse effects were all comprehensive too: social, economic, intellectual, psychological or physical. No one and no aspect of life was spared. People faced misery, death and despair. Added to that was the fear and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. However, the affect was not just negative. There was also a lot of positive benefits attached to the pandemic as well, again on the very same groups of people that had been negatively impacted. The benefits again were varied and diverse but showed the resilience of humankind to cope with adversity and mould themselves to the situation however adverse it is. In that way, kudos to humankind. This paper tends to focus on both approaches and look at the topic at hand in a fairly balanced manner and fill the research gap of lack of literature on the positive benefits of the pandemic on the well being of people.

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