Comprehensively Address Mental Health Issues due to COVID-19 Pandemic

Landscape Analysis of various MH helplines operated by Central and State Governments

Background

COVID-19 pandemic has brought the crisis regarding mental health in India to the forefront. It has led to various versions of isolation and insecurities for many individuals. The larger population is facing a strong negative impact of COVID-19 on their mental health while COVID-19 positive patients often suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress related to the disease. Frontline workers face stigma from their community and family and have to deal with the fear of getting infected. They also suffer from burnout, anxiety, and insomnia related to overwhelming workloads. While the challenges faced by COVID patients, their families and frontline workers are relatively more noticeable, the issues that go unnoticed and unaddressed are that of the general population.

 COVID-19 has resulted in increasing demand for mental health services. However, due to pandemic induced social distancing protocols and non-availability of MH specialists in every region, tele-counselling has emerged as an easily accessible and effective medium to address mild mental health challenges. The Government of India (GoI) at the national level and various state governments have also taken a number of steps to cater to the emerging challenge of mental health and have initiated several helplines on MH, specifically for women and youth.

Progressively significant work is being done to increase awareness about mental health and to strengthen mental health services in India. For example, the Government of India has initiated programs like the National Mental Health Program (NMHP) and District Mental Health Program (DMHP). During the initial lockdown period, under the mandate of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of India, the three central mental health institutions, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS), Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health (LGBRIMH), and Central Institute of Psychiatry (CIP) initiated a national helpline to provide support for mental health concerns arising out of COVID-19.

Epidemics pose many challenges in providing health care. As a result, unique and innovative solutions are needed to address both the critical needs of patients with COVID-19 and other people who need healthcare service. Technological advances provide new options. World Health Partners (WHP) through the project "Comprehensively Address Mental Health Issues due to COVID-19 Pandemic", supported by USAID, aims at early screening, diagnosis and management of mental health issues of COVID-19 patients and their family members, including victims of gender based violence (GBV), through its tele-counselling and tele-medicine platforms. The project is being implemented in five districts each in Jharkhand and Gujarat and seven districts of Delhi.

Government Initiated Mental Health (MH) Helpline Programs

This document is an effort to outline the helpline numbers initiated by the government (central and state) to help citizens access mental health counselling. Additionally, it provides information on various services offered by such platforms and how CAMH project is further complementing these services.

Below is a list of government (central and state) helpline numbers along with the services offered. This list is focused on states we are working in that includes Delhi, Jharkhand and Gujarat:

State/National	Name	Timings	Number	Services
National	**Kiran**	24x7	1800-599-0019	Early Screening, Psychological support, Distress management, Mental well-being, Psychological crisis management and Referral to mental health experts
National	**NIMHANS-PSSMHS**	24x7	080-46110007	Stress, anxiety, emotional discomfort due to COVID-19 and fear of any kind
Delhi	**Yuva**	11 am to 5 pm	1800-11-6888	Focus on youth by providing emotional support and career help. Parents can call too.
Jharkhand	**Mental Health Helpline**	12 pm to 5 pm	9801114493 9801133966	Stress, anxiety, emotional discomfort
	Nistha Swasthya Sampark	24x7	07314821385	Post COVID care. Also includes mental health support
	Ranchi District administration	24x7	9334915046	Mental health support including suicide prevention

	Ranchi District administration	24x7	9334915048	Mental health support to children and adolescents
Gujarat	Jeevan Aastha	24x7	18002333330	Mental health- Stress, domestic issues and exam-related anxieties
	Corona Santvana	9 am to 9 pm	1100	Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, fear, phobia and other psychological illnesses due to COVID

Gender based violence helpline numbers:

State/National	Name	Number	Services
National	Police helpline	1091	24 hours immediate and emergency response to women affected by the violence
National	National Human Rights Commission	14433	Human rights violation complaint numbers
National	ChildLine	1098	Children in distress
Delhi Police	Counselling Services on Women in Distress	011- 3317004	Help during distress
Gujarat	Abhayam	181	For women in distress
	State Women Commission	18002331111	
Jharkhand	Women Helpline	10921	For women in distress
	Mahila Helpline	9771432103	

Key Insights:

- Upon secondary research on the national mental health helpline 'Kiran' we found during the period of September 2020- January 2021, only 15,170 calls were made to the helpline number[1]. This number is very low considering it's a national number.
- For the period of Sept 2020- Jan 2021, based on the available information, only 1,978 follow-up calls were made through helpline 'Kiran'.
- Helpline 'Kiran' does offer early screening, psychological support and distress management along with referrals to mental health experts but as per the latest data, only 81 front-line professionals are catering to calls across the country which could lead to massive wait times.
- State based mental helpline numbers in Gujarat and Jharkhand are focused mainly on suicide prevention and only offer referral services to government hospitals. The counsellors direct callers to the nearest government facility and do not follow up afterwards.
- Women helpline number 1091 is focused on providing immediate support and police help for women in distress. National mental health helplines, 'Kiran' and 'NIMHANS' are not specific to women and anybody can call them to seek help.
- Limited outreach was noticed for national and state run government helplines. The launch of these helplines was covered through a press briefing but post launch communication outreach is missing for these helplines. It has led to limited or no information about availability of such helplines for general public.
- Referrals are only available for national mental health helpline numbers. State based helpline numbers only directs the users to the nearest government facility to seek help.

Centralised Control Center (CCC)- Strengthening Government's Efforts and Reach

It has been found that mostly all helplines are providing counselling services, some of which also provide guidance on treatment and investigations. WHP, under CAMH project, has visualised a comprehensive continuum of care approach. This approach enables clients/ family members and communities to access counselling and help through Care Coordinators (CCs) on-ground and counsellors and doctors at the centralised control center (CCC).

Centralised Control Centre (CCC) is a significant source of contact for patients and families requesting psychological first aid and information on MH challenges and support services, and the primary contact point for responding to public inquiries. The CCC centrally manages all calls coming into the system via toll-free telephone number 080 10 11 12 13. CCC is functional six days a week-Monday to Saturday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

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[1] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ministrys-mental-health-helpline-sees-most-calls-from-men/article33774872.ece

The beneficiary needs to give a missed call on CCC helpline number and the support cycle starts following the due process. There are dedicated human resources, about 50 counsellors and doctors to provide tele-counselling services. Same counsellor provides follow-up counselling to a beneficiary throughout the counselling cycle to ensure personalised services and support. Free tele-consultation with doctors is available to all and a prescription is sent as an SMS after the consultation. Counsellors also do a follow-up with all the beneficiaries after the prescription has been sent to them to address any issues.

In addition to direct missed call services, WHP has a cadre of Care Coordinators (CCs) in the field. During the household visits, CCs screen Covid-19 positive patients and their family members on Mental Health (MH) issues using PHQ-4 tool. Subsequently, these patients are connected with WHP's Centralized Control Centre (CCC) for online counselling. This on-ground integration and inter-personal communication enhances the direct reach of the project among COVID affected communities.

Strengthening support linkages and integration with government institutions like National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Institute of Human Behaviour & Allied Sciences (IHBAS) and Central Institute of Psychiatry (CIP) has been done and more such collaborations are likely to happen in the project. It will ensure quality referral care to MH patients having moderate and severe symptoms. In addition, referral centres within the localities are also being mapped and will be communicated to MH patients.

For GBV survivals and vulnerable groups like sex-workers, LGBT communities etc. WHP is exploring collaboration with organisations for post-counselling engagement and relief.

Conclusion

By creating an integrated support mechanism of Care Coordinators and tele-counsellors, WHP is addressing the COVID induced MH challenges in a comprehensive manner in the project locations. In addition, establishing a referral care network and post-counselling support system for the most vulnerable communities enhances the overall impact of the intervention. The project has a strategic communication plan to ensure WHP run helpline is widely visible and easily accessible to the community.