

## COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health Issues Among Young Generation

**Elizabeth Imti**

*Department of Sociology, Fazl Ali College, Mokokchung*  
drlizbeth2020@gmail.com

---

### Abstract

Keeping in consideration the outbreak of Covid-19, on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the Government of India announced lockdown in the entire country. This sudden and unplanned lockdown immensely affected the life and livelihoods of people from all different backgrounds and social strata. This pandemic and lockdown has brought about a sense of anxiety, fear and helplessness around the world. However, one can see that over the time, people have started to adopt to the new ways of living life which is also sometimes labelled as the “*NEW NORMAL*”. Since then, new ways of social life is experienced by all sections of the society irrespective of their age, sex, caste and class. Since then, various digital platforms have emerged as a strategy to retain the daily activities such as education of students, accessing health facilities, online income generation etc. Thus the term “*New Normal*” is very much connected with the uses of digital platforms as well. But the excessive use and dependency on digital platforms are resulting in serious consequences in human life. It has severely affected the physical and mental health of those who are continuously engaged in various digital platforms for their day to day activities.

The paper is focussed on the impact of excessive use of digital platforms and how this pandemic has forced teens to be removed from normal social, physical, and educational interactions. The worldwide increasing rate of suicide among youths indicates that they are at high risk of losing mental equilibrium. There is a need to understand the extent and severity of the problem so that appropriate measures can be planned. The paper is developed based on secondary data, reports and articles published.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, mental health, youth, digital platforms, online activities.

### Introduction

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, World Health Organisation declared Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) as Pandemic. Since then a drastic change could be observed around the world. Lockdowns, home quarantine, social distancing etc. have a direct impact on the life and livelihood activities of people (Tabish, 2020, p. 99). The pandemic have directly or indirectly affected all sections of the society. But the marginalised and the most vulnerable sections of the society around the

world are severely affected and suffering in both the economic and digital realms (Robinson, et al., 2021, p. 45). In present context, women, refugees, children, aged and disabled are considered as the most vulnerable sections of the society and it is true that these sections of people have witnessed the dare consequences of this pandemic in their life. Very limited studies have been conducted considering the issues of younger generation in this pandemic whereas adolescents and youth are

the representative of a particular vulnerable population (Labana, 2020, 4).

The first case of covid-19 was diagnosed in December 2019 and since then it has started spreading very quickly. In a very quick time it got spread all parts of the globe drastically affecting the life of millions and millions of people. The total lockdown and maintaining social distance are the effective strategies as opined by the experts to slowdown the spread of the disease (Golechha, 2020, p. 10). Because of this suggested and adopted strategy every section of the society are directly or indirectly affected. And during this process mostly the youths' lives and activities were restricted. Sudden shifting of activities such as education, socialisation with peers etc. shifted to digital platforms but frequent use of such online and digital platforms are resulting in extensive impacts on mental health and development of the youth (Golberstein, Wen, & Miller, 2020, 41). It is estimated that more than 330 million youngsters have been stuck at home for at least nine months, since the virus spread (UN News 2021, Feb. 16).

The UNICEF spokesperson James Elder was of the opinion that “Tens and tens of millions of youngsters have been left feeling isolated, afraid, lonely and anxious because of these enforced lockdowns and isolations that have become as a result of this pandemic.” The issues of the young generation are serious matter of concern now. People are bound to limit their social gatherings and as a result people started to use various digital platforms for mutual sharing and interactions. We have already moved into online services for our education, income, and other day today activities. Now in cases of lockdown, teens have had to stay home all day for months, with online interactions only.

Excessive use of digital platforms and accessing online services are resulting into severe health hazards for the young generations who are addicted to their electronic gadgets. Education, entertainment or whatever the reason may be, the children and the young people are important sections of the society who are mostly bound to engage over the online services and digit platforms in this pandemic. Worldwide more than 1.5 billion children and young people have been affected by the closing of schools and many are online now taking classes and socializing in a new way (*The Indian Express*, 2020). Since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic starting from last year, the mental health crisis for children, adolescents and families is growing, devastating underdeveloped systems and services (Harvey & Prabhu, 2020, 3).

### **The Nature and Extent and Causes of Mental Health Issues in Pandemic**

#### **The Digital Divide**

UNICEF's Executive Director Henrietta Fore mentioned in her annual open letter how global lockdowns have exposed the inherent inequity of the digital divide. During the peak of school closures in 2020, about 30 per cent of the world's schoolchildren were unable to access remote learning (UNICEF 2021, Mar 1). Because of the structural gap there is a section of people who are economically not that sound to afford smart phones at home. In India, the numbers of families living below poverty line is significantly high and for the younger generation of the families, it is not possible to access the online education. Those who are having the access to smart phone, laptop, computer and other technological devices, for them even in pandemic education were continuing. But for the poor families it was not at

all possible to continue their studies. For a section of students unable to attend classes, examinations etc. are causes of stress and frustration too.

### **The Mental Health Challenges During Pandemic**

According to UNICEF, half of all mental disorders develop before the age of 15 and majority of the 800,000 people who die by suicide annually are under 18 year age group (UN News, 2021, Mar.1). Before the pandemic, an estimated 10–20 percent of children and adolescents worldwide experienced mental health challenges with one in four children living with a parent who has a mental health condition (Harvey & Prabhu 2020, 3). There are very limited studies conducted on youths' mental health experienced during covid-19 pandemic. Larger survey data showed that in Italy during the early phase of lockdown the young adults of the age group 19-24 years experienced less level of fear and anxiety compared to the age group of people 40-49 years. But surprisingly the younger age group is found experiencing more loneliness and boredom (Colombo et al. 2020, 1). The assessment report concerning mental health symptoms, in Belgium showed that anxiety and depression among the people of the age group 16–24 year greater than before when compared with a past survey reports of 2018. It signifies the highest rates while comparing to other age groups (Sciensano 2020, 4). A study reported that in China more than one-third of adolescents of the age group 12-18 years old, were experiencing depression and anxious symptom during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is surprisingly represents almost double than normal (Zhou et al. 2020, 7).

It is very much true that during isolation in pandemic, occurrence of anxiety, frustration, anger, confusion, and posttraumatic stress symptoms etc. appear to be the significant causes of distress (Brooks et al. 2020, 4). It was also found that half of the young people of the age group 18-24 years experienced loneliness during lockdown. Similarly higher level of loneliness was reported among more than one third of the adolescents (Loades et al. 2020, 5). Loneliness and social isolation during pandemic is closely connected and it has a direct relation with the psychiatric problem of an individual. Loneliness is again connected with different psychosocial factors e.g., suicidal thoughts, anxiety, alcohol and substance dependence, depressive symptoms and aggression (Cacioppo et al. 2015, 132).

In this pandemic the youth are failing to achieve the developmental milestones, for example completion of school, engagement in labour market, maintaining social relations and ability to ensure autonomous decision making (Arnett, 2004). Implication of the pandemic e.g., fear of contagion, social isolation etc are some of the important factors of increasing stress, anxiety and issues of mental health (Galea et al., 2020; Mengin et al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2020, 3). Younger generation also experienced the significant level of stress witnessing the degrading financial condition of the family, health concerns of the family members and most importantly thinking about the uncertainty about the future life (Tsai et al. 2018, 10). All such issues care further pushing the young generation in a risk of developing mental health concerns and engaging in substance use. Therefore there is a need of further investigation, research work and strategic planning to understand and manage the impacts

of pandemic on mental health of young people (Hawke, et al. 2020, 4).

Part-time employment, physical activities such as participation in sports, creativity etc are key to the identity of adolescents. But unfortunately the covid-19 crisis severely affected such key factors and thus the identity of the adolescents as well. Complete restriction on in-person activities in addition to increased screen time and online networking have become the contributing factors to limited physical activity, increased negative effects, sleeping disorder (Becker & Gregory 2020, 8). At the same time sleeping disorder may result in negative outcomes increasing susceptibility to mood disorder and anxiety problems (Becker & Gregory 2020, *ibid.* 7). Remote learning and excessive use of technology during the pre-sleep period leads to high stress level and other physical and mental disorders. Similarly the direct exposure to the blue light of the electronic devices can disturb the production of melatonin that means the body cannot get the biological cue that it is already time to sleep. The exposure to online platforms during covid-19 pandemic aggravates or become a contributing factor to psychopathology (Dijk & Cajochen 1997, 7).

### **Cyber Bullying in Pandemic**

Use of online platforms has increased the risk of cyberbullying in many folds and online discrimination as well. In a report it has been mentioned that more than a third of young people in 30 countries report being cyberbullied and with 1 in 5 skipping school because of it. National head of UNESCO, Sarita Jadav, also mentioned that because of the raising issues of cyberbullying children are suffering academic loss. It become more complicated and difficult for the children to handle such incidences as majority of the children are not aware of the

availability of any support mechanism thereafter. According to a study, 62% of digital users did not know where to find help if they were cyberbullied (Hussain 2021, 12).

In one way when the internet connectivity is having a wide opportunity for knowledge sharing and knowledge building, it is equally risky if safety protocols are not followed. Cyberbullying and other forms of peer-to-peer violence are rising in an alarming rate during covid-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020, Feb. 16). According to a report of an organisation who tracks the cases of online harassment shared that there has been a drastic increase in the numbers of cyberbullying cases in just a few months. As per their record there has been 70% increase in the numbers of such incidences (Mi Blues Perspective 2021, 4). It can definitely affect young people each time they log in to a social media. There is always a high possibility that when browsing the internet, children may get the exposure to hate speech and any aggressive content. There are also possibilities of getting messages that incite self-harm and even provoke to commit suicide (UNICEF 2020, Feb 16).

### **Online Exploitation and Other Possible Threats**

Following the strict containment measures and after the closure of schools, the parents are bound to engage the children into technology and digital platforms for continuing their teaching learning process. Such platforms are also used to keep the younger generation, entertained and to keep them connected with the outside worlds. But in doing so because of the negligence of the parents and limited knowledge about the protocols to be followed while doing online activities, they fall prey in many online fraudulent (*The Indian Express* 2020, Jun. 17).

There is another way of targeting the children and the youth. They can also be put at risk when tech companies violate their privacy to collect data for marketing purposes. The excessive screen time often results in negative consequences on individual's healthy development (UNICEF 2020, April 15). During this pandemic people have started spending more time online than ever before and thus unknowingly the possibilities of online threat increases which may have severe consequences in life.

The UNICEF recorded that during covid-19 pandemic, spending more time on online platforms can leave the younger people vulnerable to online sexual exploitation. Due to the lack of opportunity to interact with friends and peer groups in face to face situation the children get involved more into exploration of the digital world and thus become prey to sexual abuse and cyber bullying (UNICEF, 2020). Moreover, poor social connection is result in suicidal behaviour among the young people (Hou, Mao, Dong, Cai, & Deng, 2020, p. 4). Increased and unstructured time access online platforms may also expose children to harmful and violent content (*The Indian Express* 2020, Jun. 17). The threat of online sexual exploitation and abuse is most alarming in present context. Some 80% of children in 25 countries report feeling in danger of sexual abuse or exploitation online (UNICEF 2020, Feb. 16).

Thus it can be said that due to the closing of educational institutions amid imposed lockdowns around the world, millions of children and youths are at high risk of online sexual exploitation, violence and cyberbullying (*The Indian Express* 2020, Jun. 17). For an individual, this may result in social isolation, mental health issues, substance abuse, self-harm or suicide. There is also increased likelihood of exhibiting similar abusive

behaviours by themselves in adulthood (UNICEF, 2020, Sept. 3).

### **Conclusion**

Rising online platforms offers limitless opportunities for learning. Using technological devices such as computers, smart-phones, gaming consoles, and televisions, anybody can learn, and get the opportunity to develop their social networks. Safe internet facility has the potential to widen the knowledge and to improve and shape ones' creativity but only when it is used in the right way and when it is accessible to all without any discrimination (UNICEF, 2020).

From both physical and mental health standpoints, Youth who are having physical health issues can also be considered as a vulnerable section, though their mental health challenges are generally not acknowledged (Katon, Richardson, Russo, Lozano, & McCauley, 2006; Parasuraman, Anglin, McLellan, Riley, & Mann, 2018, 7). The impact of COVID-19 on the young people with existing psychological disorders may become more serious. There are high possibilities that their treatment may have been disrupted as result of the pandemic. Similar challenges can be further aggravated among adolescents with disabilities, who may not be able to maintain the protocols of maintaining physical distancing. The young people with learning or cognitive disabilities may not be able to fully understand the situation brought about by COVID-19, or effectively use available virtual channels for communication and to avail remote support (Harvey & Prabhu, 2020, 3).

Globally, there is only one mental health professional for every 10,000 people and in this pandemic the mental health services,

particularly for children, adolescents and youth are neglected and less talked about (Harvey & Prabhu, 2020, 2). The UN agency said that the pandemic has disrupted or halted critical mental health services in 93 per cent of countries worldwide (UN News 2021, Mar. 4) and it is a serious matter of concern. UNICEF is looking into the matter seriously and already adopted different action strategies worldwide to protect the younger generation from any possible online threats and to address the issues of mental health. Time to time UNICEF has issued guidelines and working very closely with tech companies to ensure online safety measures and protocols. UNICEF is also working very closely to address the issues of online sexual abuses using the model called “We PROTECT Global Alliance” which aimed to strengthen the capacity of the ground level service providers to provide service to the victim. This is high time to take-up this matter seriously and to work collectively to promote well being of the younger generation. It is equally the responsibility of the parents and the adult population to understand the needs of the younger generation and to ensure necessary

support mechanism whenever needed. It is also important to identify all different contributing factors which may lead to serious psychological damage among youth. Along with the initiative from the government, community level collaborative initiative, involvement of civil society organisation and NGOs should be welcome and encouraged. There are a lot more that could be done by forming youth self-help groups for mutual support at the community level. At this juncture, the most important work will be to create public awareness about the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and to safeguard the well being of the younger generation. It is also realised that very limited studies or proper research are conducted in this area. The available study reports are just an indication of such problem in a particular location limited to a small population. There is a need to look at the problem of mental health among the younger generation in pandemic considering a larger population and sample size. Then such studies will definitely give a better understanding on the nature and severity of the problem and pave the way for planning strategic intervention.

## References

- Arnett, J. J. 2004. *Emerging Adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press.
- Becker, S. P., & Gregory, A. M. 2020. "Editorial Perspective: Perils and promise for child and adolescent sleep and associated psychopathology during the COVID-19 pandemic". *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 61(7), 757–759. doi:10.1111/jcpp.13278
- Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. 2020. "The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review of the evidence". *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 912–920. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8)
- Cacioppo, S., Grippo, A. J., London, S., Goossens, L., & Cacioppo, J. T. 2015. "Loneliness: Clinical import and interventions". *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 10(2), 238–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615570616>
- Colombo, S., Ciuccarelli, P., Cuia, D., Di, Molino, P., Perozzi, S., Tonelli, S., & Guerini, M. 2020. *Design for Emergency*. (Accessed: March 20, 2021) <https://www.designforemergency.com/analisi>
- Dijk, D.J., & Cajochen, C. 1997. "Melatonin and the Circadian Regulation of Sleep Initiation, Consolidation, Structure, and the sleep EEG". *Journal of Biological Rhythms*, 12, 627–635.
- Galea, S., Merchant, R. M., & Lurie, N. 2020. "The mental health consequences of COVID-19 and physical distancing". *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 28(8), 666–675. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.1562>
- Golberstein, E., Wen, H., & Miller, B.F. 2020. "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Mental Health for Children and Adolescents". *JAMA Pediatrics*, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.1456>
- Golechha, M. 2020. "COVID-19, India, Lockdown and Psychosocial Challenges: What Next?" *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 66(8), 830–832. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020935922>
- Harvey, R., & Prabhu, S. M. 2020, October 9. *World Mental Health Day: Looming Mental Health Crisis - Better Investment in Systems*. (Accessed: March 21, 2021) [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org): <https://www.unicef.org/eap/stories/world-mental-health-day>
- Hawke, L. D., Monga, S., Korczak, D., Hayes, E., Relihan, J., Darnay, K., . Henderson, J. 2020. "Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth Mental Health Among Youth With Physical Health Challenges". *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 1-8. doi:10.1111/eip.13052
- Hou, T.Y., Mao, X.F., Dong, W., Cai, W.P., & Deng, G.H. 2020, December. *Prevalence of and factors associated with mental health problems and suicidality among senior high school students in rural China during the COVID-19 outbreak*. 'Asian Journal of Psychiatry,' 54. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102305>

Hussain, F. 2021, March 17. *The Times of India*: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/help-kids-deal-with-cyberbullying-experts/articleshow/81546419.cms>

Katon, W., Richardson, L., Russo, J., Lozano, P., & McCauley, E. 2006. "Quality of Mental Health Care for Youth with Asthma and Comorbid Anxiety and Depression". *Medical Care*, 44(12), 1064–1072.

Labana, R. V. 2020. *The Public Mental Health while in a community quarantine due to COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review of literature using Google Scholar*. <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202005.0050.v1>

Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., Linney, C., McManus, M. N., Borwick, C., & Crawley, E. 2020. "Rapid Systematic Review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19". *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59, 1218–1239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009>

Mengin, A., Allé, M. C., Rolling, J., Ligier, F., Schroder, C., Lalanne, L., Berna, F., Jardri, R., Vaiva, G., Geoffroy, P. A., Brunault, P., Thibaut, F., Chevance, A., & Giersch, A. 2020. *Psychopathological consequences of confinement*. 'Encephale,' 46, S43–S52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.encep.2020.04.007>

Mi Blues Perspective. 2021. *Increase in Cyberbullying During COVID-19*. (Accessed: March 21, 2021) <https://www.mibluesperspectives.com/>: <https://www.mibluesperspectives.com/2020/10/12/increase-in-cyberbullying-during-covid-19/>

Parasuraman, S. R., Anglin, T. M., McLellan, S. E., Riley, C., & Mann, M. Y. 2018. "Health care utilization and unmet need among youth with special health care needs". *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 63(4), 435–444.

Robinson, L., Schulz, J., Ragnedda, M., Pait, H., Kwon, K. H., & Khilnani, A. 2021. *An Unequal "Pandemic: Vulnerability and COVID-19"*. *American Behavioral Scientist*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211003141>

Rossi, R., Succi, V., Talevi, D., Mensi, S., Niolu, C., Pacitti, F., & Di Lorenzo, G. 2020. *COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures impact on mental health among the general population in Italy*. 'Frontiers in Psychiatry,' 11, 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00790>

Sciensano. 2020. "Enquete de santé COVID-19", *Belgique*. (Accessed: March 20, 2021) <https://www.sciensano.be/sites/www.wiv-isp.be/>

Tabish, S. A. 2020. *Life and Livelihood during the COVID 19 Pandemic*. 'Journal of Clinical Immunology & Immunotherapy.' doi:10.24966/CIIT-8844/1000035

"Beware, parents: Your child may be at risk of online sexual exploitation & cyberbullying during pandemic lockdown". *The Economic Times*. 2020, April 15. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/beware-parents-your-child-may-be-at-risk-of-online-sexual-exploitation-cyberbullying-during-pandemic-lockdown/articleshow/75154179.cms?from=mdr>

“Rising domestic violence in India: National bodies and Twitter launch search prompt for help”. *The Indian Express*. 2020, June 17. <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/domestic-violence-india-national-commission-for-women-twitter-search-prompt-6463505/>

UN News. 2021, March 4. (Accessed: March 19, 2021) [www.news.un.org](http://www.news.un.org): <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086372>

UNICEF. 2020, April 15. (Accessed: April 24, 2021) [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org): <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/children-increased-risk-harm-online-during-global-covid-19-pandemic-unicef>

UNICEF. 2020, September 3. *Protecting children online*. (Accessed: March 20, 2021) [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org): <https://www.unicef.org/protection/violence-against-children-online>

UNICEF. 2021, February 16. (Accessed: March 19, 2021) [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org): <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/building-trust-vaccines-addressing-youth-mental-health-crisis-and-bridging-digital>

UNICEF. 2021, February 8. *Growing concern for well-being of children and young people amid soaring screen time*. (Accessed: March 20, 2021) <https://www.unicef.org>: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/growing-concern-well-being-children-and-young-people-amid-soaring-screen-time>

Zhou, S.-J., Zhang, L.-G., Wang, L.-L., Guo, Z.-C., Wang, J.-Q., Chen, J.-C., Liu, M., Chen, X., & Chen, J. X. 2020. *Prevalence and socio-demographic correlates of psychological health problems in Chinese adolescents during the outbreak of COVID-19*. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 29, 749–758. (Accessed: March 15, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01541-4s>