

Paper 7

Traumas Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic and School Counsellors' Responses

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Abstract

One major issue on the front burner of most nations today is how to survive the COVID-19 pandemic by ensuring the mitigation of its spread. Several efforts have been introduced to achieve this with significant injury to the educational system. As the schools are striving to return to its normal process of helping the learners to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that may help them in their future endeavours, school counsellors need to understand the traumas associated with the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic with the view to help mitigate its effect on the learners, the teachers and the entire school community. Therefore this paper presents a conceptual description of the term “trauma” particularly in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. It also analyzes the traumas that are found to be associated with the pandemic. It recommends that counsellors should help the school administration in insisting that members of the school community continues to adopt all preventive efforts against the COVID such as hand washing, use of face masks and social distancing.

Introduction

One major role counselling is expected to play in people's life is maintenance of individual's emotional well-being as well as prevention and remediation of moral and affective

injury. Meanwhile, occurrence of widespread infectious diseases and/or pandemics is commonly known to trigger significant trauma in individuals and the entire society (Boyras & Legros, 2020), leading to moral and emotional injuries. This is particularly true in the case of the Coronavirus pandemic which reportedly started from the city of Wuhan, the Chinese province of Hubei city, China in December 2019 (Ekpenyong, Obinwanne, Ovenseri-Ogbomo, Ahaiwe, Lewis, Echendu & Osuagwu, 2020) and have been known to have ravaged many countries in the underdeveloped, developing and even in the developed world.

One of the worst hit sector of the global economy is Education and specifically the schools where interpersonal contact is the norm. It therefore follows that counsellors and other school leath professionals need to identify, characterize and understand the gamut of traumas that are associated with the globally recognized pandemic. It is also expected that this will help in promoting self-care, social support, and sleep, in order to prevent prolonged psychological consequences such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (The niversity of California in San Francisco, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences, 2020). The UCSFDPBS (2020) noted that resilience and healing from trauma happens best in the context of supportive relationships that counselling seeks to offer.

Often, trauma is what results when an individual experiences overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds their ability to cope, or integrate the emotions involved with that experience. It threatens to shatter people's sense of security, making them feel helpless in an apparently dangerous world. It may result from a single distressing experience or recurring events of being overwhelmed and can be precipitated within a day, a weeks or in a year, as the individual struggles to cope with the circumstances.

With specific reference to the coronavirus pandemic, Boyraz and Legros (2020) identified some pandemic-related worries and stressors which people have been experiencing and these may include:

- a. Rising perceived threat of becoming infected: This stressor may be as a result of actually becoming infected or recently discharged from the isolation/quarantine camp, living in highly affected areas or knowing someone who has been infected (Jiang, Nan, Lv & Yang, 2020; Sun, Sun, Wu, Zhu, Zhang, Shang, et al., 2020). Boyraz and Legros (2020) reported a survey carried out in New York in the first four week of the Coronavirus pandemic, in

which 43% of New York City (NYC) residents knew someone who had COVID-19 and approximately half of them (48%) rated their chance of becoming infected as “high” or “very high”. This reportedly led to hopelessness and feelings of social isolation (40%), anxiety (44%), or depression (35%) “at least half of the time” during the past week. Other participants indicated that the major contributing factor to their distress is their concern about family members or loved ones getting sick.

- b. Social isolation and loneliness: These are known to be major traumatic fallouts of the coronavirus pandemic. Wu (2020) defines social isolation as the objective state of having few social relationships or infrequent social contact with others and loneliness as a subjective feeling of being isolated. These have been linked with poor physical and mental health status. Prior to the disease outbreak, people have been actively participating in schooling, work-place engagements, social activities, such as attending get-togethers, churches/Islamic activities, traveling, and many other social events. All these were stopped and even total lock-down was instituted leading to remote working; remote or online education; cancellation of sporting, entertainment, and professional events; and, closures of museums, parks, churches and much more, with no specific hope of when these were to abate. The immediate fallout was the unprecedented surges in mental health concerns, substance abuse, and domestic violence. In fact, Holt-Lunstad (2020) opines that although social isolation and loneliness were prevalent in some western population prior to COVID-19, efforts to reduce the virus’ spread via stay-at-home orders, quarantine, and social distancing recommendations have exacerbated an already serious problem.
- c. Economic stressors: Many studies (e.g. Didar-UllIslam, Bodrud-Doza, Khan, AbidulHaque, .Mamun (2020); Shanahan, Steinhoff, Bechtiger. Murray, Nivette, Hepp, Ribeaud, & Eisner, (2020); and Usher, Bhullar, Durkin Gyamfi Jackson (2020) have documented economic stressors thrown up by the Covid-19 pandemic. including job/financial loss, the inability to pay rent and fear of being evicted. In Nigeria, Obioma, Reuben and Elekwachi (2020) reported that the incidence of coronavirus pandemic has affected both low and high-income earners in various businesses and that particularly, traders and transporters were the most hit, despite the regimen of palliatives provided by different tiers of government. The authors opine that very hardly hit were start-up businesses and small scale enterprises,

as well as businesses in the consultancy, hospitality and aviation sectors. All these place untold pressure on the health and wellbeing of the average Nigeria family. Kira et al (2020) surmised that marriages and other relationships may have crumbled under the stress of self-isolation and mounting financial hardships.

- d. **Stigmatization:** Ahmedani (2011) described stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting and that reduces someone from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one”. Such individuals are thus perceived as having a “spoiled” identity. Also Dudley (2000), defined stigma as stereotypes or negative views attributed to a person or groups of people when their characteristics or behaviors are viewed as different from or inferior to societal norms. Hence, the process of tainting the identity or characteristics of an individual or a group of individual is commonly referred to as stigmatization. Adesegun, Binuyo, Adeyemi, Ehioghae, Rabor, Amusan, *et al.* (2020) opine that in the case of the Coronavirus pandemic, stigmatization may mean people are labeled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated separately, and/or experience loss of status because of a perceived link with the disease. The authors reported that Asian ethnicity and recent international travelers in Nigeria are perceived as the cause of the pandemic reaching the shores of Nigeria. They reported the case of a Nigerian COVID-19 survivor who claimed that her ordeal was made worse by the aura of stigmatization and misinformation that surrounded her during her isolation period. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) stated that anecdotal evidence indicate that stigma associated with COVID-19 can make people hide when they are sick and can also make people delay in seeking treatment.

Boyraz and Legros (2020) also warned that individuals with disabilities who have limited mobility or have difficulty understanding or communicating information may not only be at high risk of contracting COVID-19 but may also experience unique challenges and stressors during this pandemic. In addition, keeping a safe distance from others is difficult for individuals with SCIs and other disabilities who need assistance with self-care and daily activities; thus, these individuals may experience greater fear of being infected.

It should be noted that young people are known to be highly susceptible to stigma because they are at a stage when social interactions and peer acceptance are top priorities, and they worry a great deal about what others think about them (Kanegawa, n.d.). This can worsen their problems and, in

extreme instances, may increase suicidal tendencies. Also Martin (2010) posited that a person may internalize the negative responses and experiences associated with stigma, either consciously or subconsciously, resulting in loss of confidence and poor self-esteem.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, dry cough, and tiredness while other symptoms may include loss of taste or smell, aches and pains, headache, sore throat, nasal congestion, red eyes, diarrhoea, or a skin rash. Consequently, once someone is heard sneezing or coughing, which were earlier accompanied with some courtesies, it nowadays attracts neck-turning, suspicion and in some cases desertion by other members of the society. This is despite the fact that no clear cut suspicion of COVID-19 infection can be traced in the individual.

Counsellors' responses

One of the major issues on the front burner in educational circles is the uncertainty concerning when school life would return to normal (Daniel, 2020). Although, schools are exploring different approaches in order to teach and encourage effective learning in different ways, an important aspect is providing the students, staff and parent with the reassurance for safety and wellbeing. Encouraging members of the school community to stick to covid-19 preventive measures of regular hand-washing, social distancing and the use of facemasks and sanitizers are getting increasingly difficult. It behooves counsellors the duty to regularly insist that the school community sticks to compliance with these measures, now that second and third wave infections of the pandemic have been declared to be on. It is even said to spread more quickly and is reputed to be deadlier than the first wave. It is expected that if these safety precautions are strictly adhered to, the rising perceived threat of becoming infected would have been largely addressed.

Another important response counsellors need to develop toward these traumas is encouraging members of the school community within the age brackets required to be vaccinated against Covid-19 to present themselves for the vaccination. In Nigeria, one major responsibility of the school counsellor lies in dispelling myths and misconceptions about the Covid-19 vaccines. In fact, there are a number of misconceptions people have all over the world concerning the Covid-19 vaccines, those in Nigeria may be very difficult to dispel. For instance, the UNICEF (2021) identified common myths and misconceptions about the vaccines to include the fact that the vaccine contains microchips; that the vaccines were developed too quickly without proper research and so may not

be safe; that the AstraZeneca brand was specifically very dangerous and so on. In Nigeria, such myths and misconception, including accompanying doctored videos include that vaccine spots on human body magnetizes metallic materials like spoons, keys, etc.; that the Coronavirus was mainly for the rich and powerful: that Nigeria's climatic conditions does not favour the spread of the virus; that those who attend certain religious denominations are protected by the Holy Ghost and so on. Now that the third wave appears to be crawling into the Nigerian society, school counsellors need to take up the task of encouraging members of the school community to take both preventive and curative precautions.

Counsellors also have to intensify their efforts in identifying students, teachers and other members in the school who may be showing symptoms similar to those that are commonly presented by those infected by the Covid-19 virus. Even when such people are not infected, any suspicion should be taken seriously and reported promptly to the school authority and health authorities in the neighbourhood, so that prompt attention can be given to victims and the spread can be mitigated.

The knowledge, selection and application of different therapeutic techniques for anxiety, social isolation, and stigmatization of any member of the school community need to be enhanced in order to reduce the effect of trauma associated with covid-19. More recent information about the pandemic should regularly be released to the school community through staff meetings, students' assemblies, PTA meetings and even individual discussion. The school noticeboards should be used in disseminating useful information and encouragement for compliance with necessary Covid-19 prevention protocols.

Conclusion

It appears the scourge of the Coronavirus pandemic is not subsiding as quickly as expected and consequently all educational establishments are looking for ways of continuing with its educational activities such that their teaching-learning programmes are not completely disrupted. As schools resume, school counsellors need to be able to identify, characterize and minimize the traumas associated with the incidence of the pandemic. This will help to prevent moral and affective injury that may arise if such effort is not given a timely attention.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that counsellors should be vigilant in identifying possible Covid-19 cases within the school and be skillful in disseminating information required by members of the school

community to protect themselves from contracting the deadly illness or further spread in the community.

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