

COVID-19
Pandemic Risk
Reduction

Mental Health
and Psychosocial
Support Services
(MHPSS) for Staff,
Volunteers and
Communities
During COVID-19

In any epidemic or pandemic, it is common for individuals to feel stressed and worried. Emergencies are always stressful, but specific stressors particular to COVID-19 outbreak affect the population.

Furthermore, misconceptions and misinformation about the disease often spreads rapidly in such pandemic. This brief guideline provides background knowledge on the MHPSS aspects related to COVID-19, and suggests MHPSS activities that can be implemented.

In this guide, you will find a number of trusted sources and resources to help guide your response to the mental health challenges our communities are faced with as we deal with COVID-19.

NORMAL REACTIONS

In this situation, there are usually misconceptions and rumours about the disease. The affected may receive contradictory information from various sources.

Fear and mistrust of public health messages can cause people to not seek medical help and some may even hide.

“Fear and anxiety about COVID-19 can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in an individual. Everyone reacts or responds differently to stressful situations. How a person responds to (it) is influenced by the individual’s background, and the community they live in”.

Get the facts right. Gather information that will help you accurately determine your risk so that you can take reasonable precautions.

Find credible sources you can trust such as the Ministry of Health’s Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC), World Health Organization (WHO), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and MERCY Malaysia.

RUMORS RELATED TO COVID-19

Some of the rumors circulating in the COVID-19 outbreak are:

- The virus only attacks old people and spares young people and children.
- The virus can be transmitted through pets and people should abandon their pets.
- The use of mouthwash, antibiotics, cigarettes, and liquor with high alcohol can kill the virus.
- Going to a sauna and firing of fireworks can prevent COVID-19.
- The disease is premeditated and COVID-19 is a bioweapon designed to target a specific population.
- Food items are contaminated and will spread the virus.
- Patients hide their disease because they intentionally want to spread virus to others.
- Drinking alcohol can protect you against COVID-19.

COMMON REACTIONS AND BEHAVIORS IN PANDEMICS

- Fear of being sick, and of the way in which one dies.
- Fear of symptoms and diseases that are easily treated.
- Fear of falling ill and dying keep people from approaching health workers or health facilities.
- Fear of losing livelihood, not being able to work during isolation, and of being fired because the employer is afraid of contamination etc.
- Feeling of helplessness and depression due to being isolated.
- Mistrust and anger of everyone associated with the disease.
- Stigmatization and fear of patients, healthcare workers and caregivers.
- Refuse approaches by volunteers and medical workers; threatening them verbally or physically.
- Refuse to care for unaccompanied or separated minors due to fear of contamination.

COMMON REACTIONS AND BEHAVIORS IN PANDEMICS

Some of these fears and reactions spring from realistic dangers, but many reactions and behaviours are also borne out of lack of knowledge, rumours and misinformation.

It is important to correct misconceptions, at the same time as acknowledging that the feelings and subsequent behaviour is very real, even if the underlying assumption is false.

This guideline brings attention to the different ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to address it may exacerbate the risk of mental health and psychosocial challenges and threats to affected communities, health workers, volunteers and others.

It highlights the importance of ensuring that support and MHPSS services for at-risk individuals and communities affected by such risks are maintained and what we can take to mitigate such threats and its impacts.

MHPSS ACTIVITIES

Numerous MHPSS activities can be carried out depending on the context. Ongoing assessments and monitoring must take place to decide which activities are the most appropriate at any given time.

The list below is meant as an inspiration:

- Assessment of community needs and feedback to supervisors on developments in the community.
- Continuous risk assessment.
- Support for other sectors surveillance including contact monitoring and tracing, health, logistics.
- Peer support activities.
- Basic training in psychological first aid and supportive communication for volunteers, health and community workers.
- Supervise, support and monitor volunteers and other stakeholders.

MHPSS NEEDS IN THE COMMUNITY

Reducing fears and promoting empowerment and efficacy:

- Assess community beliefs and understanding of COVID-19.
- Identify and prevent rumours and actions in the community that may harm the epidemic control efforts.
- Seek cooperation with neighbourhood leaders, market leaders, faith leaders, authorities, and other key community members to identify avenues of collaboration and community efficacy and empowerment.
- Provide targeted community sensitizations for particularly affected individuals and groups or community members, groups or stakeholders identified as being resistant to sensitization messages and pandemic control efforts.
- Provide psychological first aid to the affected families, discharged patients and other affected community members.

MHPSS NEEDS IN THE COMMUNITY

Reduce stigmatization in communities and support reintegration:

- Provide psychosocial support for people who have recovered from COVID-19 to assist with their social and family reintegration.
- Provide support to unaccompanied and separated minors and other vulnerable children, link with relatives/extended families in collaboration with child protection partners.
- Ensure that people who are undergoing treatment in clinical centres and their family members receive support including food, psychological first aid and other needs.
- Facilitate communication between patients and family members while in the treatment.
- Facilitate community dialogue with stakeholders in raising awareness and to promote community reintegration.
- Provide necessary assistance to families affected by a death or illness caused by COVID-19.

MHPSS COMPONENTS IN RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

Awareness raising on disease prevention and control:

- Use a psychosocial approach to further behavioural change using supportive communication techniques when developing messages for different audiences and for the media.
- Train responders in psychological first aid to learn active listening and trust building with community members.
- Include psychosocial volunteers in social mobilization activities to reduce fears and change beliefs and provide sensitization messages for example through household visits and targeted community sessions.

Isolation of suspected, probable and confirmed cases:

- Liaise with surveillance teams for identified cases.
- Include psychosocial support volunteers in the surveillance and health worker activities to reduce fears and change beliefs and provide sensitization messages.

MHPSS COMPONENTS IN RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

Contact tracing and monitoring:

- Inform and raise awareness to foster collaboration in case of possible resistance for the contact, their family and other community members and stakeholders.

Case management:

- Liaise with health care personnel to identify vulnerable cases and community members for inclusion in psychosocial activities.
- Sensitize family members who may refuse treatment.
- Conduct targeted community sensitization and psychoeducational activities to reduce fears and change beliefs. Target groups may include discharged patients and others affected by COVID-19, community members, community and faith leaders.
- Provide peer support and stress management for health workers and others involved in the response.
- Stay close and calm, listen to the fears and sorrows, provide a sense of safety, and offer practical support.

MANAGING STRESS

Before assisting in an epidemic, it is natural to have some concerns. Family and friends may be worried, have little knowledge about the disease, not know what the work will be like etc. When preparing to work in such situation, consider:

- **Family and friends:** may be concerned about the safety and their own safety upon your return. Take these concerns seriously, help with proper information, and talk openly about the concerns and dangers – both those that are real and those that are imagined. Having the support of understanding close ones will make the work easier.
- **Learn about COVID-19:** Learn about the disease, how to avoid contamination, safety measures etc. as information supports being calm and confident. Health staff, epidemiologists, nurses, Ministry of Health (KKM) and WHO websites can answer questions about the virus.
- **Be critical:** There is misinformation and the media tends to dramatize the coverage on the outbreak. Only seek information from trustworthy sources.



SOKONGAN PSIKOSOSIAL COVID - 19

HOTLINE 03 29359935

MASA OPERASI:
8 pagi - 5 petang
(setiap hari)

Security: Ensure a proper briefing is given before beginning any task in a pandemic. Know how to use protective equipment and always follow security instructions. Complying with security measures is not only a matter of personal safety but that of everyone else.

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Content adopted from **+C IFRC** and  World Health Organization

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COVID-19 Pandemic Fund

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