Caring for the mental health of the elderly during the COVID-19 outbreak

When facing a major crisis or disaster, it is always important to take care of those who may not be able to look after themselves or manage the situation on their own. Such people are at a higher risk of experiencing negative thoughts and feelings when faced with a crisis, and this can affect their health and well-being in many ways. One such group are the elderly, who are often emotionally, physically or financially reliant on the help of others. This leaflet provides information on caring for the mental health of elderly people during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The vulnerability of the elderly
Old age is a time of maturity, wisdom and experience. Throughout human history, the elderly or “elders” have been respected for their ability to provide valuable advice, transmit values and ideals to the younger generations, and share their experiences with those who are less experienced. However, old age is also a time of decline in physical and mental capacities. It is normal for the elderly to experience changes such as decreases in muscle power or energy levels,
forgetfulness, or slowness in doing their daily activities. Sometimes, these aspects of the ageing process can be made worse by various illnesses that are more common as age advances.

In a crisis situation, such as a flood or a disease outbreak, this decline in capacities means that the elderly may feel confused, helpless or uncertain about what is going to happen to them and their families. They may also find themselves isolated from others, leading to feelings of loneliness. It is important to address these feelings, as they can have a negative effect on the physical and mental health of the elderly.

At this moment, the entire country is facing a serious problem – an infectious disease known as COVID-19 (short for “coronavirus disease 2019”) which is caused by a virus. This disease is spreading extensively and is leading to a number of deaths even in developed countries of the world. It is therefore natural that it is causing a lot of anxiety to people of all ages. To control the spread of this disease, the Government of India and the various State governments have implemented measures to reduce our risk of catching this infection. While it is vital for us to observe these measures, it is also important for us to take care of the health and well-being of our elderly family members during this time.

When should I be concerned about my elderly relative’s mental health?

It is absolutely normal to feel worried or upset for some time when faced with a problem or crisis. Such feelings can actually help us to think about the problem in a realistic manner, and can occur at all ages! Therefore, the fact that an elderly person is worried or “stressed out” about the COVID-19 outbreak is not, by itself, a sign of mental illness. However, when negative feelings and thoughts continue for too long, or cross a certain limit, they can lead to mental health problems. The information box below gives you a list of certain “warning” or “red alert” signs that may indicate that your elderly relative has crossed this limit:

**Box 1: Warning signs of mental health problems in the elderly**

- Irritability or anger
- Lack of interest in daily activities
- Complaining that they “don’t know how to” or “cannot” do things that were a part of their normal routine
- Crying easily or frequently
- Disturbed sleep
- Loss of appetite or food refusal
- Unwillingness to remain alone, even for short times
- Becoming excessively demanding or dependent on other family members
It is also important to note that some elderly people may be at a higher risk of developing mental health problems than others. These people require more attention and care in order to prevent and protect their health. Details of these “risk factors” are given in the information box below:

**Box 2: Who is at a greater risk of mental health problems among the elderly?**

- Widows and widowers
- Those living alone
- Those with ongoing family disputes or conflicts
- Those with financial difficulties
- Those with chronic physical illnesses, such as diabetes, hypertension or heart disease
- Those with a physical disability, such as difficulty in walking, decreased vision or hearing impairment
- Those with memory problems
- Those who have suffered from mental disorders in the past

**As the caregiver of an elderly person, what can I do to help them?**

The following steps have been found helpful by experts in caring for the mental well-being of older adults during the COVID-19 outbreak. Some of them may apply to you or your relative, and others may not, so choose the ones most suitable for your situation in life.

1. **Take care of their physical health**

   There is a close link between physical and mental health. If a chronic physical condition such as diabetes, hypertension or heart disease is not treated continuously and regularly, this can lead to negative thoughts and feelings. Therefore, even when under a lockdown or observing other safety measures, your elderly relative should continue taking treatment for these conditions. This includes not only tablets or injections but also any lifestyle modifications advised by your doctor, such as dietary restrictions or exercise. If you experience any difficulty in obtaining medications for your elderly relative’s condition, please contact the local authorities for assistance.

2. **Encourage social contacts**
Being lonely or isolated is harmful to our mental health. The elderly who live alone, or with only a few family members, are at risk of feeling lonely, especially if relatives, friends and neighbours can no longer visit them because of safety measures. At this time, we should try to maintain contacts with friends and family by remote means such as a telephone call, or online communication if this is feasible. If you have an elderly relative who lives far away, make sure to keep in touch with them regularly and encourage others in your family to do the same. Being in contact with others and communicating with them often can help us to fight feelings of sadness and worry and can reduce stress.

3. Establish a regular routine at home

Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, all of us have had to make sudden changes to our activities and daily schedule. This can be disturbing to the elderly, especially those who are used to a particular regular routine, and can cause them to feel worried or “stressed”. Because of this, it is important to try and preserve daily routines and rituals at home as far as possible, avoiding only those activities which are against safety measures or Government rules. This will help to retain a sense of normalcy in the household and cause less worries to the elderly.

4. Provide accurate information
To an elderly person, suddenly hearing about a strange disease may be extremely frightening! This is made worse by the profusion of false and misleading information that is available online, especially through social media. It is vital that the elderly should be given accurate information about this disease, its mode of transmission, its symptoms, and the safety measures to be adopted by all of us. This should be explained to them clearly and in a language that they are comfortable with, without unnecessary use of technical terms or abbreviations that may only confuse them further. Even if an elderly relative keeps asking for clarifications about this, we should not become impatient with them or scold them! Giving our elderly relatives correct information can allay anxiety and reduce false ideas or beliefs about COVID-19. They should also be taught the appropriate safety measures, such as face covering and hand hygiene, as this can give them a greater sense of confidence and control over their situation.

5. Encourage participation in activities without breaking rules about safety

Even if we have to remain confined at home, we should avoid being idle! The elderly can easily become depressed or worried if they are told to “stay still” or “do nothing”. They should be encouraged to take part in some physical activity, such as walking or gardening, as long as this is not too strenuous. The level of activity should be based on their level of health and any physical disabilities they may have. However, they should avoid physical activities, such as walking in public places, which may violate safety measures and precautions.

The same concept also applies to participation in religious rites and ceremonies. Many elderly people are especially attached to such rituals, which give them a sense of meaning, purpose and security. They may experience distress when told that they cannot go to their local temple, mosque or church. It should be explained to them that this is a safety measure to protect their health as well as the health of others, and they can be encouraged to pray or perform such rites at home instead.
6. Special considerations for elderly relatives with memory problems

Some elderly people suffer from brain diseases which cause a loss of memory as well as behavioural problems. The term “dementia” is used by doctors to describe these problems. People with such diseases need to be looked after carefully during disease outbreaks, as they may not fully understand or cooperate with safety measures. They may also show an increase in behavioural problems, such as irritability, anger outbursts or trying to wander away from home, when faced with the stress of the COVID-19 outbreak. The following points should be kept in mind when caring for elderly relatives with these problems:

- If they keep talking about past events and circumstances, do not discourage them from doing so. This may give them a sense of stability.
- Do not show excessive anger or fear in front of them, as this may worsen their behavioural problems. Instead, talk to them in a clear, calm tone of voice.
- Try to explain safety precautions to them in simple language, even if you have to do this repeatedly. Help them with activities such as hand-washing if they are unable to do them on their own.
- Avoid excessive noise in the home.
- Try to establish regular times for them to have their meals, use the bathroom and to go to bed.
- Make sure that they continue to take whatever medicines they need for other physical conditions, such as diabetes or high blood pressure.
- Adopt safety measures, such as locking doors at night, to prevent them from wandering away without their knowledge and accidentally exposing themselves to COVID-19 infection.

We hope that following these suggestions can help you to care for your elderly relative as we deal with this difficult situation.

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