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Psychological Well-Being of Children in Covid Scenario – Ayurvedic Approach

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ABSTRACT

The entire health scenario have been transformed or even altered with the COVID pandemic. Each and every one in the society is being affected in the scenario of mental health, with the resulting drastic changes happened in the society. One of the key vulnerable groups in the society is none other than children. Even though the educational scenario has been supplemented by the learning platforms, the social scenario have been affected so adversely. They are having several psychological issues as per reported studies from various parts of the globe. Ayurvedic principles of psychiatry and psychology including preventive principles, medicines and psychotherapy will do fine if applied in this area, so as to enhance the quality of life of the affected children. The various possibilities are discussed in the article.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has profound impact on the lives of people across the globe. Children being the most vulnerable are the worst affected and often overlooked group during this crisis. When the exemptions were announced, the adults were able to get out at least for the essentials, but the children were still confined within the four walls of their homes. Mobility restrictions and school closures limits their access to socialization, play as well as interaction with peers and teachers which are inevitable for their development and psychological well-being. Though these social distancing measures are necessary to curb the spread of disease, it can have detrimental effects on children's physical and mental developments. The most significant but neglected issue is the psychological impact resulting from the situation on them.

Psychological Impacts

School is a platform that accelerates the intellectual, physical and psycho-social development of children, along with the providing of adequate education. It equips them with gear to be better human beings by imparting to them the social lessons of helpfulness, sharing, friendship, participation, kindness and gratitude. Schools can actively promote a health-conscious schedule, good personal hygiene; encourage physical activities, appropriate diet, and healthy sleep habits in children [1]. To tackle COVID-19, many countries have closed their schools on an indefinite basis. Decreased interaction with teachers and peers, disruption of daily routines and parental maltreatment can have negative impacts on student population.

In their continuing learning process, children find a balance between assimilation and accommodation [2]. The ongoing situation is quite different from a child's understanding of how the world works. Children find it difficult to make sense of the world by assimilation i.e., by adding new information to existing knowledge. It requires a great deal of adjustment to learn by accommodation i.e., development of new schemas. Being the keen observers of the environment, their concerns about current challenges when not adequately addressed can further heighten their anxiety. A preliminary study depicted psychological and behavioral problems among children and adolescents such as clinginess, distraction, irritability and fear of asking questions about the epidemic [3].

Researchers have documented anxiety, depression, lethargy, impaired social interaction, and reduced appetite as the commonly reported manifestations of stress due to negative events in children [4]. To be added more, pandemic stressors such as persisting fear of infection of themselves or their dear ones, thoughts about virus, media coverage of the consequences also may have an insecurity feeling and troublesome impacts on mental health of children. Physiological effects include a compromised immune system which can have both physical as well as psychological consequences in due course. When children are kept away from their school, their activity level decreases, diet and sleep become irregular. Their routine got disrupted and there is a risk of establishing unsafe habits such as screen addiction and even substance abuse. Anxiety caused by the existing uncertainty is capable of leading to sleep disorders such as nightmares and insomnia in many children. Fear of themselves or loved ones getting sick can also cause distress in children.

In today's digital media age, children are exposed too much scary and fake news on social media which further aggravates their worries and anxiety. Many children are increasingly seeking refuge on various digital media as an escape from the prevailing stressful situation. As a result, painful feelings and emotions are suppressed which will cause problems later in life. As classes shifted online, incidents of children from low backgrounds committing suicide were reported due to their inability to utilize those platforms. All this refers to the defective coping and emotion regulation skills with stressful events in children.

When most of the parents started to work from home, they could no longer carry out the extra responsibility for their children's education. Covid-19 is perceived as a significant stressor as far as many parents are concerned. Stressors resulting from financial difficulties, low educational status and single parenthood can lead to poor parental behaviors. Parental exposure to stressors will result in cognitive, emotional, and physical fatigue, which seriously affects parent-child relationship [5]. As part of quarantine restrictions, many children have to stay away from their parents, causing them to develop separation anxiety. There are a lot of challenges to kids with special needs such as those with learning disability, attention deficit hyperactive disorder etc. For them, online learning is a hard-hitting transition to an environment with which they aren't used to which makes them difficult to cope with the situation. They can find more distractions at home and will not be able to concentrate, manage time and complete tasks in required time. They may need extra assistance to stay on track.

Understanding the Problem

Psychiatric disorders among children are often not able to recognize so easily. Developing a better knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of children or even the basics of child psychology may be essential for identifying abnormal behaviors. Effective communication between the child and the parent is essential for the early detection of psychological problems. In school going situations, a good teacher may be the initial observer of the problems. Detailed evaluation of the symptomatology and personal as well as family interview helps the clinician to determine whether they meet criteria of any of the psychiatric disorders such as depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder etc.

Outlook of Ayurveda

In Ayurveda, the various aspects of functioning of mind, its alterations, resulting psychological affections and their algorithm of management have been narrated. *Acārya Caraka* describes the usefulness of techniques such as *anumāna pramāna* through which various psychological states could be inferred by experienced clinicians. The emotion behind *abhidroha* (aggressive behavior) should be inferred as *Krodha* (anger). *Soka* (Grief) is understood from *Dainya*, *baya* (sorrowful dispositions such as crying spells) and *baya* (fear) from *vishada* [6]. This is applicable in case of children as well with slight variations.

Satvabala or *mental strength* of the child should be assessed which is a determinant of mental health status and ease of having psychological imbalance. The validated scales are available in the case of adults which may be helpful to an extent in children as well. Detailed history for *prajñāparādha* which is represented by intellectual pseudo-conception and improper conduct should be identified. Identifying the underlying status of Doshas of the mind, *rajas* and *tamas* is so relevant here before reaching a conclusion. Status of *Ojus* should be assessed as depletion of *ojus* can be the cause or effect of a psychiatric or even psychological disorder.

Understanding of the issues in terms of the alteration or *vibhrama* of the eight mental faculties such as *manas*, *budhi*, *samjñajñāna*, *smṛti*, *bhakti*, *Seela*, *cheshta* and *achara* is considered as the steps of mental status examination as per Ayurveda [7]. In the *Vibrama* of *manas*, a child's thought process is altered and he or she thinks about the instances which are worth thinking but thinks of such instances which are not to be thought about in the current situation. In the alteration of *budhi*, a proper decisive cognition doesn't occur on time. Proper discriminative power is lost and the child doesn't know what is good and what is bad. This may result in the presentation of behavioral disorders.

The alteration of the faculty of samjna is the impairment in attention, concentration and orientation of the child or the affected. The dysfunction in *smṛithi* leads to inability of the child to learn from their past experiences, thus the child will behave inappropriate or unexpected manner. The change in the area of *Bhakti* leads to the sudden shift in desire or disinterest towards previously desired things. One example is change in desire towards food (lack of desire or excessive desire) happening for the first time in the lockdown period. Mood swings, sleep disturbances and appetite disturbances in children that can arise in the context of a significant life change or a stressful life in COVID scenario can be understood as *sīla vibhrama*. Due to the impairment in the *ceṣṭā*, child indulges in undesirable or irrelevant psychomotor activities. Temper tantrums, self-harm and reduction in activity are considered as *anucita ceṣṭa* or unexpected psychomotor activity. Symptoms of *ācāra vibhrama* during this period are mainly reduced self-care and neglect of routine activities of them.

Preventive Aspect

While narrating the definition of a *svastha* (healthy individual), it is clearly mentioned that the person should be '*prasannātmendriyamana*' (Pleasant soul, sense organs as well as mind) which is having due importance in the current scenario [8]. A child's mental status should be preserved so that he/she remains healthy physically, mentally as well as in the social perspective. The role of parent is quite inevitable in this regard. Several systematic reviews have demonstrated the effectiveness of parenting skills training in reducing internalizing and externalizing problems in children.

Dietary Factors

Food and dietary habits have an influence on the child's mental health as per the Ayurvedic classics, Indian philosophical texts and contemporary sciences. *Manas* is said to be *annamaya* which means supplemented by the food and the *sūkṣmarūpa* (minute part) of food nourishes the mind. By the *śuddhi* or the purity of the *ahara*, *śuddhi* or clarity of functions of the mind is attained [9]. In this scenario where challenges persist to both physical as well as mental health, it is essential to develop healthy eating habits in children and such positive habits are prone to retain by them throughout their life. *Dugdha* (milk), *navanīta* (butter) and *ghṛta* (ghee) are some of the food constituents mentioned as *medhya* which means enhancing the intellect [10]. Habituating to *sātvika āhāra* or ideal diet is described in *Bhagavat gīta*, which are of the properties of *snigdha*, *sthira* and *hrīdyā* which definitely promotes clarity to functioning of body and mind in children [11]. Excessive spicy foods, fried items, curd, junk foods etc. which result in aggravation of certain behaviors as agitation, anger, increased sexual desires etc. should be absolutely avoided.

Routine and behavioral deeds

The *dinacarya* or the daily routine is considered as the ultimate preventive measure in Ayurveda. Educating the child of the

regular routine at an early age helps him/her to stay healthy and happy throughout his life. Practice of sleep hygiene is also so crucial and is the area where technology has affected in a negative manner. Physical activity is to be promoted in the form of yoga and pranayama, where the parents can accompany their children.

Sadvṛtta and *ācara rasāyana* describing certain rules in the physical, mental and social scenario for maintaining a healthy state of body and mind is applicable to children as well. It includes ethical, social, mental, moral and physical conduct that one have to adopt throughout their life. It helps in improving the behaviors, cognitions, attitude, emotions and intellect of the child in the greatest possible way. Following these principles increase *satva guna* and controls *rajas* and *tamas*, leading to appropriate response and behaviour. It also leads to the configuration of excellent status of the dhatus and increases the quantity and quality of *ojas* and in effect to immune-enhancement in the individual so as to overcome such infectious diseases.

Unwholesome action performed due to the alteration in *dhī* (intellect), *dhṛti* (restraint) and *smṛti* (memory) is termed as *prajñāparādha* which is considered as the main contributory component of many psychological illness. As a result, children engage in unwholesome things such as abuse of substances, excess use of mobile phones and defiant behavior to elders [12]. Staying away from *prajñāparādha*, practice of *dhṛti* (patience) and *manonigraha* (control of the mind), non-indulgence of *asāt myendiyārthasamyoga* (unwholesome contact of the sense organs with sensory objects) and control of natural mental urges (*vegas*) is capable of keeping children free from psychological affections.

Management

Ayurvedic parlance have explained its own methodology of psychotherapy right from the beginning. ‘*Satvāvajaya cikitsa*’ is the psychotherapeutic technique that is used to control the mind from unwholesome objects and is capable of attributing to any available psychiatric ailments [13]. *Jñāna* (self – realization of the various aspects), *vijñāna* (scientific knowledge about the existing condition), *dhairya* (re-assurance about the situation), *smṛti* (experience sharing and its derivatives) and *samādhi* (relaxation strategy) are certain steps dealt under ‘*satvāvajaya cikitsa*’ [14]. Promotion of *jñāna* and *vijñāna* is done by enhancing *dhī*, *dhṛti*, and *smṛti*. Self-realisation and awareness about current situation of ongoing pandemic, its own strength and opportunities should be made known to children. It is essential to convince children that the world around them is working tirelessly to eradicate this epidemic. Their role is to support them by staying along with them. *Jñāna* and *vijñāna* can also be imparted to parents and caregivers through psychoeducation and family/ group therapy, where online methods can also be imparted. The resultant thing is the child will be equipped to perform his duties after duly considering the pros and cons.

Dhairya is the controlling power of mind in stressful situations [15]. Mental instability is quite common in children. For imparting *dhairya*, motivating the child for self-control (*manonigraha*) and reassuring through *āśvāsana* (reassurance), *sāntvana* (consoling the patient) and *harṣana* (making them happy) by proper guidance and suggestions from parents, teachers etc. are to be done. Recollection of past successful experiences is an important component of the *smṛti* domain. Samadhi can be achieved by relaxation techniques, meditation and *yogāsana*s, under adequate supervision and guidance. Emotional balancing can be adopted by practicing *Pratidvandva cikitsa* (replacement by opposite emotions). Here the condition is managed by inducing

the opposite emotions in order to neutralize them in the context of conditions caused by *kāma* (excessive desire or passion), *śoka* (grief), *harṣa* (pleasure), *īrṣya* (jealousy), *lobha* (greed) etc [16].

Role of medicines

As per the severity of the conditions, medicine supplementation is crucial as well as effective. In *Ayurvedic parlance*, it is mentioned that, medicines used in children can be same as that of adults as components of disease such as *doṣa*, *duṣya* and *nidana* are similar but with a lesser dosage calculated as per the age [17]. Agni is the primary factor to be considered while administering the medicines. Single drugs such as *āśvagandha*, *śankhupuṣpi*, *vaca*, *jadamansi*, *yaṣṭi* etc can be used as per the demand from the condition. *Ghṛta* yogas or medicated ghee preparations such as *Kalyāṇaka ghṛta*, *Pancagavya ghṛta* and *Kusmāṇḍa svarasa ghṛta* are beneficial in psychiatric disorders especially in children. A medicine which enhances the *ojas* can also be incorporated such as *jivānīyagana*, *Drakshadi Kwatha* etc. *Rasāyana* drugs especially *medhya rasāyanas* such as *maṇḍūkāparṇi*, *yaṣṭimadhu*, *gudūci* etc. are used so as to enhance memory, concentration and intellect. Panchakarma treatments are also ideal in severe manifestations on a conditional basis in children. A multi disciplinary approach incorporating all the above said methods will definitely provide excellent results in such conditions.

Conclusion

Children are the most vulnerable group who face psychological challenges especially during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. Timely recognition and addressing of their negative emotions are inevitable to save children from the psychological consequence of the pandemic. Here the parents, teachers as well as the peers are having an inevitable role. Preventive and curative aspects in Ayurveda are to be effectively utilized so that children can appropriately overcome a condition of distress and attain emotional stability which also reflects in their later life. Further studies are the need of the hour and will especially be helpful for the affected in the near future.

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