

Module-8: Child protection during pandemics

Session 3: Providing Psychosocial Support to children and addressing stigma and discrimination

Duration: 14:56 Minutes

In this session we will discuss

- What is mental health and psychosocial support
- What is stigma and discrimination
- Stigma and discrimination during COVID-19
- Addressing stigma and discrimination
- Ways to provide psychosocial support to children during COVID-19

Let's watch a video on psycho social well-being during COVID-19 through this video. This will help you understand the mental health issues during COVID-19 and the importance of addressing it.

As we saw in the video, pandemics are not only a physical health issue, but they badly affect our mental health also!

We have already discussed about the mental health and psychosocial distress as one of the child protection risks.

Let's discuss it in detail.

What is Mental Health and Psycho Social Support?

The composite term 'mental health and psychosocial support' (MHPSS) refers to any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being or prevent or treat mental disorders.¹

COVID-19 and related lockdown has pushed children to potential vulnerability and risky situations since there have been restrictions of mobility and interaction with peer group, teachers and the larger community.

School closures are affecting children's access to learning and limiting their interactions with peers. Children may feel confused and at loss with the current situation, leading to frustration and anxiety, which will only increase with the over exposure to mass and social media, especially among adolescents.

Further, Stigma related to COVID-19 has left some children more vulnerable to violence and psychosocial distress.²

¹ <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/49304/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support>

² <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-children-heightened-risk-abuse-neglect-exploitation-and-violence-amidst>

What is Stigma and Discrimination?

Throughout the sessions we have been mentioning about Stigma. Do you know what does stigma mean? Let's now discuss it in detail.

Stigma is a major cause of discrimination and exclusion: it affects people's self-esteem, helps disrupt their family relationships and limits their ability to socialize and obtain housing and jobs. It hampers the prevention of mental health disorders, the promotion of mental well-being and the provision of effective treatment and care. It also contributes to the abuse of human rights.³

Stigma during COVID-19

Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between a person or group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. In an outbreak, this may mean people are labelled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated separately, and/or experience loss of status because of a perceived link with a disease.

Such treatment can negatively affect those with the disease, as well as their caregivers, family, friends and communities.

People who don't have the disease but share other characteristics with this group may also suffer from stigma.

The current COVID-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviours against people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus.

WHY IS COVID-19 CAUSING SO MUCH STIGMA?

The level of stigma associated with COVID-19 is based on three main factors:

- 1) it is a disease that's new and for which there are still many unknowns;
- 2) we are often afraid of the unknown; and
- 3) It is easy to associate that fear with 'others'. It is understandable that there is confusion, anxiety, and fear among the public. Unfortunately, these factors are also fuelling harmful stereotypes.

What does Stigma do?

- Drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination
- Prevent people from seeking health care immediately
- Discourage them from adopting healthy behaviours⁴

Let's now watch this video on addressing stigma during COVID-19.

<Video plays>

³ <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health/priority-areas/stigma-and-discrimination>

⁴ <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/covid19-stigma-guide.pdf>

Addressing stigma and discrimination during COVID-19

Let us understand what should we do to address stigma and discrimination

Dos

- Allay anxiety through FACTS and POSITIVE and accurate MESSAGES
- Speak out against false information and double check facts before sharing to stop rumours
- Share positive stories of those who have recovered from COVID-19
- Appreciate efforts of health workers, essential service providers and support them and their families
- Promote kindness, solidarity, compassion.

What we should not do to fight stigma and discrimination

Don'ts

- Do not indulge in spreading rumours, myths and misinformation
- Do not attach locations or ethnicity to the disease and do not label any community or area for spread of COVID-19
- Do not talk about people “transmitting COVID-19” “infecting others” or “spreading the virus” as it implies intentional transmission and assigns blame
- Do not target health workers and essential service providers
- Do not fuel fear and panic.

Due to fear, stigma and discrimination associated with COVID-19, it is important to provide psychosocial support to children.

Let's now understand the major roles of parents or care givers in providing psycho social support to children

- To promote an environment where children can grow up and develop their full potential having fun and being safe and healthy.
- To facilitate a space where children are listened to, they can express their thoughts and feelings, and are free to ask any question and are answered honestly.⁵

How to help children deal with stressful events?

- **Listen:** Give children opportunities to **talk** about what they are feeling. Encourage them to share concerns and ask questions
- **Comfort:** Use simple tools to **comfort and calm** children.
- For e.g. telling stories, singing with them and playing games.
- **Praise them frequently** for their strengths, such as showing courage, compassion and helpfulness
- **Reassure** children that you are prepared to keep them safe. Provide them with correct information through valid sources.

⁵ Psychosocial Support for Children during COVID-19: A Manual for Parents and Caregivers, UNICEF, CHILDLINE India Foundation

Let's now understand how to **recognise signs of psychological distress in children which needs specialised help.**

Some children may face some of the serious mental health issues and show symptoms such as:

- Difficulties in sleeping and eating
- Nightmares
- Being withdrawn or aggressive
- Complain of pain in stomach or headache without physical reason
- Having fears, being afraid to be left alone
- Clinging, depending behaviours
- New fears manifest (for instance of the dark)
- Decreased interest in playing and engaging in playful activities
- Being sad, crying more than usual or for no apparent reason

Children may experience psychological distress and stress in the situations of any pandemics. Parents and care takers need to understand the communication with children during such situations. Let's now understand...

How to talk to children about COVID-19?

- Make sure you talk positively and emphasise on the importance of effective prevention measures, including following safe tips on hand washing
- Remember to not make the conversation scary or fear-based for the child.

How to help Children cope with stress during COVID-19?

Children may respond to stress in different ways such as being clingier, anxious, withdrawing, angry or agitated, bedwetting etc.

Respond to the child's reactions in a supportive way, listen to their concerns and give them extra love and attention.

Children need adults' love and attention during difficult times. Give them extra time and attention.

Remember to listen to your children, speak kindly and reassure them. If possible, make opportunities for the child to play and relax.

Try and keep children close to their parents and family and avoid separating children and their caregivers to the extent possible. If separation occurs (e.g. hospitalization) ensure regular contact (e.g. via phone) and re-assurance.

Keep to regular routines and schedules as much as possible, or help create new ones in a new environment, including school/learning as well as time for safely playing and relaxing.

Provide facts about what has happened, explain what is going on now and give them clear information about how to reduce their risk of being infected by the disease in words that they can understand depending on their age. This also includes providing information about what could happen in a re-assuring way (e.g. a family member and/or the child may start not feeling well and may have to go to the hospital for some time, so doctors can help them feel better).