

Editorial: COVID-19 connections and impacts in Africa: The need for psychological care

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There is growing concern and recognition that the COVID-19, including the measures to reduce its spread will worsen existing and trigger new tensions in Africa's health spheres. Before the coronavirus outbreak, the health sector in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and other Low-Mid Income Countries (LMICs) are fraught with weak psychological and public health systems. The quality of health services and the healthcare systems are major causes for concern for World Health Organization (WHO).

The worsening burden of COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa is a leading cause of rising mental health problems. The pandemic has had a profound effect on people's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Mental health correlates with COVID-19 have been extensive and wide-ranging in presentation, relating also to susceptibility and premorbid functioning. Clearly, the pandemic has engendered much fear and panic globally. United Nation (2020) raised concern based on findings of numerous studies on COVID-19 where distress prevalence ranged from 35% to 60%. Like many other countries in Africa, South Africa is grappling with increased level of anxiety about their current situation, a report from a population-based survey found that 54% of South Africans perceived themselves as having moderate to high risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 (Human Sciences Research Council, 2020). Relatedly, a community survey of over 12,000 respondents reported several negative emotions including 33% of adults depressed and 45% fearful, with fear, stress, and depression more prevalent in people under 40 years of age than older persons (Orkin et al., 2020). In addition, happiness level of South Africans was found to be reduced due to the pandemic regulations (Ejoke & Khumalo, 2020; Greyling, Rossouw & Adhikari; 2020).

What is equally worrisome is the increasing prevalence of the symptoms of psychological trauma in Africa considering the rise in ethnic, religious and politically motivated clashes, insurgency, kidnapping, farmers and herders' conflict, gender-based violence as well as substance use-related problems during these unprecedented times. The import of COVID-19, therefore, exacerbates the already precarious situation. Scientists, researchers, academics and healthcare professionals in countries worldwide are faced with the onerous task of responding to the present pandemic of COVID-19, its unprecedented consequences and at the same time prepare for future pandemic while maintaining other essential health services across the life course. However, the challenge as well as the dangers of failure are more for Africa and other Low-and-Mid Income Countries across the globe, that bear the brunt of the global economic plunge due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is against this background that this special issue on psychological import of COVID-19 on the healthcare system in Sub-Saharan Africa and the entire Low-and-Mid Income Countries attempts to make important contributions for practical solutions. Articles featured in this issue show that COVID-19 is associated with several psychological imbalances, further evidence show that significant statistical difference exists between rural and urban dwellers with regards to their knowledge, attitude and compliance to COVID-19. In fact, majority of Africans do not doubt the existence of the coronavirus, rather what were reported to affect psychological well-being and mental health were connected to the meaninglessness of reported death tolls, lack of sufficient information and the non-concrete information given to affected individuals about COVID-19 infection. Also noted is the increase in abusive drug use among the youth and the heightened prevalence of psychological symptoms including depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances because of conflicts, kidnapping and the present COVID-19 induced lockdowns in Africa.

Yet, limited intellectual engagement, attentions and discussions exist on the psychological import of COVID-19 in the healthcare system particularly among Africans in SSA and LMICs. Therefore, the core of this special issue is to provide better insight and understanding on the makings of COVID-19, and lessons learned from the pandemic in Africa. The idea of this special issue is twofold. Firstly, it is to explore COVID-19 transmission control, management related concerns and how psychological responses, research, therapy have contributed or failed to contribute to the mitigation of COVID-19 in SSA and entire LMICs. Secondly, it is to examine to what extent or in what ways peer influence and societal conflict has and will provoke maladaptive behavior and psychological traumatic symptoms. In conclusion, this academic outputs are expected to help inform improved well-being interventions, create awareness on the danger of abusive substance use and strengthen COVID-19 protocols awareness among rural dwellers. They will provide new innovative ideas for effective management of COVID-19 and future pandemics in LMICs, as well as produce useful and important policies towards effective, efficient and equitable healthcare services across Africa.

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