

A Letter From Ground Zero - Fighting The Mental Crisis of Covid-19 Pandemic: an Ophthalmologist's Experience

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Dear Sir,

It was another routine day of an ophthalmologist at the COVID ICU duty. I always reach the centre 45 minutes prior for a hassle-free and safe donning. The usual steps of donning with sanitization after every step is taken due care of by me.¹ As across the globe, even at our institution doctors from various walks of medicine, including ophthalmologists, were trained and deployed in COVID duty.

One evening, after 3 hours of duty I started feeling breathless while taking rounds. Nevertheless, tried and continued working for another 10 minutes, but then it started becoming intolerable. So sat on a chair, when I felt some air was leaking around from the mask. However, then within seconds, instead felt it was something foamy around my lips, and swallowed it in, assuming it to go away. However, with all those increasing efforts to breathe, the foam started increasing many folds, making my respiration difficult and rigorous. It had choked my nose and mouth, and by a knee-jerk, I took out my mask inside the ward. After catching some breath and wiping off the foam, I slipped on the mask again and rushed downstairs towards the doffing area. It became progressively difficult for me with increasing breathlessness and anxiety. Somehow after reaching the doffing area, all confused, started doffing randomly, all I wanted was to remove the mask somehow and clean all the foam and thereby pump few breaths into my lungs. I then reported the incident to the infection control team at the centre and was advised home isolation.

Becoming the father of a newborn four months back, and having hypertension with few other comorbidities; a string of thoughts made the first night uncomfortable. My mind continued fluctuating between relief of no fever and an acknowledgment that an infection, having killed lakhs of individuals, might be hiding inside me. The devil may discover a space through my low immunity, caught on pre-existing ailments. Social disconnection creates uneasiness as the mind hops oceans, so kept reminding myself; this also shall pass. In the initial three days, my sleep-wake cycle got disturbed. I ensured myself not to allow it to settle and turned to family video visits for some giggling and talked while tuning in to positive serenades late into the night. With continued rest throughout the day, cooking food for myself, doing the dishes, few exercises and pranayama, and positive attitude towards the outcomes, I finally managed to get through the isolation period with a negative COVID RT-PCR at the end.

We, ophthalmologists, are working in areas that we are not well accustomed to. COVID-19 pandemic is still raging, and it has been an exhausting physical, mental and emotional turmoil. Most importantly, what I learned from my experience is to maintain mental health by keeping up with daily routines and hobbies, keeping a check on pre-existing illness, doing exercises/mediation, and communicating with family. Ultimately, the greatest lesson that COVID-19 can teach humanity is that "We are all in this together."²

References

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