

## COVID-19: Psychological Impact on Non-Medical Employees of a Medical College setting in South India

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Pandemic situation can be distressing for any population. This cross sectional study looked at the psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic among the non-medical employees working in a medical college setting. Fear of COVID-19 Scale, Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and General Health Questionnaire (GHQ 12) were used to assess 71 employees. The study indicated that majority of the participants reported fear about COVID-19 along with physiological symptoms, who were also more prone for experiencing psychological distress, Fear of COVID-19 was positively correlated perceived stress and psychological distress. Female employees expressed high levels of perceived stress as compared to males.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, fear, stress, psychological distress

In December 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was reported and within a month it was declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organisation (Sohrabi et. al., 2020). As the number of cases rapidly increased, the uncertainty and vast spread in this crisis would have a potential to cause a lasting effect on the physical and psychological wellbeing of people (Liu et. al., 2020). Mental health consequences among people are characterised by emotional responses like extreme fear, uncertainty, distress reactions, such as insomnia, anger and mental health disorders such as anxiety disorders, depression, and somatisation (Shigemura et.al., 2020).

Fear is one such response that can be conceptualised as an adaptive, but phasic state elicited through confrontation with a threatening stimulus (Adolphs, 2013). At the time of a known or objective threat, fear induces changes in brain and body resulting in various physiological responses like sympathetic activation (hypertension, tachycardia, perspiration) and neuroendocrine responses (HPA axis activation) (LeDoux and Pine, 2016). In the adaptive point of view, Harper et. al.,(2020) reported that fear during a pandemic such as COVID- 19 can be a predictor of positive behaviour changes such

as social distancing and improved hand hygiene. On the contrary, the debilitating effects of fear of the pandemic can lead to the avoidance of infection -related stimuli, and employees refusing to go for work due to the fear of being infected (Taylor, 2019) and stigma (Lin,2020). Based on a study in Switzerland, Wissmath et. al., (2020) generated a model demonstrating that fear is the main component that leads to worry and further to stress among the general population.

Stress is a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive and behavioural changes that are directed either towards altering the stressful event or accommodating to its effects (Baum, 1990). Disasters and epidemics can lead to stress in people, irrespective of whether they are directly affected or not. These long standing stressors can lead to various mental health problems in the affected population. A survey conducted by the Indian Psychiatric Society indicated a 20 percent rise in mental illness in India due to the pandemic (Loiwal, 2020). Most patients affected by COVID-19 experienced significant post traumatic stress symptoms at the time of hospitalisation (Bo et. al., 2020). At the time of COVID-19, various stressors such as perception of safety and threat, risk of contagion, quarantine, stigma,