

COVID-19 and its Impact on Youth: Challenges and Coping Skills

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Abstract

COVID-19 posed many challenges to the youth affecting their physical health, social life, economic security, educational growth, career, and psychological and mental health. However, it is evident that despite the challenges, youth exhibit great potential for growth and inner resources to overcome the obstacles. Building resilience, faith in God, youth spirituality, involvement in meaningful activities like voluntary services, and a strong support system can help young people overcome challenges and problems and attain their life goals. Accompanying the youth in their efforts to go beyond the COVID-19 challenges with courage and confidence is an urgent task and a social responsibility.

Keywords: COVID-19, Youth, Challenges, Coping skill, Resilience, Youth spirituality, Meaningful existence, Accompaniment

Introduction

One of the unforgettable tragic events of this century is the outbreak of the deadly epidemic COVID-19, which is considered to be the biggest public health crisis after the Second World War. World Health Organization declared an international public health emergency in January 2020 (WHO, 2020). It became a global pandemic affecting millions across the globe. The pandemic has caused immense suffering to the entire humanity and affected every spectrum of human life in terms of economic devastation, stress, severe illness, and loss of life.

Everything came to a halt with unprecedented nationwide lockdowns to limit the spread of the virus, which affected the normal life pattern of every single individual. While it affected the world's economies, the developing countries paid a heavy toll, leaving millions deprived of their essential needs. Though the elderly and the physically vulnerable were affected by COVID-19 more than any other age group, it has dramatically impacted the youth. It is important to identify the real problems of youth in the covid and post-covid times and accompany them with effective measures. The article is a humble attempt to enter into the world of youth, bring to light some of the challenges they faced on account of the pandemic, and analyze the coping skills that can be helpful for a meaningful and practical life.

COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges to youth

The pandemic posed many challenges to youth across the world. International Labour Organization (ILO) warns that the multidimensional challenge the pandemic poses on youth can have a long-term impact (ILO, 2020). It was against the backdrop of their existing vulnerabilities like substance abuse, educational demands, financial difficulties, limited employment opportunities, and subsequent migration. In such a context, the pandemic has put the youth under tremendous pressure. It has accelerated their physical and mental health concerns, loneliness and isolation, lack of social and economic security, educational and career instability, and poor quality of life. Increased social media and online pressure, lack of safe space, lack of genuine trusted relationships, and higher risk of exploitation were some of the problems that youth faced. Some of these issues are very evident in the national and international surveys and studies carried out in the recent past. They highlight the multidimensional challenge the pandemic poses for young people through the resultant disruption to education and training, amplified vulnerabilities among the young workers, and a long and challenging transition into decent work (ILO, 2020). They reflect the long-term impacts of COVID-19 not only on the lives of young people but also on the entire humanity. Such impacts can exacerbate inequalities and risk, reducing the productive potential of an entire generation (ILO, 2020).

One of the most vulnerable informal youth sectors that often do not appear in surveys and studies is the migrant youth. Millions of young people are out of their homes, even away from their homelands, for study and work. The pandemic has severely impacted the livelihood,

security, and health of the migrant youth. Being least organized and lacking institutional support, domestic workers, especially young girls, are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and human rights violations. India witnessed one of the worst migrant crises in history when it imposed a nationwide lockdown in 2020. It was a crisis within a crisis (Vig, 2021) or a crisis of mobility (Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020). Such an inhuman crisis has long-lasting effects on millions of young students and employees who were migrants. In the global scenario, the young migrants also experienced cultural discrimination, having no access or limited access to healthcare and vaccination. Some of the challenges the pandemic posed on the youth are discussed.

Physical Impact

Young people were not exempted from the attack of the COVID-19 virus. World Health Organization (WHO) warned more than once that young people are also prone to be infected by the virus and can be potential carriers of the infection. The studies show that many young people were physically affected by the virus. Many were anxious about their physical health and well-being (Shukla et al., 2021). Many young people with a pre-existing history of physical health issues were more affected physically and mentally. Pre-existing health issues like allergies, asthma, cancer, kidney problems, obesity, immune disorders, epilepsy, and arthritis put them into severe physical and mental anxiety (Hawke et al., 2020). Youth with pre-existing health concerns are a vulnerable population from both physical and mental health standpoints (Hawke et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this situation. It also puts more significant pressure on them because of the sickness or the loss of their dear ones caused by the pandemic. The shock and discouragement drained them of their hope of a brighter future. Substance addiction and eating disorders were some indirect impacts of COVID-19 on youth, which will have long-lasting effects on young people's physical and mental health. Family stress, domestic violence, and physical and sexual abuse are serious problems young people have to undergo. An overall reduction in physical activity and sports have negatively influenced the physical well-being of the youth. Lack of access to healthy food too deteriorated physical health.

The physical impact of COVID-19 is much more severe among the migrants, of whom the majority are youth. Many are employed in the informal economic sector, like domestic workers. The poor working conditions, limited payment, huge workload, lack of nutritious diet,

and lack of access to medical facilities harmed the health of the youth. The survey among the domestic workers reveals that 42.3 % of domestic workers had severe health issues. Among them, 67.3 % had to discontinue the treatment. The major reasons for their discontinuity were reported as lack of affordability and lack of transportation (Sumalata et al., 2021). This report points out the severe health issues and lack of access to medical treatment among the working class during the pandemic. Such a situation has led to the loss of lives of many young migrants in India and abroad. This points toward the inequality that is a stark reality in our society.

Psycho-Social Challenges

The human being is a social being. Adolescence is a time of emotional and social development. The inevitable social distancing due to COVID-19 had a huge impact on youth. Ordinarily, youth spend much time with their peer groups in educational institutions. Educational institutions provide structure, intellectual stimulation, peer interaction, recreational facilities, and socializing. The school closure will have many unintended impacts on the psycho-social well-being of children and youth (Serlachius et al., 2020). Many adolescents reported heightened anxiety about their schooling restrictions and peer relationship (Daniunaite et al., 2021). The impact on the free movement, on account of the lockdown measures, led to greater loneliness among the youth. Social distancing kept them away from their peer groups and normal socializing. The youth experienced significant hardship due to social isolation. Broken ties with educational institutions, workplace colleagues, and community members kept them aloof. Lack of athletics, social gathering and other healthy outlets added to the stressful situation of the youth. Though media became a means of social communication, it had its limitations. The physical and social distancing and other COVID-19 restrictions fostered feelings of isolation and loneliness, disrupted routines, and limited access to extended family, friends, neighbors, and other community support (Jones, 2021). The restrictions on social gatherings, celebrations, and religious festivals also setback socializing.

Challenges to Economic Security

Rapid measures taken by the governments like complete lockdown to limit the spread of the virus have led to a global economic slow-down (ILO, 2020). Its impact on people, jobs, and businesses is likely to

be long-term and hit hard on the most vulnerable section of society, including the young. The global unemployment rate among youth had been very high even before the pandemic (ILO, 2020). The economic crisis due to COVID-19 has hit hard on youth. Youth unemployment rose sharply. It is undeniable that most of the young, irrespective of their countries, experience a financial crisis. However, the intensity of the crisis may vary from person to person. It has caused an economic recession. The WHO (2020) stated that tens of millions of people risk falling into extreme poverty. Millions of enterprises experienced existential threats that sped up youth unemployment. Informal economy workers, or the poor daily laborers in the Indian context, have suffered much poverty and have been deprived of their essential needs. Many youths who were employed in informal economic sectors that the pandemic has severely hit have lost their jobs. Young women reported that financial strain was the most significant impact of lockdown. Loss of employment and money strain affected the young workers. Restricting food supply and other essential things aggravated their financial strain (Napier-Raman et al., 2021). Many vulnerable youths who are migrants and homeless have experienced the bitter reality of poverty and hunger. The economic crisis has been exacerbated again due to the ongoing war situation.

Impact on Education and Career

The impact of the pandemic on the education of the youth is immeasurable. The closure of the educational institutions affected the young students leaving many without access to teaching, training, or any courses. Most youth testifies that they have learned less during the pandemic. According to the survey conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), about 70 % of youth were adversely affected by the closure of their universities and training centers. It was worse in developing countries that were either poor or had no access to internet facilities. Thousands might have lost the chance to learn without access to online classes. The ILO Director underlined how the pandemic is “inflicting multiple shocks on young people. It is destroying their jobs and employment prospects and disrupting their education and training and seriously impacting their mental well-being.” Around 38 % of those who participated in the survey were uncertain about their future career prospects. The ILO report underlined that such a situation inevitably leads to greater anxiety and depression among the youth. Millions of youth were unable to develop the skills that would

give them a good job, start a business and engage in their community. Many young women expressed a keen desire to return to education that had been curtailed. Some of them expressed their frustration and depression at being unable to study and work (Napier-Raman et al., 2021). The ongoing war also poses many challenges to young students who were pursuing their higher studies in Russia and Ukraine.

Psychological Impact and Mental Health Issues

Severe disruption to learning and working along with health crises and the loss of dear ones have had a huge psychological impact on the youth. It has witnessed the deterioration of the mental well-being of the youth from a global perspective. 1 in 2 or 50% of youth are considered to be subject to anxiety or depression while 17% are already affected by it according to the ILO survey (ILO, 2020). The survey conducted by UNICEF reveals the immense impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health. Increased anxiety and depression counted high. One in 2 feels less motivated to do the activities which they enjoyed earlier. Many feel pessimistic about the future (UNICEF, 2020). The studies carried out in India also reveal the impact of COVID-19 on the youth's mental health (Chaturvedi et al., 2020). The lockdown had severe implications for mental health, resulting in psychological problems, including frustration, stress, and depression (Chaturvedi et al., 2020).

Mental health issues were high among the poor. The survey conducted among domestic workers shows that about 90% had anxiety as their mental health condition. Among them, 45.8 % had severe anxiety that their sleep pattern got highly disturbed (Sumalata et al., 2021).

Creative and Skilful Response to the Challenges

There have been all-out efforts to face the challenges of coronavirus from all sectors of human society. Every government has put maximum effort to respond to the challenges with various measures. Many young people took to new skills and new modes of living, studying, working, and socializing. Many inner dynamics can play a major role in facing challenges and living a meaningful life.

Building Resilience: An Effective Coping Skill

Resilience is the ability of an individual to withstand adversity. It is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress- such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial

stressors (APA, 2020). It helps protect and promote an individual's psychological well-being and reduces the intensity of possible mental health issues. It reduces the negative effects of a stressful event and accelerates recovery. Studies have shown that it is also highly related to many socio-emotional learning skills (Grazzani et al., 2022). Having a positive attitude and confidence in one's inner resources can help the individual overcome the struggles. Responsible decision-making is also highly related to achieving resilience. Bouncing back from tragic experiences also involves profound personal growth (APA, 2020). The pandemic has allowed facing the challenges and increasing the inherent resilience in every human person. It is a choice to be happy and be at the best of one's ability, even in adverse circumstances of life. As Victor Frankl writes, everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way. Therefore, choosing to be happy in the given situation can beat even the worst of tragedies.

Resilience is an important element in youth development. There is a wide range of theories on the relationship between resilience and positive youth development. Cultivating resilience is important to promote adolescents' psychological and social development. Some of the factors that contribute to the building up of resilience are the following: 1) *Bonding*: It is a strong emotional strength, knowledge, and wisdom that comes from relationships with the family and caretakers, close relationships with mature and supportive and prosocial adults, connections to prosocial and rule-abiding friends, and bonding to people in prosocial organizations. 2) *Competence*: It includes *cognitive competence* that is good cognitive abilities, *emotional competence* in terms of good self-regulation of emotions and impulses, *moral competence* that is positive self-perceptions, *behavioral competence* that is talents and behavior valued by self and society, *social competence* that is a general appeal and or attractiveness to others. 3) *Optimism*: It is manifested in self-efficacy, spirituality that is faith, and a sense of meaning in life, as well as a clear and positive identity. 4) *Environment*: The organized home environment, school environment, neighborhood, and social system play an important role in building resilience. Other factors like cultural values and a good sense of humor can enhance resilience (Lee et al., 2012). However, building up resilience is a personal effort. It requires a lot of emotional and cognitive workouts. An optimistic attitude alone can help one to

be courageous in challenging situations in life. Positive emotions and thoughts have tremendous power to change a person's life.

Faith in God and an Adequate Youth Spirituality

Many theories highlight the link between positive youth development and spirituality. In Fowler's developmental theory of faith, the fourth stage is important for the youth. In this stage, faith development takes place in the form of individuative-reflective. It is characterized by personal struggle and choice. The existence of personal struggle and choice are important elements of mature spirituality (Shek, 2012). Therefore, youth spirituality must be the fruit of their own experience of the divine in their daily realities of life. Active reflection and experience are important processes in developing spirituality among the youth. Many theories underline the correlation between the quality of life and spirituality. They suggest that spirituality is an antecedent to quality of life (Shek, 2012). It is a prerequisite for well-being. Many studies show a positive relationship between spirituality and adolescent mental health. Spirituality positively affects adolescent health attitudes and behavior (Shek, 2012).

Another aspect of faith and spiritual life is that it gives healing and hope. It has always played the role of being a healing balm to the soul. Regular participation in religious practices is associated with better emotional health outcomes. Religion is important for finding meaning, sparing us from "existential angst" (Azar, 2010). Practices like meditation and contemplation enhance attention and turn off the brain's areas that focus on self (Azar, 2010). Such practices are not only pathways to God but also bring about greater peace and calmness to the disturbed mind. One of the studies carried out in Poland in the context of COVID-19 reveals that a greater need for God was seen among the people during the pandemic. Faith or spirituality, in broader terms, can be a force that helps to overcome the mental crisis as well as facilitate adaptation to the disease or the restrictions resulting from it (Kowalzyk et al., 2021). In the light of the pandemic, most people are much more open to faith and prayer. It might have been associated with the fear of illness and death (Kowalzyk et al., 2021). The overall pandemic situation reveals the stark reality of life that despite the power, knowledge, and riches, humanity remains helpless to combat the pain, discomfort, and loss of lives. One of the studies in Italy reveals that spirituality and religious practices are protective factors connected not only with mental and psychological well-being but also physical

health. Many people experienced spiritual hunger when their places of worship had to be locked down, and the standard religious practices were suspended. It had its own spiritual and emotional impacts. Not having done a religious funeral rite for their dear ones who were victims of COVID-19 brought untold pain to the family members in many cases (Coppola et al., 2021).

Family plays a vital role in instilling and deepening the faith and religious beliefs among the youth. Pope Francis reminds us in *Amoris Laetitia*, “Home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbor” (Pope Francis, 2016). The lived experience of faith in the family becomes the basis for the continuous search for God in the life of every child and youth. Moments of family prayer and devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon. It is formative in itself (Pope Francis, 2016).

Creative Involvement and a Meaningful Existence

The studies reveal that youthful age is a time of seeking the deeper meaning of one’s existence. They tend to ask questions like what is the purpose of life? Why do we exist? And What is a meaningful life? These questions often lead them to take up challenging tasks and overcome difficulties. The importance of meaningful activity in adolescent life is clear from history, where youth have been taken up by meaningful activities and even moved into action by strong ideologies that give them satisfaction and purpose. Young people are with tremendous potential for achieving greater things. Identifying their life goals and moving ahead with meaningful activities can help them cope with the difficulties they face in their growth process. According to the theory of Victor Frankl, when one fails to find meaning in life, one experiences an existential vacuum characterized by boredom. Research shows that people are experiencing greater life meaning report greater well-being and less psychopathology (Shek, 2011).

Despite the adverse life situation, the young people were not onlookers in the crisis during the pandemic but were active contributors to facing the challenges. Many of them mustered up the courage and were determined to step up to be partners with governments, social activists, civil society, and other institutions to combat the virus. One of the many ways the youth responded to the crisis was by becoming volunteers to help the poor, to reach out to the elderly, bring awareness

about the safety measures, volunteer for burials, etc. Through such voluntary services, the youth themselves feel empowered and able to find meaning in their suffering. They also cleaned and disinfected public spaces, produced and distributed protective gear like masks and other PPE, combated misinformation and stigma around COVID-19, distributed provisions for vulnerable groups, and supported local police and healthcare personnel to monitor COVID-19 regulations (UNV, 2020). Many young medical personnel, like doctors and nurses, were at the forefront of combating the virus. The meaningful and productive activities gave them an impetus to look beyond the challenges and hope for the better.

The Role of Supportive Mechanism

It is of paramount importance to have a strong support system, especially for the youth in their efforts to face the challenges in life. Family plays an important role in the life of every individual. In the family, a young person develops his/her qualities and forms a value system. The role of the significant other in the developmental process of a young person is very important. Therefore, parents and siblings have an important role in the overall growth and development of the personality of every young person. The lockdown situation gave young people more time to be with family members. Having trusted relationships with others like family members, peers, teachers, and mentors with whom one can disclose inner feelings has immense power to reduce stress in a difficult situation. The Social, supportive system act as a protective mechanism in challenging situations. Therefore, it is essential that the government, educational authorities, mentors, spiritual directors, mental health professionals, and NGOs all work hand in hand to encourage and accompany the youth in their efforts to cope with their challenging situation. The youth sector needs to be connected, engaged, mobilized, and monitored.

The Dynamics and Nuances of Accompanying the Youth

In the overall situation of growing disorientation and discomfort among young people caused by the existing challenges, accompaniment plays an important role. It can be spiritual accompaniment, mentoring, counseling, or career guidance, though each has its unique path, diverse methods, and purposes. More than ever youth of today requires persons who can journey with them. Accompanying the youth who are struggling to rise from their brokenness is a challenging task. As the

word accompaniment suggests it is walking with a young individual in his or her quest for meaning and purpose in life. The exhortation of Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit* has a deeper meaning in today's context of the youth. He states: "The community has an important role in the accompaniment of young people; it should feel collectively responsible for accepting, motivating, encouraging, and challenging them. All should regard young people with understanding, appreciation, and affection, and avoid constantly judging them or demanding of them a perfection beyond their years" (Pope Francis, 2019). Accompanying the youth means meeting them where they are. It involves entering into the sacred space of each individual with respect and reverence and listening to them with empathy, understanding, and compassion. Such an accompaniment is possible only when a genuine relationship builds up trust and confidence. Building up trust and confidence, active listening, recognizing and identifying the inner resources for better planning, motivating to make use of the resources, and evaluating the outcome are all various dynamics of an effective accompaniment. Careful and proper educational and vocational accompaniment in the discernment process helps the young in their vocational journey.

The qualities of someone who accompanies the youth as put forward by the young people themselves and expressed by Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit* are; a faithful Christian who engages in the Church and the world, someone who constantly seeks holiness, someone who is a confidante without judging, someone who actively listens and responds kindly, someone deeply loving and has self-awareness, someone who recognizes his or her limits and knows the joys and sorrows of the spiritual journey (Pope Francis, 2019). It is evidentially clear that young people value authenticity and depth.

Conclusion

The pandemic COVID-19 has caused a lot of havoc in human life, especially in the lives of millions of young people hampering their physical, social, educational, economic, psychological, and mental health and well-being. The pandemic, along with the ongoing crisis of war between Russia and Ukraine, makes the situation worse, shattering the dreams and aspirations of many. The worst humanitarian crisis of millions fleeing their homes is a current reality. In such a situation, we can never be just onlookers or feel safe within the limited space in which we live. We need to hear the cries of the poor and needy, especially the youth puzzled by the crisis. It is important that youth have

a forum for expression and that their voice is heard. Youth and their education, career, employment, and physical and mental well-being need to be prioritized in various government policies. Their in-built resources and coping skills like resilience, faith in God, meaningful activities and a strong support system must be facilitated. Resourceful accompaniment of the youth is an urgent need of the time. Youth will determine the future of the nation and society at large. Therefore, they need to be motivated and encouraged to be at their best. The role of youth in building up the Church and society needs to be recognized. It is they who will ensure continuity, growth, and development.

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