



## COVID-19 and Mental Health Care: Role of Medical Social Worker

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**ABSTRACT:** Faced with unprecedented disease in the year 2020, the world was not only exposed to the virus causing the pandemic but also faced with rapid multiplication of mental health issues tagged along. A report of World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>1</sup> highlighted that in 2020, reported cases of mental health illnesses like anxiety and depression increased by 25% globally, leave alone the unreported ones. The pandemic unveiled the world with the hidden pandemic of mental health which have been existed all along, while discussion over it prominently increased only during the pandemic when its inevitability was confirmed with the increasing cases of people complaining to suffer from certain kinds of mental health issues. In order to tackle the vicious cycle of such pandemonium, it is vital to ensure the availability of the required services. While there are professions like psychiatrist, psychologist and counsellors to tackle this inevitable disease, one such profession whose roles and responsibilities extends beyond treating the illness is Medical Social Work (MSW). Thus, the study sheds light on glimpses of mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic with a detailed discussion on roles of Medical Social Work in dealing with Mental Health issues.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Mental Health Issues, Medical Social Work, Pandemic

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### I. INTRODUCTION

World Mental Health Report of 2022 states that “Mental Health is a lot more than the absence of illness: it is an intrinsic part of an individual and collective health and well-being”<sup>1</sup>. It is also condemned to be known as a “hush hush disease” which people often like to keep under the shadow due to lack of awareness, stigmas encircling it and lack of mental healthcare services. While the deteriorating physical health of a person is directly evident, mental illness of a person is hard to identify immediately. With the existing issues encircling the status of mental health amongst the population, the outbreak of pandemic made it worst especially for those with pre-existing mental health issues<sup>2</sup>. The year 2020 could be deemed as not only the pandemic of COVID-19 but also the pandemic of mental health illnesses.

Medical Social Work (MSW) is one of the disciplines of Social Work, that is concerned with the field of healthcare sector dealing with social, physical, and psychological aspects of patient. They collaborate with other health professionals to provide support and help to needy patients and their family members in the form of psychosocial counselling, advocacy and legal assistance and ensure that no person is deprived of accessing an affordable and quality healthcare treatment. Medical Social Worker aims to ensure every patient’s right to access healthcare services without any discrimination in the most affordable way possible. Over the time, the profession has successfully integrated with medical teams to provide humanistic & holistic care and services such as healthcare education, mediator between physician-patient, hospice care, IEC endeavors, palliative care, and grief consolation to name a few.

The current study gives an insight on how the roles and responsibilities of medical social work can contribute in handling the concerns of mental health.

## II. OBJECTIVES

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the prominent mental health issues emerged during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
2. To outline the roles and responsibilities of Medical Social Worker in dealing with Mental Health issues.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study integrates secondary sources of data. The paper referred to existing literatures available on mental health issues during the COVID-19 Pandemic and a report of World Mental Health report 2022 was reviewed reflecting the evidences of mental illness reported during the pandemic. The study has also referred to few research journal articles available on roles and responsibilities of Medical Social Work describing how the profession like Medical Social Work aids in dealing with mental health problems.

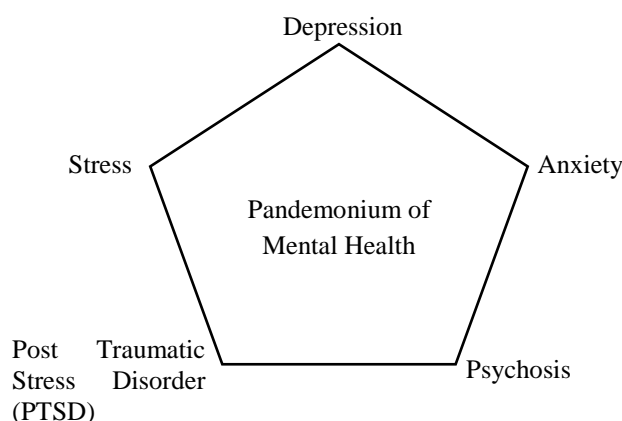
## IV. PANDEMONIUM OF MENTAL HEALTH: GLIMPSES FROM COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Faced with the outbreak of unprecedented disease in the year 2020, the world was not only exposed to virus causing the pandemic but also rapid amplification of mental health problems. The pandemic unveiled the world with the hidden pandemic of mental health which pre-existed even before the pandemic hit and worsen during and post pandemic. While the discussion over it were eminent in the pre-pandemic years, it prominently increased during the pandemic when its inevitability was confirmed with the increasing cases of people complaining to suffer from various kinds of mental health issues.

The World Mental Health Report of 2022<sup>1</sup> revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has been reported to be an unprecedented stressor to mental health of many. It has also identified some stressors namely unemployment, poverty and adversity which has emerged to be major risk factors for deteriorating mental health conditions. Hence, concluding that the pandemic's influence on mental well-being cannot be underestimated at all.

In the hindsight, as the emergency measures like redeployment of staff and resources for COVID-19 relief severely disrupted the mental health services making it unavailable and inaccessible for many. The preventive measures such as social distance, quarantine, self-isolation, and fear of virus made it more difficult to access care (WMHR, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. While these precautionary measures reduced the social interaction, in the counterpart the feeling of loneliness amongst the population also increased posing as one of the major risk factors for aggravating the mental health problems<sup>3</sup>. The amalgamation of all these stressors, risk factors and preventive measures during the pandemic led to an arduous journey of both physical and mental health. Meanwhile, the concept of telemedicine emerged as the alternative care giving service of which only few could access due to lack of awareness and digital division caused due to pre-existing social reasons namely digital illiteracy and poverty.

Figure 1. Prominent Mental Health illnesses emerged during pandemic



(Source: World Mental Health Report, 2022)<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 is based on the report of World Mental Health Report 2022 and various review of literature. The figure above reveals various mental health illness reported during the pandemic.

1. While people suffering with **Stress** was one of the most common and natural psychological reaction to the pandemic, it was accompanied with various sub-syndromal mental health problems such as mood swings<sup>4</sup>.

2. Other mental health conditions which were notably visible were **Depression** and **Anxiety** whose prevalence was estimated 25-27% rise in the first year of the pandemic as revealed by the Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries and Risk Factors Study, 2020<sup>5</sup>.

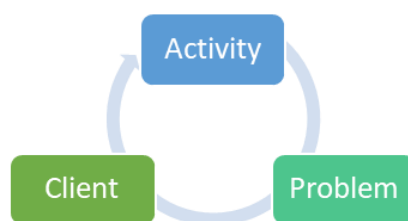
3. The issues of mental health did not end with the end of the pandemic but post pandemic people would still suffer from mental health conditions like **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. This was not only reported from the recovered patients but is also seen in those who lost their family member, friends and loved ones to the virus<sup>4</sup>.

4. The prevalence of all these issues became a major stressor for those with pre-existing mental health disorders. And the severity of it could lead to PTSD or even suicidal thoughts and attempts<sup>6</sup>. Further constant fear, anxiety tagged along with PTSD have tendency to cause Hypervigilance<sup>7</sup>. Thus, creating a vicious cycle of mental illness.

## V. ROLES OF MEDICAL SOCIAL WORKER (MSW) IN DEALING WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

The role of social worker in medical setting revolves around mixture of three issues:

Figure 2. Three thrust areas for Medical Social Worker

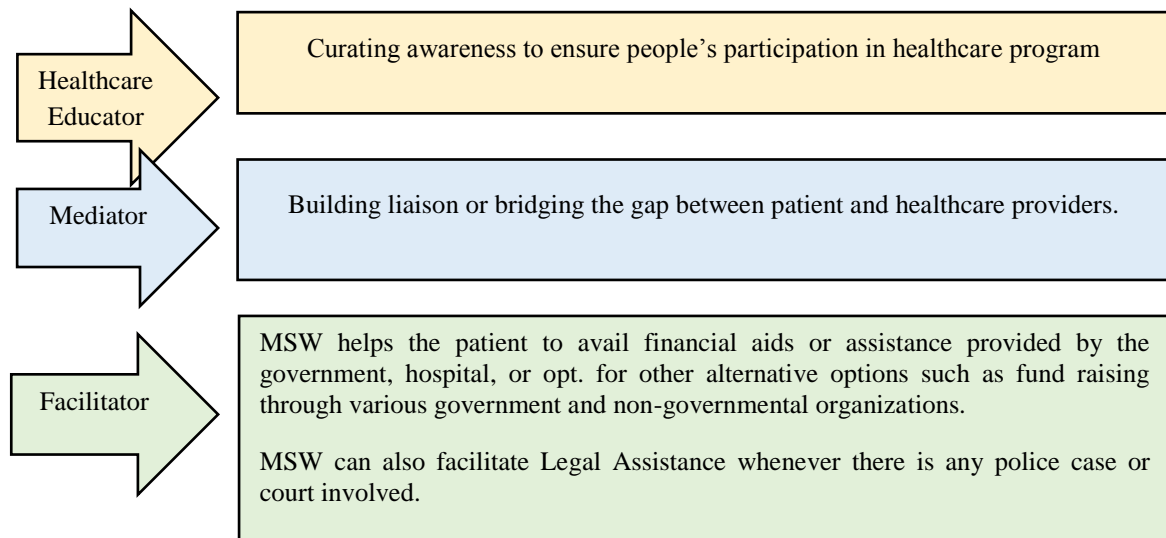


(Source: Cowles & Lefcowitz, 1995)<sup>8</sup>

Medical Social Worker are crucial in offering healthcare services which other professionals do not address<sup>9</sup>. The profession aims to restore balance in an individual's personal, family, and social life by helping the client to recover from his/her illness and strengthen his/her ability to adapt the social environment and re-integrate into the society. The roles and responsibilities of MSW does not end with only helping the patient in the healthcare setting but it also extends in ensuring accessible and affordable healthcare services for all.

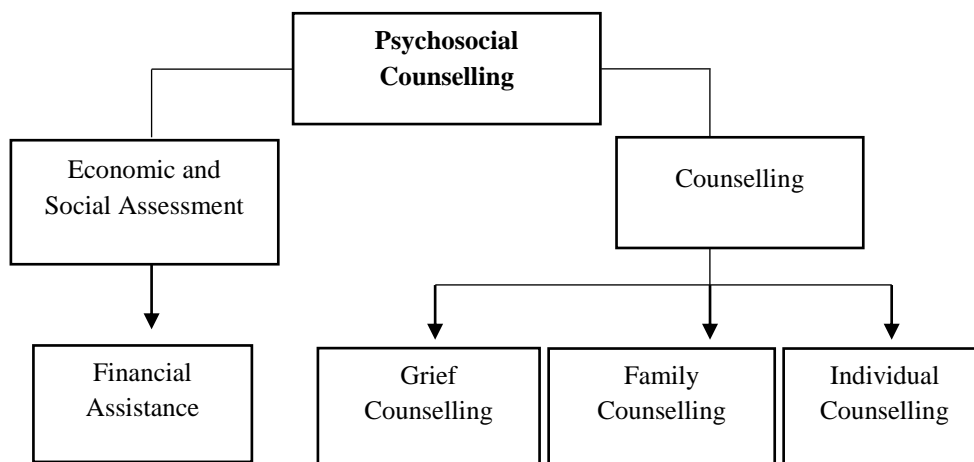
Medical Social Work sees treatment as not the final solution for illness, it begins by first awareness and prevention of the disease, after care and social rehabilitation of the patient. Hence, when the concerns of mental health are diagnosed in an individual, first the professionals try to identify the causative factors (stressors and risk factors) of it in order to have a comprehensive treatment plan which will later aid in laying out the prevention plan of the illness. Therefore, the roles of medical social worker can be divided into two parts; one which deals with the stressors of the mental health issues and the second which directly dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of mental health illnesses.

**Figure 3. Roles of Medical Social Worker in dealing with the stressors of Mental Health illness**



The above roles of medical social worker assist the patient to deal with the stressors such as lack of awareness about the disease, healthcare programs & schemes, legalities etc., posing as a risk factor in escalation of mental health issues. Through these, medical social worker plays a decisive role in helping the client through best use of patient’s capabilities and community resources and thus eventually assists in strengthening the healthcare system<sup>10</sup>.

**Figure 4. Role of Medical Social Worker in dealing with Mental Health issues directly**



The above figure suggests that one of the major roles of MSW in tackling issues pertaining to mental health is Psychosocial Counselling. In Psychosocial counselling, professionals act as a counsellor and a facilitator to provide services to individual, family or group enhancing their coping mechanisms, alleviating distress and for the purpose of improving the well-being of all. This does not only include cognitive counselling but also economic and social assessment of the client is performed and accordingly aids are availed.

➤ **Economic Assessment:** An assessment of the financial situation of the client is done which includes his/her livelihood, income and includes family’s economic background. And accordingly, financial assistance such as government schemes, funds from government and non-government organization are aided.

➤ **Social Assessment:** The social environment of the client is assessed such as type of society, family, and peer group. Very often the social environment of the client has tendency to influence the mental well-being of a person. Hence, making it necessary to study the type of social environment that s/he is living or surrounded. Both economic and social environment factors are intertwined with each other and is also the stressors of mental health issue. Both carries the potential to impact an individual’s mental well-being. For example, a person with low-income livelihood with humongous family responsibility might be more inclined to suffer from mental health issues like stress further leading to other health issues like hypertension. Therefore, making it necessary

to first assess these factors before diagnosis and treatment. After the thorough assessment the client is then given counselling in personal or to his/ her family. This also includes grief counselling. And very often referral services are also offered by MSW if the solution to the client's concern is beyond their jurisdiction, they guide the client for next step. Hence, medical social worker's role extends from only counselling to that of a facilitator.

➤ **Individual Counselling:** Here the client is directly communicated regarding his/her mental health problems and a treatment plan is outlined by involving the participation of the client himself. This type of counselling varies with numbers of sessions based upon the progress of the patient. The principle of "helping the client to help himself"<sup>11</sup> one of the essences of Social Work is sternly followed.

➤ **Family Counselling:** MSW assists the families to apprehend the circumstance that a patient has been identified with and offer counselling to reduce pressure and deal with the requirements of the patient<sup>12</sup>. This ensures family participation in the treatment process of the client.

➤ **Grief Counselling:** During the pandemic, not only the patient infected suffered with various mental health issues but also those left behinds of the dead had to bore the brunt of the pandemic. Hence, grief counselling is often offered and provided to those survivors who lost their loved once. Professionals here help and guide the client to work through various emotions of mourning someone's death and help overcome it through various sessions and activities.

While executing all the above roles and responsibilities, Medical Social Work is driven by basic values of social work and various principles; Principle of Acceptance, Individuality, Non-judgmental, Confidentiality and Controlled emotions.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS: A WAY FORWARD

The following recommendations have been put forward to augment the roles of Medical Social Workers in healthcare setting:

➤ Recognition and Promotion of Medical Social Work as a healthcare profession whose roles and responsibilities extends from cognitive to psychosocial help & referral services and not just diagnosing the problem but going beyond it.

➤ Mandatory recruitment and salary at par with national and international standards of Medical Social Worker in every healthcare institution.

➤ The roles and responsibilities of MSW are multifaceted which is adjusted based on the client's need. Therefore, it is necessary to have clear distinction between different roles and responsibilities to be executed by Medical Social Worker.

➤ Quarterly or annual training of medical social workers as per the requirement of changing time and situation to prepare for the worst situations like that of pandemic 2020.

➤ Encouraging extensive research on significance of Medical Social Worker in Healthcare setting.

To implement the above recommendation into reality the collaboration between central pool of Medical Social Work and the government is necessary. Especially, after the hellish experience of pandemic the significance of MSW in healthcare has increased.

## VII. CONCLUSION

After assessing the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and identifying various mental health issues accompanied with other sub-syndromal reactions, the report World Mental Health 2022 by World Health Organization (WHO) concluded that post-pandemic "People with severe mental health conditions die 10 to 20 years earlier than the general population"<sup>1</sup>.

Unlike other health professionals like physicians or nurses, the roles and responsibilities of medical social worker does not necessarily involve direct diagnosis or treatment of mental health illness, it goes beyond and above while treating its causative factors. Along with the other healthcare professionals, medical social work plays a vital role in bringing out an inclusive plan to deal with mental health issues beginning from the awareness, prevention, and treatment and follow up. Although, due to lacunae of research work available on medical social work working in the arena of mental health, the efficacy of the profession in dealing with the issues can only be found theoretically. However, the current study has outlined various mental health issues reported during the pandemic and how medical social work can deal with it by dividing its roles and responsibilities into two parts driven by its inclusive principles. Therefore, introducing various courses and trainings required to become a medical social worker will increase the healthcare practitioners dealing with mental health issues whose void was experienced worldwide during the pandemic.

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