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स्वास्थ्य एवं परिवार कल्याण विभाग
स्वास्थ्य एवं परिवार कल्याण मंत्रालय
Government of India
Department of Health and Family Welfare
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

D.O. No.V-15016/100/2020 – PH – I

6th July 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Together we have been fighting the battle of COVID-19 pandemic and I compliment you and your team for the immense effort made by you. I am writing to you to stress that as we fight the challenge of COVID-19, we are also faced with concerns relating to mental health, manifested in feelings of fear, anxiety, negative thoughts about consequences of disease and subsequent depression.

2. Psychosocial concerns cut across age groups and segments of the population, though in varying degrees. Incidence and prevalence of mental health issues, however, tend to be higher in the urban areas, and even more skewed towards the metropolitan cities. While there may be many causative factors to this reality, declining social support in the nuclear families and restricted social networking due to COVID-19 are among important reasons. The identification and acceptance of mental health issues is relatively low due to the stigma attached with it. Given the above factors, it is imperative to focus on preventive aspects of mental healthcare and early detection.

3. Recognising the rising psychosocial concerns among people during a pandemic like COVID-19, I would like to share with you the steps taken by the Ministry to address them. These initiatives inter alia include:-

- (i) Setting up of 24/7 helpline (080-4611 0007), in collaboration with National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS), to provide psychosocial support by mental health professionals for different target groups viz children, adult, women and elderly.
- (ii) Creation of separate category in the same helpline for healthcare workers to offer psychosocial support to them in a focussed manner, given the increasing pressure and stressful environment to which they are exposed.
- (iii) Onboarding of 20 States on the national psychosocial support helpline. Remaining States/UTs are also encouraged to join the helpline in order to expand its reach. I request you to review this with your Health Secretary and ensure that your State/UT is onboarded.

- (iv) Issuance of guidelines / advisories on management of mental health issues, catering to different segments of the society
- (v) Advocacy through various media platforms in the form of creative and audio-visual materials on managing stress and anxiety, and promoting an environment of support and care for all
- (vi) Issuance of detailed guidelines by NIMHANS- “Mental Health in the times of COVID-19 Pandemic - Guidance for General Medical and Specialised Mental Health Care Settings”.
- (vii) All the guidelines, advisories and advocacy material can be accessed on Ministry of Health and Family Welfare website under “Behavioural Health – Psychosocial helpline” (<https://www.mohfw.gov.in/>)

4. NIMHANS has also been working towards building capacity of health workers in providing support and has undertaken online training of psychologists across the country for providing brief and basic telephonic psychological support in the context of COVID-19. This is in addition to an online platform (<https://psychcare-nimhans.in/>) set up to support healthcare workers involved in providing psychosocial help in the context of COVID-19.

5. It is also imperative that all the providers (including volunteers, police and all frontline workers) are aware and equipped with the appropriate training. For this purpose, modules have been prepared and uploaded on the Integrated Government Online Training (iGOT)-Diksha platform (https://igot.gov.in) for standardized capacity building and training. These modules cover topics such as-

- (i) COVID appropriate behaviors,
- (ii) Psychological care of patients,
- (iii) Stress management,
- (iv) Psychosocial Care,
- (v) COVID awareness,
- (vi) Awareness for community health workers, etc.

6. While we appreciate all the efforts being taken thus far by the States and UTs to combat COVID, it is also critical at this point that we open discussions around mental health issues. Need is to bring mental health issues to foreground and make them accepted as common ailments which could be faced by anybody at any phase of life, but are amenable to treatment. The common signs and symptoms of the depression and anxiety need to be discussed openly so that anybody who starts facing the problem is able to identify, accept and seek help. Lack of knowledge and ignorance is what aggravates the problem. Mental health

services including advocacy and awareness campaigns should essentially become part of the Government's response to COVID-19.

7. Keeping above in view, I request you to put in place and strengthen mechanisms for amplifying awareness about mental health through existing communication materials via your State Departments and local networks, initiate screening and address mental health issues for those in need, improve help seeking behaviour on mental health related issues by sensitising people & health care workers and promote trainings through iGOT or through webinars on Ministry website and other available resources.

Warm regards,
Yours sincerely,

P. Sudan / 6.7.20.
(Preeti Sudan)

To : Chief Secretaries / Administrators (all States/UTs)

Copy to: Addl. Chief Secretary/ Principal Secretary/ Secretary – Health, All States /UTs