

Drug Abuse as a Maladaptive Coping Response among Healthcare Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Dear Editor

There have been some concerns about the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enormous burden placed on communities' physical, mental, emotional, economic, social, and even political health.¹ Meanwhile, mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders among healthcare workers are a particular concern. Researchers believe that post-epidemic psychiatric problems, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation, sleep disorders, and drug and alcohol addiction, are more prevalent among healthcare workers, especially those on the front lines.²

During the pandemic, healthcare workers were exposed to burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to high-stress situations.³ Daily efforts to keep patients alive, the cruel spread of the virus, insufficient rest, the constant threat of disease, workload, lack of medical protective equipment, and frequent distance from the family have caused stress in healthcare workers.⁴

People cope differently with stress. Exposure to stressors can force the individual to overcome the problem (adaptive response) or manage the emotions (maladaptive response).⁵ When the stressors exceed a person's coping capacity (physical, mental, social), the risk of maladaptive responses increases.⁶ Five categories of stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have been identified: danger and contamination fear, social and economic stress, traumatic stress symptoms, checking and reassurance-seeking behavior, and xenophobia and stigma.⁷ Totally, these factors can increase the risk of substance abuse and drug addiction as a maladaptive response among the general population.⁸ Unfortunately, healthcare workers as an important population group, experience a combination of these stressors and are at high risk for mental illness and maladaptive coping, such as substance abuse.⁹

Numerous pieces of evidence support this pessimistic hypothesis; for example, McKay and Asmundson reported that COVID-19 stress syndrome puts healthcare workers at high risk for alcohol and substance abuse.¹⁰ Lai et al. also stated healthcare workers were exposed to the risk of depression, anxiety, distress, and substance abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹

Based on the evidence, few studies have reported the prevalence of substance abuse in HCWs. In this regard, a report from the Pan-American Health Organization found that drug abuse among HCWs from 35 countries increased during the pandemic, and alcohol was the most common substance used (30%).¹² Weber et al. showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 32% of Brazilian HCWs used psychoactive substances, and the consumption of tobacco (0.5%) and marijuana (0.3%) were also in the next rank.¹³

Human resources are the most important asset of any organization and an essential element of social development.¹⁴ This issue is very important for the health system's human resources, whose mission is to protect the entire population's health, especially human capital in

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all organizations. Any damage to human capital in the health system will cause greater damage to the community. An Iranian proverb says: It is salted to prevent anything from rotting, but woe to the salt if it rots!

Incompatible responses to stressors, especially substance abuse among health workers, are associated with frequent tardiness, decreased job performance, negligence in patient care, and excessive faults.¹⁵ Therefore, human resource management is of strategic importance. This notion means that some welfare services are provided to satisfy the desires of employees, while effective human capital management requires the establishment of comprehensive policies to maintain the well-being of employees, physically, mentally, and socially.¹⁶ This issue is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, which burdens healthcare workers heavily.

The complexity and multiple dimensions of this problem indicate that it is necessary to use an ecological approach for effective prevention. From an ecological point of view, individual, organizational, and socio-economic factors are intertwined in increasing the tendency of substance abuse in healthcare workers. These determinants include individual factors such as job stress, fear of illness and death, organizational factors such as heavy workload and lack of protective equipment and upstream support, economic instability and unsafe working conditions, and social stigma.^{17, 18} Therefore, due to multiple factors, the effectiveness and efficiency of strategies to combat substance abuse in healthcare workers increase by planning individual-based interventions in conjunction with interventions at the organizational and socio-economic levels.

According to our search, there was no evidence of comprehensive policies designed to prevent substance and drug abuse in healthcare workers. One major reason is that health systems are fully focused on pandemic control, and healthcare workers' well-being has been neglected. Some evidence has reported limited interventions such as stress management training,^{19, 20} household support packages,²¹ and staff relocation.²²

In conclusion, we express our concern about this important issue, noting that the mission of scientific references worldwide (including reputable international journals) is to warn of scientific, political, and managerial gaps. Therefore, it is important to inform researchers to plan evidence-based policies and practices on preventing substance abuse in healthcare workers through some journals. In this regard, we propose creating an inter-journal network of research on health issues of global importance, such as threats to the well-being of human capital in the healthcare system.

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