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# UNICEF Support to Psychosocial Support of Healthcare Providers During COVID-19 Pandemic

The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic had put the healthcare providers under tremendous unforeseen pressure. On 14 April 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) had released the guideline on “Enabling the Delivery of Essential Health Services during the COVID-19 Outbreak”<sup>1</sup> for provision of **essential services** which covered:



Services Related to Pregnancy Care and Management



Newborn Care and Childhood Illness Management



Immunization Services



Management of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) in Children



Family Planning Services



Comprehensive Abortion Care Services



Adolescent Health Services

In order to meet the services set out in the guidelines, healthcare providers worked relentlessly to ensure all essential Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCH + A) services were operational. These healthcare providers faced risk, stigma and backlash from communities as they went for contact tracing, providing treatment, counselling for family members and ensuring other forms of medical support.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/EssentialservicesduringCOVID19updated0411201.pdf>

A multi-centric study<sup>2</sup> in India conducted on a web-based platform between April - May 2020 by the Department of Mental Health and Behavioural Sciences, Max Health Care - Saket, revealed that



Every 2nd Indian  
is hit by  
corona-anxiety



Every 4th individual  
is having symptoms  
of depression



27 per cent  
respondents reported  
suicidal thoughts

In order to mitigate the stress and depression among service providers, it was evident that there was an urgent need to provide mental and Psychosocial Support (PSS) to frontline health care providers.

UNICEF in coordination with National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, and several institutions in states across India, conducted an orientation training of various stakeholders on PSS and dealing with Stigma and Discrimination (S&D) related to COVID-19.

In June 2020, UNICEF teams also started working with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi to support operational research on the impact of COVID-19 on Maternal, Newborn & Child Health (MNCH) services, and in supporting the healthcare providers with psychosocial care for health workforce resilience during COVID-19 response to ensure continuity of services.



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Some of the activities carried out by UNICEF are as follows:

- » UNICEF partnered with the NIMHANS, Bengaluru to develop an information manual on “Psychosocial Care for Frontline Health Workers” and a first responders manual titled “Psychosocial First Aid (PFA) for Children affected by COVID-19 Pandemic”.
- » In Gujarat, UNICEF facilitated the development of a manual for healthcare providers for “Ensuring Safety and Well-being through Psychosocial Care and Support during COVID-19 Pandemic”, adopted by the State Institute of Health and Family Welfare (SIHFW) and implemented statewide.

<sup>2</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/every-2nd-indian-hit-by-coronaxiety/articleshow/78135741.cms>



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- » UNICEF contributed to the training of doctors and counsellors who handled the helpline numbers in Gujarat, Bihar, West Bengal, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. For instance, in Jharkhand, UNICEF conducted online capacity building on PSS counselling for 153 mental health and psychosocial counsellors of the National Health Mission (NHM). These trained counsellors, in-turn provided online teleconsultation and offline support to healthcare providers including frontline workers and the general community.

#### In Bihar, PSS orientation was provided to:

**300**

Railway  
Protection  
Force

**3,300**

Medical Doctors

**200**

Field Publicity  
Officers of the  
Regional  
Outreach Bureau

**200**

Service Providers  
of the Antiretroviral  
Therapy (ART)  
Centres

- » In Mumbai, a PSS cell, supported by UNICEF was established in KEM hospital that reached 7,705 COVID-19 positive cases and 4,965 caregivers.

UNICEF also continues to support the PSS initiatives such as helpline in Tata Institute of Social Science of Mumbai and iCALL - a free counselling helpline that is run by trained and qualified counsellors for children on the move and COVID-19 patients. An outcome of these interventions is the vigour to integrate focus on mental and psychosocial health and support of frontline and Primary Health Care (PHC) providers as a key component of UNICEF programme support.

## Innovations

Due to COVID-19 protocols of social distancing, UNICEF, along with partners, shifted its training methodology to online platforms. Nationwide Quality of Care Network (NQOCN), supported by UNICEF India Country Office (ICO), conducted webinars on psychological safety and supported over 200 doctors and nurses across the country. Civil Society Organizations, NGO and NSS volunteers were also trained. This shift from conventional face-to-face trainings to online sessions helped reach a wider audience with critical information despite the lockdown.



MoHFW



NIMHANS



WHO



FOGSI



IAP



NNF



NQOCN

## Reflections and Learnings

Healthcare providers and frontline workers had their own fears, apprehensions and fluctuating motivation levels while battling COVID-19. The free-flowing session on psychosocial care designed by UNICEF was immensely appreciated by the participants for the opportunity to open up and get practical tips from psychiatrists on managing stress. It was evident from the trainings that nurses and doctors were not only afraid of contracting COVID-19 but also feared they might pass it on to their family members. As a result of their vocation, they faced S&D from their own family members, landlords and community members in their villages/neighbourhood. However, despite the fear and challenges, the nurses were, nevertheless, proud to be working in a COVID-19 hospital as they were saving lives and contributing to the society in difficult times. Many were happy to be appreciated for their work by their relatives and friends while others considered this work as a very good learning and a once in a lifetime experience. The healthcare providers also came out of the training sessions armed with information on how to protect themselves mentally and physically, much more confident, motivated and upbeat.



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## Way Forward

UNICEF will continue partnering with MoHFW, NIMHANS, WHO, FOGSI, IAP, NNF and NQOCN and other relevant expert partners to introduce/sustain mechanisms for PSS for healthcare providers, during the pandemic. This will include advocacy on rationalization of workload of frontline health workers and integration of gender action plan recommendations in all aspects of support to PHC support in close coordination with health programme. The year 2021 being international year of Health and Care Providers, UNICEF will continue support and partnership towards “care of caregivers”.

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