

Chapter 13

Cyberchondria During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Many factors govern the behavior pertaining to anxiety regarding health – it may be stressors, triggers, adverse situations faced by people. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, health-related anxiety has been widespread. December 2019 saw the occurrence of a form of pneumonia, not known at that time, from the Wuhan region of China to rapidly proceed into a worldwide pandemic and lockdown. This disrupted normal life across the globe and affected social and economic functioning. Cyberchondria has been one of the coping strategies seen during this time, pertaining to online health-related searches which offer answers and relief as seen at the surface but also bringing a plethora of mental health challenges. The authors in this chapter try to simplify what exactly cyberchondria is and how has it affected the lives of the worldwide population during the COVID-19 crisis, the biggest pandemic of recent times. The origin, development, and prevalence of the concept, along with coping, treatment, and prevention of the condition are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Cyberchondria refers to the excessive or repeated online health research related to anxiety associated with health – health anxiety (HA) or distress. It also leads to repeated online searches similar to compulsive behavior which is extremely time consuming and can lead to neglect of other day-to-day chores and activities. It has also been compared to the new-age hypochondriasis – or a counterpart of it – as

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problematic behaviors like seeking information regarding health. This behavior of repeatedly checking or seeking assurance exists along with negative emotional states – like being anxious or distressed – so these behaviors may persist despite the negative consequences and disturbance to daily tasks, there is increased HA. There is a reassurance seeking model of Cyberchondria which exists due to uncertainty about online searches, doubt over the information available, too much information over online platforms and difficulty in coping with it. Naturally, some information may also be false or contradictory and so cannot be trusted, which further increases anxiety due to uncertainty (Starcevic et al., 2020). In this chapter we shall be discussing what is Cyberchondria, how has this term come into existence, how the concept has evolved, what is its significance in the COVID 19 era, and how to cope with it, besides its treatment and prevention.

BACKGROUND

Factors Leading to the Concept of Cyberchondria

HA refers to worry and anxiety generated due to a perceived threat to one's health. It can be there on a continuous spectrum, the ends of which range from having no health awareness to a pathological level of health anxiety or hypochondriasis. Certain cognitive behavioral models of HA hypothesize that some minor symptoms or sensations may be interpreted as being threatening or assumed as signs of grave illness, further propagating health anxiety (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020).

Problematic use of Internet (PUI) refers to an inability to keep internet use in check, resulting in significant distress and impairment. Cyberchondria, therefore, is considered as a compelling form of PUI resulting from health concerns. PUI is also associated with HA (Fergus and Dolan, 2014).

Hypochondriasis has always been a controversial diagnosis. Despite that or perhaps because of it, cyberchondria has become a popular term, often used by authors who otherwise prefer the term HA and avoid both the term and the diagnostic concept of hypochondriasis. The consequence of this trend has been the affirmation of the link between hypochondriasis and cyberchondria so that the latter is sometimes regarded as a 21st century 'version' of the former. Indeed, gone are the days when individuals with hypochondriasis consulted medical textbooks or encyclopedias, looking for information about their symptoms or suspected illnesses, or attempting to reassure themselves. These days the internet is the main source of health-related information and people with hypochondriasis usually turn to the internet to obtain information or seek reassurance.

Have they thus become “cyberchondriacs”?

The transformation of hypochondriasis into cyberchondria may be plausible to some extent, but it is also deceptive: not all individuals with a behavioral pattern of cyberchondria necessarily suffer from hypochondriasis as a disorder and vice versa. Making things more complicated, hypochondriasis was replaced by illness anxiety disorder and somatic symptom disorder in the Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). On the other hand, in the Eleventh Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), hypochondriasis has been classified as one of the obsessive-compulsive or related disorders, while also having a recognized relationship with anxiety disorders. Considering the ongoing uncertainty about the concept and nosologically status of hypochondriasis, where does cyberchondria fit in the landscape of psychopathology, psychiatric diag-

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