

Phenomenology and Severity of Symptoms in OCD Patients After COVID 19: A Cohort Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: COVID 19 pandemic and the associated restrictions can have significant impact on patients with pre-existing mental disorders. Fear of getting infected and excessive focus on contamination can worsen in patients with OCD.

Methodology: Thirty patients with OCD attending Chengalpattu Medical College Hospital were evaluated for OCD symptom severity using Y-BOCS severity scores in June & July 2020 and that was compared with their scores five months prior (pre covid)

Results: Majority of the study population (53%) had no changes in symptom severity after the onset of COVID19 pandemic. Twenty seven percent (27%) had a decrease in symptom severity while only 20% had increase in severity.

Conclusion: Our study results indicate that there were no significant changes in OCD symptom severity after the onset of COVID 19 pandemic.

Keywords: OCD, COVID 19, Severity

Running Title: Changes in OCD in COVID pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a neuropsychiatric disorder with prevalence of 1-3 % in general population.¹ OCD is characterized by recurrent obsessions, such as persistent thoughts, impulses or mental images, that promote anxiety, and uncontrolled compulsions such as repetitive behaviours or mental acts that are performed in response to the obsessions with the intent of reducing anxiety. Of the multiple symptom domains, obsessions of contamination and compulsive hand washing are amongst the commonest. These domains respond well to pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy, it tends to relapse in case of stress due to external or environmental cues.²

Adam Abba et al,³ reported that the prevalence of OCD symptoms increased during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a rate significantly higher than pre-pandemic rates in the general population. Also, other studies have suggested that there could be significant worsening of (OCD) in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic.^{4,5,6,7} One study reported that psychoeducation of the patients and families, facilitating tele-consults and psychotherapy, enhancing medication compliance and social worker input potentially reduce the worsening of symptoms in this population.⁵

Hence the aim of this study was to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of patients with OCD in an Indian setting and find out if there is a need to modify or intensify their treatment.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the psychiatry department of Chengalpattu medical college and hospital in Tamilnadu. Thirty patients with OCD who were already

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a part of a previous study were reassessed for severity of OCD symptoms in June and July 2020. These scores were compared with that from the earlier assessment of severity done in January & February 2020. The protocol was approved by the institute ethics committee and patients provided informed consent to be part of this study.

Measures

Socio demographic and clinical profile was obtained using a semi structured proforma. The Y-BOCS-SC was used to identify the content of the obsessions and compulsions⁸ and the Y-BOCS Severity Score, a 10-item instrument developed by Goodman et al was used to evaluate symptom severity and treatment response.⁸ The knowledge of patients about Covid-19 was assessed using semi-structured interview. This consisted of five

questions regarding the mode of spread, symptoms of the illness, course of illness, treatment available and preventive measures

SPSS software was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics of socio demographic and clinical profile was used. Paired t – test analysis was performed for comparison of mean scores of YBOCS before and during COVID 19.

RESULTS:

Socio demographic characteristics

In our sample 60 % [n = 18] were male and 60% [n = 18] were from rural background. 50 % [n=15] had primary level of education. 60% [n= 18] were employed and 73% [n = 22] were married. (Table 1)

Table 1: Demographic details, (n=30)

S No	Variable	Frequency	Percentage	
1	Age	20-30	9	30
		31-40	9	30
		41-50	9	30
		>50	3	10
2	Gender	Male	18	60
		Female	12	40
3	Locality	Rural	14	47
		Semi urban	8	27
		Urban	8	27
4	SES	Lower	16	53
		Middle	14	47
5	Education	Illiterate	1	3
		Primary	15	50
		Secondary	6	20
		College	8	27
6	Employment	Professional	1	3
		Skilled	5	17
		Semi skilled	12	40
		Unemployed	12	40
7	Marital status	Married	22	73
		Unmarried	7	23
		Divorced	1	3

Clinical Characteristics

Many had duration of illness greater than 5 years, 66 % [n= 20]. About 10% [n= 3] were drug naïve and 50 % [n= 15] were on regular treatment. 23% [n= 7] had a past history of suicide attempt. 20 % [n= 6] had a family history of psychiatric illness and 43% [n = 13] had alcohol use. (Table 2)

Table 2: Clinical characteristics of the sample

S No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage	
1	Duration of illness	<5 years	10	33
		5-10 years	16	53
		>10 years	4	13
2	Treatment history	Regular	15	50
		Irregular	12	40
		Drug naïve	3	10
3	Past history	Seizure disorder	2	7
		Suicide attempt	7	23
		Nil	21	70
4	Family history	No	24	80
		Yes	6	20
5	Substance use	Alcohol	13	43
		Alcohol and Tobacco	1	3
		Tobacco	1	3
		Nil	15	50

Profile of OCD in the sample

Obsessions on themes of contamination, aggression was most common. Cleaning and checking compulsions were the most frequent. The different types of obsessions and compulsions seen and their frequency of occurrence in this study population is noted.(Table 3)

Table 3: Frequency of obsessions and compulsions by domain

S No.	Obsessions	Frequency	Percent
1	Aggressive	9	23%
2	Contamination	9	23%
3	Somatic	4	10%
4	Religious	3	8%
5	Sexual	8	21%
6	Miscellaneous	2	5%
7	Symmetry	2	5%
8	Nil	2	5%
S No.	Compulsions	Frequency	Percent
1	Cleaning	17	36%
2	Checking	13	28%
3	Miscellaneous	5	11%
4	Repeating rituals	4	9%
5	No compulsions	8	17%

Changes in severity of symptoms after COVID 19

We found that about 20 % [n = 6] of the patients had increase in the severity of symptoms following COVID 19 while 27% [n = 8] of the patients had decrease in the severity of symptoms and 53% [n = 16] of the patients had no changes in the severity of symptoms following COVID 19. Paired samples t-test showed there was no significant difference (p value- 0.202) in the Y BOCS score before (16.04) and after pandemic (15.03). (Table 4)

Table 4: Change in severity of symptoms after COVID 19

Change in severity	Frequency	Percentage
Increased	6	20%
Decreased	8	27%
No changes	16	53%
Change in YBOCS	Mean Score	p value
Pre Pandemic	16.04	0.202
Post Pandemic	15.03	

DISCUSSION

The spread of fear, anxiety and even panic due to the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to a worsening of pre-existing psychiatric disorders (Yao et al., 2020).⁹ There are few studies in India regarding the changes in OCD symptoms following COVID 19.

In our sample of 30 patients only 20% of the patients had increase in the severity of symptoms following COVID 19. As a whole group, there was no significant differences in severity of symptoms before and after the onset of COVID 19. This is different to the findings of another studies by Davide et al, of 30 patients, where they found that there was overall worsening of symptoms.¹⁰ That study included only patients with contamination symptoms whereas, in this sample patients with all subtypes were included. The mean YBOCS score before the COVID 19 was 15. 97 which is like our sample score 16. 04. The mean YBOCS score during pandemic was 20. 6 in their sample which is higher than in our sample which was 15.03.

In a cross-sectional study conducted by Benatti et al, 36% of the patients had clinical worsening of symptoms which is little higher than our sample were only 20% had worsening of symptoms. 39 % were employed in their study which is contradictory to our sample were 60 % were employed. Most common obsession was

aggressive type and compulsions were cleaning type which is similar to our sample.¹¹

There could be a few reasons why there was no significant worsening in the study sample. The clients with OCD in this study were continuing their treatment for a longer duration (majority with an illness duration of more than five years). They might represent a group with better understanding of their condition, significant clinical improvement, resilience and better ability to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. Most of the patients were on regular follow up and treatment even during the lockdown and for those who couldn't reach the hospital, tele-therapy was started and based on the symptoms patients were advised to get drugs from nearby hospitals.

LIMITATIONS

Our study had a small sample size from a tertiary care hospital and results cannot be generalized. There is high risk of selection bias as those who follow up regularly might be a group with better prognosis. Half of the patients in our sample had mild to moderate severity, so the impact on those with severe illness could be underestimated.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE

DIRECTIONS

The effects of pandemic on the mental health in OCD patients might be variable. It is necessary that the patients to be in regular follow up and treatment during pandemic. Follow up study with large sample size to be included. That will allow comparison between those with predominance contamination obsessions and others. It will be useful to study if the understanding of COVID19 reduces the risk of worsening.

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