



Brief Research Communication

## Change in sexual well-being during COVID-19 pandemic

**Nisha Mani Pandey<sup>1</sup>, Rakesh K Tripathi<sup>2</sup>, Deeksha Pandey<sup>3</sup>, Pallavi Bharti<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor (NM Research), <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor cum Clinical Psychologist, <sup>4</sup>Ph.D. Scholar, Dept of Geriatric Mental Health, King George's Medical University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

<sup>3</sup>Ph.D. Scholar (Public Health), Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

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### Abstract

Good sexual health is one of the most critical aspects of maintaining the quality of life. The subject is often sidelined due to the stigma associated with it. However, without significant and quality research in India in this area concerning the pandemic, lack of information/awareness may give rise to risky practices. The results suggest changes in participants' sexual life, which leads to further possibilities of research within the domain. This would help the population adopt safe and conducive practices to a healthy and fulfilling sexual life. This brief research paper attempts to understand the possible effects of COVID-19 on individuals' sexual well-being during the lockdown and after it. The more extensive study aimed to capture the participants' perceived psychosocial well-being, wherein sexual health was also an item recorded.

**Keywords:** Sexual well-being, COVID-19, Pandemic

### Introduction

A pandemic comes with many distressing issues, most documented extensively throughout history. People try to cope with it or become stressed, worried, anxious, depressed, and sometimes commit unfortunate acts. There are numerous ways

to cope with the situation, where some may be called healthy and unhealthy. Because of COVID-19, looking at the deteriorating condition, on March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic. Since then, many health care regulations, orders, and advisory were disseminated worldwide, including India. A person may contract COVID-19 in many ways, including- nasal discharge, mouth/eye droplets (severe) to touching infected surfaces (moderate), and blood, feces, and semen of a contaminated person (mild chances). Accordingly, WHO prepared interim guidance (World Health

**Corresponding Author :** Dr. Nisha Mani Pandey

E Mail: [nishamani@kgmcindia.edu](mailto:nishamani@kgmcindia.edu)

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Organization, 2020), which needs to be considered by us in general.

In taking such precautions, our lifestyle has changed a lot, as we have to adopt many protective measures to maintain our health and well-being. This is a challenging period, and there is a need to keep balance by adopting various lifestyle changes to handle numerous challenges of the current pandemic. This also gives rise to multiple myths stemming from paranoia and queries that are unanswered. One such aspect is the maintenance of sexual well-being. There is a shortage of scientific literature that throws light on sexual behavior in the current scenario and its impact on one's health, especially mental health.

The practice of social (physical) distancing (6 ft.) as well as wearing masks, frequent hand washing, and avoiding face touching are crucial in reducing the spread of COVID-19 (Cerami et al., 2020; Fegert et al., 2020). Subsequently, many unverified data, like linking the lockdown to population explosion, high-risk intimate relationships, and sexual behavior, have come to light. Numerous reasons may be regarded as factors behind this particular kind of conversation and discussion. Upon analysis of such information in the public domain, one might be incorrectly informed and engage in unsafe or risky practices.

Thirst, hunger, sleep, sexual gratification are considered as basic needs for the human. However, talking about it is still taboo in India, and people don't discuss sexual behavior issues comfortably. Further, the disastrous impact of an unplanned lockdown and restricted movement for almost six months has left people feeling isolated. Social distancing has become an essential part of life for now, unless we find any remedy/ solutions/ vaccines/ medicines for COVID-19. Remaining healthy, happy, and satisfied

with basic needs is more important than ever. People cannot cope with the situation at hand, which may worsen sexual health and affect physical and mental health.

It is difficult to comment on the impact of a pandemic on one's sexual behavior in detail. However, we had carried out a study titled 'Psychosocial well-being during and after state lockdown due to COVID 19: An online survey'. The study aimed to understand the changes in lifestyle and the impact of changes on an individual's psychosocial well-being and behavior during and after a complete state lockdown due to COVID-19. With many other items, we also explored sexual behavior. Thus, this brief research paper attempts to concisely discuss the changes in one's sexual behavior during and after lockdown.

## **Methods**

The main study was an ethically approved online survey, which was done on a pre-post basis. The study questionnaire was developed on Google Forms. The forms were developed in two formats, one capturing the data of participants during the lockdown, which was prepared for the pre-test (during lockdown). The second form was developed to capture the data post the first 'unlock', that was the post assessment (after lockdown). The participants of the study included individuals who were above the age of 18 years and had access to the internet. We did not pose a geographical limit to the participants as the survey was done online. Participants were recruited through common contacts and various social media platforms. The questionnaire had a description of the study along with an online informed consent clause, with assured anonymity regarding the responses of the participants.

The questionnaire captured the socio-demographic details (sex, age, education, socio-economic status, marital status, living

status, etc.) of the participants and multi-choice statements related to their routine, behavior, health, etc. The questionnaire also included an item related to sexual behavior, i.e., 'please rate changes in your feelings/ emotions/ behaviors after this during this lockdown/ unlock condition. [with respect to sexual behavior]'. The item was rated on a 5-point scale (1= no changes, 2= uncertain/ can't say, 3= mild changes, 4= moderate changes, 5= many changes). After getting the ethical clearance during the lockdown, the questionnaire was circulated on 02.05.2020 till the declaration of phase 1 unlocked. The questionnaire pertaining to the unlock was circulated on 08.06.2020, and responses were taken in till 17.07.2020. The circulation of the questionnaire link was done through newspapers, Facebook wall, email, and other forms of social media. The help of students was also taken for wide circulation. After the declaration of the first unlock, the questionnaire related to psychosocial behaviors after the lockdown was sent to all those emails which had responded in the first phase of the study (during lockdown). The obtained responses were analyzed by applying percentage statistics.

Results

We expected a sample of at least 385 subjects

initially. However, in spite of rigorous efforts, only 324 subjects took part in the study, and of these, only 159(49%) participants replied after the declaration of the unlock. During the lockdown, the number and proportion of male/ female respondents were equal, but after the lockdown, the proportion of female respondents was higher (n=91, i.e., 57.2%) than their counterpart male (n=68, i.e., 42.8%). Therefore, a comparison was not made. The socio-demographic details of participants are provided in table 1.

Table 1 reveals that the majority of the participants were below the age of 45 years, from middle socio-economic status with a higher level of education, living with family, and residing in an urban area. After the unlock, maximum drop out was recorded from highly educated urban males. As there was a 50% loss of sample, the responses obtained were compared applying percentage statistics. The response regarding changes in sexual behavior during the lockdown and after the unlock due to pandemic has been shown in figure 1.

Further, responses related to change were merged (a little bit/ mild to mostly/many changes) to see the difference for the same question, which has been displayed in figure 2.

Figure 1: Response of participants regarding changes in sexual behavior

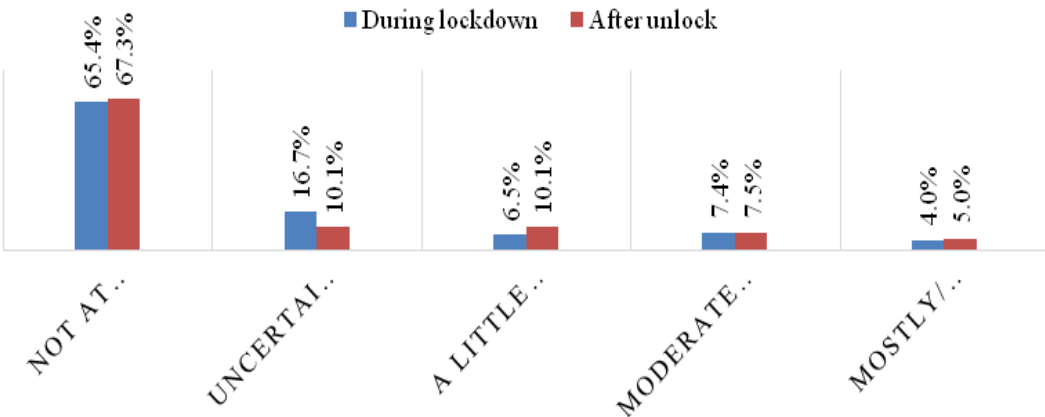
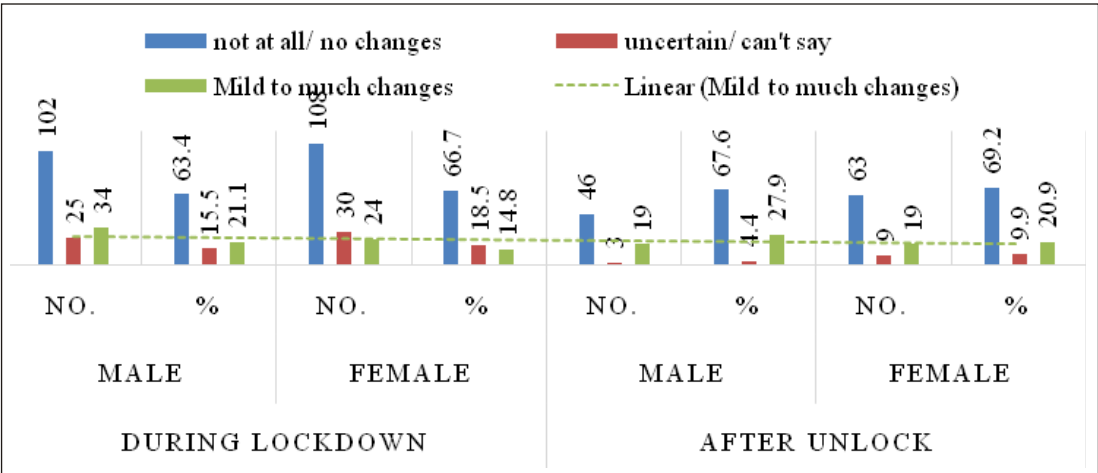


Table 1: Socio-demographic details of the participants as per the stage of the study

Details			During Lockdown (N=324)			After Unlock (N=159)		
			Sex		Total	Sex		Total
			Male (n=161)	Female (n=163)		Male (n=68)	Female (n=91)	
Age groups	< or = 29 yrs.	N	94	93	187	28	53	81
		%	50.3	49.7	100.0	34.6	65.4	100.0
	30-44 yrs.	N	40	37	77	22	24	46
		%	51.9	48.1	100.0	47.8	52.2	100.0
	45-59 yrs.	N	23	28	51	18	14	32
		%	45.1	54.9	100.0	56.3	43.8	100.0
	= or > 60 yrs.	N	4	5	9	None		
		%	44.4	55.6	100.0			
Education	Upto intermediate	N	7	5	12	2	2	4
		%	58.3	41.7	100.0	50.0	50.0	100.0%
	Graduate	N	38	47	85	30	42	72
		%	44.7	55.3	100.0	41.7	58.3	100.0
	Post Graduate	N	52	51	103	30	42	72
		%	50.5	49.5	100.0	41.7	58.3	100.0
	Professional/ doctorate	N	64	60	124	6	5	11
		%	51.6	48.4	100.0	54.5	45.5	100.0
SES	Higher	N	23	25	48	1	7	11
		%	47.9	52.1	100.0	36.4	63.6	100.0
	Middle	N	117	125	242	57	82	139
		%	48.3	51.7	100.0	41.0	59.0	100.0
	Lower	N	21	13	34	10	2	12
		%	61.8	38.2	100.0	87.5	12.5	100.0
Living Status	Living alone	N	8	9	17	7	3	10
		%	47.1%	52.9%	100.0%	72.7%	27.3%	100.0%
	With Family	N	141	139	280	61	77	138
		%	50.4	49.6	100.0	44.2	55.8	100.0
	With friends/ partner	N	8	10	18	2	4	6
		%	44.4	55.6	100.0	33.3	66.7	100.0
	On duty	N	4	5	9	2	3	5
		%	44.4	55.6	100.0	40.0	60.0	100.0
Background	Rural	N	27	19	46	14	10	24
		%	58.7	41.3	100.0	58.3	41.7	100.0
	Suburban	N	15	18	33	8	7	15
		%	45.5	54.5	100.0	53.3	46.7	100.0
	Urban	N	119	126	245	46	74	120
		%	48.6	51.4	100.0	38.3	61.7	100.0

Figure 2: Gender wise response of participants regarding changes in sexual behavior



Results show that 21.1% of males report changes (mild to much) in sexual behavior during the lockdown, whereas for the same question after lockdown, 27.9% of male reported changes in sexual behavior. Whereas females report for comparatively less change in sexual behavior (during lockdown=14.8%; unlock=20.9%).

Discussion

The study reveals that change in sexual behavior was reported more by males than their counterpart females during the pandemic of COVID-19. United Kingdom carried out a study to examine levels and association of sexual activity during COVID-19 and concluded that complimentary sexual health messages may decrease the adverse outcomes of self- isolation/ social (physical) distancing (Jacob et al., 2020). Another report revealed that due to pandemic there was marked effect on young people's sexual health (Li et al., 2020), another study reported that in pandemic the quality of sexual life decreased (Yuksel and Ozgor, 2020). A latest study reports that lockdown affected one's sexual life (Arafat et al., 2020); however, hardly any studies reveal what kind of sexual behavior would be healthy in this pandemic era.

The study and subsequently the data arising from it has its limitations. The participants of the study were literate belonging to a stratum of the society that has access to the internet and interested in such studies. This makes it a homogenous sample and does not reflect on the heterogenous nature of Indian society. The initial goal of the number of participants could not be achieved and maintained during the pre-post data collection due to the high drop-out rate, which is a drawback of online surveys. The questionnaire itself captures a large amount of data out of which only one item has been elaborated in this paper. Thus, the in-depth descriptors of sexual well-being have not been elaborated in the study. The study can only serve as a starting point into detailed research to initiate and understand the issue and suggest measures, if required, for a healthy sexual life during a pandemic.

Conclusion

Due to COVID-19 and the lockdown, there were massive changes in every individual's life. People had to make various adjustments to maintain their health as well as the quality of life. Does sexual health and related behaviours play a role in supporting over all health, well being and quality of life? It is

essential that we look at this through an intersecting lens that connects the dots for everyone in times to come. Thereby, this would turn into an opportunity to develop interventions and promote health practices that are safe and secure without affecting a person's sexual life and health. This will invariably help researchers determine the linkages between sexual well-being and high-stress situations like a pandemic.

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