

The Mental Diet Plan: A Matter of Concern For Women During Pandemic.

With Special Reference to the Flood-Affected Women of Assam.

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Abstract

The world always talks about your food and nutritional diet plan! It seems like wherever you go, and wherever you look people are talking about diets. Just standing in line at the grocery store, you'll notice every magazine has some type of article on diets. The headlines say, "How to Lose 10 lbs in Time for Summer! Five Exercises to Trim Your Tummy". Simultaneously this has led everyone to neglect their mental fitness and its diet plan to such a position that they don't even consider putting it up as a coffee table discussion. Rounding up all those concerns, this paper exclusively deals with diet plans concerning the human mind and how its laxity has its adverse effect, especially among women. Recently, researchers at the University of Essex conducted a study and found out that women are more vulnerable to mental health problems during the coronavirus pandemic than men. The study revealed that the number of women suffering from stress and loneliness during the 2 COVID-19 outbreak has risen from 11 percent to 27 percent. On the other hand, the number of men suffering from at least one mental condition has reached 18 percent from 7 percent. So in this contemporary time, every definition of mental diet whether its rhetoric or clinical seems to act as a void in the case of 'pande-mentally' affected Women. Researchers have also justified that with the added pressure of childcare, domestic duties and 'work from home' responsibilities have degraded the mental scenario of the women to a much lower level. Therefore what women should add to her bucket list apart from household responsibilities and child care to keep her mentally fit and sane is well discussed in this paper. Every woman should take to her notice how her mental diet is absolutely different from her food diet and how this diet plan is equally necessary to keep herself both physically and mentally healthy. The other purpose of my study is to understand the linkage between flood and its impact on mental health especially women. To fulfill this objective an attempt has been made to examine how North-Eastern flood detrimentally affects the mental stability of those women who every year experience economic, social as well as individual loss. The second part of the paper directs an effective intervention that should be given to those women who deal with emotional instability, stress reactions, anxiety, trauma during the pre, peri, and post diseasterial period.

KeyWord: Mental diet, Women, Pandemic, Flood, Self-care, Work from home.

India's public landscape has transformed dramatically over the last couple of months, with the most prolonged lockdown that the present generation can remember. Declared on March 24, 2020, the lockdown ensured that hundreds of millions of people were effectively confined to home, except when they ventured out, armed with a self-attested affidavit, to stock up on essentials. The Government which has implored people to 'stay home' failed to acknowledge the impact of physical (and social) isolation on the mental health of the women which has anticipated a higher level due to the increased domestic responsibilities created by the lockdown. With the advancement of this lockdown period, the McDonalidized world along with India started talking about the best workout and food diet plan for women, flooding the Instagram feeds and Youtube channels with posts such as 'Five simple exercises for women at home during lockdown!', 'Full day lockdown diet plan for ladies!', neglecting the mental fitness and its diet plan of those homebound women to such a position that they don't even consider putting it up as a coffee table discussion. This is possible because our society believes that this mental burden has traditionally been borne and continues to disproportionately be borne by the women of the household regardless of any pandemic or non-pandemic period.

The Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which has maintained stoic patriarchal silence on the issue, is complicit in the woes of Indian women, who are bearing the brunt of the pandemic on their calloused feet and hardened hands. The 'home' now includes children who are compelled to be home all day, aged people who are especially vulnerable to the virus, and babies that cannot be baby-sat by willing neighbors anymore. It is tragic that nowhere the government contemplates men on sharing the domestic load at home. Again if domestic violence was a virus in itself, the lockdown has not only increased its breeding rate but has also morphed its DNA to make it a more tenacious variant. The National Commission for Women has recorded a two-fold increase in gender-based violence across the country from March till May. Moreover, around 74% of the service industry includes women as daily wage workers or domestic helpers, whose significant income portion goes towards supporting her own family. According to IOM'S World Migration Report 2020, during the COVID outbreak, the mobility of those women workers from their work town to their home town is jeopardizing their hard-earned income causing financial distress among them. Dr. Lily Thomas (MD, OB-GYN, Kerala) mentioned that - *"Extended lockdown has led to 7 million unwanted pregnancies. A count of 20% increase has been reported in the Postmenopausal depression cases"*. Simultaneously those female health care providers who are fighting day and night leaving behind her own family, those cooperate, employees who are managing their deadlines amongst her daily chores, those young women with job and admission insecurity and at last but not the least the plight of those single moms who are stuck in some metropolitan city far away from her own parents, etc are some countless vulnerable situations which highlights the fact why mental health and its diet plan are becoming a serious matter of concern for every woman during this pandemic.

The Women's Health Research Institute at Northwestern University specially featured a healthy mental diet plan for all the women across the globe to mitigate their mental issues during this COVID breakdown including its DOs and DON'Ts. This is as follows-

- Self-Care - Spending more time with your family and managing 'work from home' simultaneously during this lockdown has increased the set of unrealistic expectations and demands, which has turned into an enormous burden to bear and fulfill. In the process of managing to become a wife, a mother, a homemaker, an employee, a caregiver, etc, and together with trying to be "perfect" in them, you have almost lost sight of your own individuality and needs. Therefore practicing self-care is the most prior thing you should do during this period. Make time for yourself. Apart from your daily activities try to do activities that you enjoy. Listen to some good music, read good books, watch a good movie, revive your childhood hobby, or start a new one and above all allow yourself to make mistakes and learn to say NO. It is also extremely important for a woman to recognize that self-care is not selfish. Unless a person takes care of their own needs, they will not have the psychological and physical energy to take care of another.
- Physical exercise and food diet- You should realize that even a small amount of physical activity and having a healthy diet can have a positive impact on your mental health. It can relieve stress, improve sleep, and improve overall health. With gyms and parks closed, it is important to find ways to add a physical activity for your day. Avoid COVID trends of oily and junk food. Add green veggies and more water to your diet plan. Remember your health issues are quite different from that of a man and what you eat has a direct reflection on your mental health.
- For new moms and pregnant women - Stress, anxiety, and depression are some common symptoms of a new mom or pregnant woman. With the world being closed, these sorts of mental issues among the new moms and the pregnant women have been reported to a much higher risk level. Don't hesitate to take an on-call medical consult and suggestions from your Doctor if you are undergoing such issues. While you are learning about the needs of your newborn, do not neglect your own. You will be better equipped to take care of your child by taking care of yourself. Make sure that you are still eating nutritious food, and get some exercise. It's a pandemic period and being a woman its not easy to make time for yourself but you and your child will be better off from doing so.
- For working women - 'Work from Home' especially for a woman is not that easy as it sounds to be. Multiple deadlines, video conferencing, irritating co-workers are sources of negativity and stress that deplete your energy. Try to engage in activities that are relaxing such as spending time with nature, watching motivational videos, etc. Always try to work with people and in an environment that gives you positive energy rather than toxicity.
- Stay connected with family and friends - We have been asked to 'socially distance' not 'Socially disconnect'. Don't hesitate to open your heart out ladies! Utilize video chats to have fun and interactive

visits with family and friends. Don't live up with the old thoughts that because you are a woman, society will judge you for expressing your 'low feeling'. This is pandemic and 'to be not ok' is the new normalcy.

- Don't dwell on negative thoughts, stop going into judgments, avoid gossiping about someone or something. Limit exposure to media about the pandemic. Find a balance between being informed and watching 24 hours a day. Remember being a woman what thoughts you allow in your mind reflects your surrounding environment. Therefore try to keep a positive perspective that this is a strange and unprecedented time, but things will return to normal eventually.

Assam is battling twin attacks - one a global pandemic and the other a natural disaster. The amalgamation of these two disasters has exposed people to several health-related problems from morbidity to mortality. It has been reported that this twin disaster has put most of the affected families in a different state of shock and despair.

In most cases, we notice that the male member of those victim families after property damage, financial loss, and displacement due to any disaster becomes alcohol dependent, distressful, and depressed. But the most inconsiderate issue is the hazardous mental strain of those women, wives who bear the brunt of almost every disaster outcome without any single dissent. With the arrival of a new calamity this year the women are seen to be triple burdening herself with flood loss, drunken husband/son, welling babies, sick in-laws, scarcity of food, medicine, and many more. With all these vulnerable situations severe distress or so-called psychopathologies have been diagnosed in most women. The 'stay at home' implored Government failed to acknowledge the fact that how can those families stay at home when their 'homes' are devastated by the demolishing flood, how can those women maintain her 'COVID hygiene' when her family and friends are suffering from disaster disorders such as diarrhea, flu, skin rashes, etc. Surprisingly no matter how much the lockdown affects the outer, how much deep the water is inside the house the 'home-makers' still have to cook the 2-time meal for her family, look after her sick child/husband and above all have to undergo through her own physiological changes like menstrual disorders, pregnancies, etc. In an interview with India Today Tv, Sangeeta Devi from Hatisila, Kamrup narrated that - "*Since the lockdown, there is no work for daily wagers as we cannot go outside to look for work and are rendered penniless. Now our houses are flooded too. Though floodwaters are gradually receding, we are still living on roads,*". Another woman Sunita Kakoti from Chandrapur via local news channels pleaded the government to help her with some financial source as she has to shut down her vegetable stall on the onset of coronavirus outbreak and since the last 45 days, she and her family are residing on roads as the floodwater has completely submersed their house. For these women, their psychological impact due to this twin disaster is in the form of PTSD, anxiety, emotional distress, and sleeping disorder. Now for them how can the above mentioned WHRI's mental diet plan be justifiable? It is completely irrational for those women who rely on the Govt. and the NGOs for their basic food, clothing, and medicines, to maintain a good food diet plan, to connect to her long-distance friends via video chat. Therefore the only diet plan that they can exercise this time is to remain positive, calm, not to allow rumors and negative thoughts venture their minds and above all to speak up against any exploitation instead of enduring it quietly.

We should remember that the mental diet is a diet of thought. As women we juggle through different roles, therefore effective interventions such as good thoughts, positive thinking, hope, and enthusiasm should be taken by each and every woman whether it is a pandemic or non-pandemic period. Otherwise, the matter concerning the mental diet of women will just remain as a topic of discussion!

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