

# Issues and Challenges With COVID-19: Interventions Through Social Work Practice and Perspectives

Sanjoy Roy, Ph.D.  
University of Delhi  
[sanjoyroy30@gmail.com](mailto:sanjoyroy30@gmail.com)

Navdeep Kaur, postgraduate student  
University of Delhi  
[navdeep48kaur@gmail.com](mailto:navdeep48kaur@gmail.com)

*Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, Volume 17, Number 2 (2020)  
Copyright 2010, ASWB

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB.

## Abstract

Professional social workers are engaged all over the world in doing what they can to save the world from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They are working at all levels, macro, mezzo, and micro, and adjusting their practices by temporarily discontinuing face-to-face services and moving to remote contact with clients, while maintaining the essential human relationships between providers and clients. Called *social distancing*, this is essential. World Social Work Day (WSWD) was announced on March 17, 2020, by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The main focus this year is “Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships,” one of the six core values of the social work profession, as delineated in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. This article discusses in detail how professional social workers can practice while dealing with COVID-19, maintaining social distancing but still fulfilling their roles during the time of the pandemic. It will also highlight intervention models dealing with the issue, stressing ways to improve efforts for better results. The authors have developed their own Corona Prevention Cycle, using and studying social distancing during interaction with people in the community. This could be a new model of treatment cycle for COVID-19.

*Keywords:* social work, COVID-19, pandemic, practice, corona prevention cycle

## Introduction

World Social Work Day was celebrated all over the world on March 17 of this year. The International Federation of Social Workers announced the theme of this year: “Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships.” This is also one of the six core values of the social work profession, as delineated in the NASW Code of Ethics. The WSWD logo had shown folded hands highlighting the theme of the importance of human relationships. Now, most people around the world are practicing “social distancing” in reaction to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Limiting contact with others is being used to slow the spread of this virus. “We’re avoiding touching things or people, and we’re washing our hands more. We aren’t hugging or shaking hands” (Grobman, 2020).

In this scenario, social workers have a flexible attitude to adapt to the situation at every moment and can be the best examples of Charles Darwin’s survival of the fittest theory. Social workers at every level have the skills and capability to not only address safety for today but to translate fear, grief, and loss into empowerment and social transformation. According to Karen M. Carlucci,

with resilience, stamina, self-direction, flexibility, and self-confidence, social workers easily inculcate the adaptability skills required in this demanding profession (Carlucci, 2020). “We are working at various levels during these hard times and this article discusses in detail the roles of a social worker during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic and also what more can be done to upgrade the efforts for better results in our country, on the basis of the recent experiences and present scenario of social work in other countries” (Carlucci, 2020). These can be demonstrated in the following areas.

### Mental Health Social Work With Special Emphasis on Support Services and Psychiatric Counselling

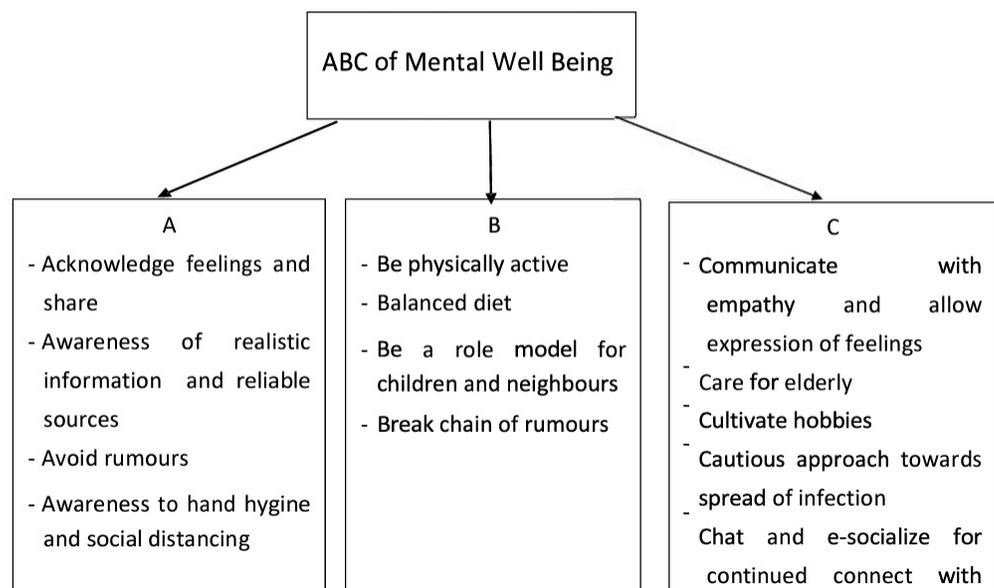
This is one of the most important pivotal dimensions during such a virus outbreak. Loneliness and social isolation can deeply impact mental health as well as the consequential physical health of individuals. In social distancing times such as this, it is especially important to maintain human contact in whatever ways we can safely do so. Social distancing is a necessary step during this pandemic but may also result in what Ezra Klein called a “social recession” in a March 12, 2020, Vox.com article. Wendy Sherman, a social worker who is the director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School, wrote that “...social distancing is hard in a time when we need each other so badly,” and provided ideas on staying connected. We can distance physically but still stay in “touch.” (Grobman, 2020). In these dangerous pandemic times, social workers are adjusting their

practices by temporarily discontinuing face-to-face services and moving to remote contact with clients (telehealth, electronic communication), in order to maintain those human relationships between providers and clients. Social workers can do online therapy with their clients to deal with the anxiety and the trauma. For example, social workers in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like Shakti Shalini of New Delhi have organized a helpline that includes phone/text/online support services for domestic violence victims during lockdown.

The Department of Psychiatry of the Armed Forces Medical College located at Pune in India has given an ABC of mental well-being that can be used by social workers to counsel their patients and keep them intrinsically motivated to survive the times of lockdown all over the world. It can help control their emotional and behavioural reactions (National Association of Professional Social Workers in India [NAPSWI], 2020). They have been summarized as follows: Social workers who are well-versed in using technology in education and practice are helping their fellow co-workers to use it to the maximum during these times (Figure 1).

The latest trend is that of online webinars being organized on the social media platforms of social workers. These webinars can be viewed by the

Figure 1: ABC of Mental Well-Being



general public to learn tips and avoid loneliness and depression. Social workers on Twitter are sharing resources to help each other in working and teaching online. Twitter has an effortlessly supportive community of social workers. One option that has been offered recently is the #MacroSW Twitter chat on social workers' response to COVID-19.

The authors attended a webinar on April 1, 2020, organized by the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's Envoy on Youth in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on the topic "Mental Health during COVID-19 for the youth - #Coping with COVID". Psychologists and mental health specialists discussed steps we as social workers as well as everybody else could take to deal with stress during the times of self-quarantine, such as:

- Taking care of your body
- Trying to eat healthy and well-balanced meals
- Exercising regularly
- Getting plenty of sleep
- Avoiding alcohol and drugs
- Making time to unwind
- Trying to do some other activities you enjoy like music, painting, or reading
- Taking deep breaths, doing yoga and stretching

Social workers can counsel their clients to maintain some kind of routine, including getting up at the same time. Setting daily goals to complete as part of the routine can help to keep a sense of engagement throughout the day. The webinar gave information on agencies and persons to contact for those who are depressed or have other mental health issues during the times of self-quarantine, which should be used by the social workers in ensuring that their clients, their offices, and the public have reliable information. (Wickramanayake, 2020).

Social workers can help their clients by encouraging them to join online versions of book clubs, virtual dance classes, or yoga groups on social media platforms. Even some live concerts

are being organized on platforms like Instagram to offer favorite live-streamed music and discover new performers. Many places of worship and organizations are proposing live-streamed religious services. Social workers should actively remain engaged with their clients through social media in case there is a need for a counselor, support group online or other support services.

### **Medical Social Worker as a Part of Medical/Clinical Social Work**

Because of social workers' expertise in assessing and treating behavioural health disorders and addressing the social determinants of health, they are increasingly being hired by health systems, hospitals, and those involved in ambulatory care settings (Zerden, 2019). Primary prevention and early intervention reduces mental health morbidity in situations such as pandemics. Clients, especially those who get infected with the virus, need to understand that the foremost things to avoid are psychological panic, anxiety, and fear. It is important that clinical social workers provide forms of psychosocial support like counselling and support services for confirmed or suspected patients as well as their families, ensuring them of both medical and psychological assistance and highlighting the need to take precautionary steps like washing their hands, wearing masks, and avoiding touching the face.

Given the varied skill set of social workers, these professionals perform a variety of functions in integrated health settings. Indeed, social workers' training and knowledge of psychosocial risk factors for health, as well as their expertise in behavioural health screening, assessment, and use of evidence-based interventions makes social workers uniquely qualified to assist in the treatment of the "whole person" in integrated care settings (Andrews, Darnell, McBride, & Gehlert, 2013; Stanhope et al., 2015). Social workers frequently support patients and their families as they navigate complex health systems. They can also assist in coordinating multifaceted care plans. Social workers have the skills to provide patient psychoeducation on health and wellness, address behavioural health

through a variety of treatment modalities, facilitate connections to needed non-medical resources, and advocate for patients across care teams to improve overall access of care (Fraser et al., 2018). The Wuhan Association of Social Workers established the “2 + 3” online community virus mode, which means two professional workers (one social worker, one community worker) and three volunteers (medical worker, psychological worker, assistant), working with internet tools to help local governments to implement home screening and early intervention.

Indian social work regulatory bodies and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) too can take such initiatives. Chief Minister of Delhi Arvind Kejriwal’s “5T plan” of **testing, tracing, treatment, teamwork and tracking-monitoring** can include more clinical social workers, who can be resourceful in linking the hospitals with the governments at the teamwork and tracking-monitoring stages. Social workers engaged in medicine can also play a larger role in ensuring the safety of health workers. For instance, it has been reported widely that Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like masks, sanitizers, and handwashing gels used by doctors who are dealing with the corona-affected patients are available in limited quantities across all hospitals. These limits obviously pose a safety threat to doctors. Social workers can do advocacy with the government to ensure adequate availability of PPE.

### **Community Sensitization and Awareness as Part of the Community Organization Method of Social Work**

A long human collaborative chain of social workers, activists, and volunteer citizens can help in spreading the sensitivity of this issue, especially among the community as a whole. The strategy of cooperation, collaboration, and pro-social behaviour also gets ensured. This will help in disseminating factual information and knowledge to the public. It has also been seen widely that during such outbreaks, the spread of rumors and

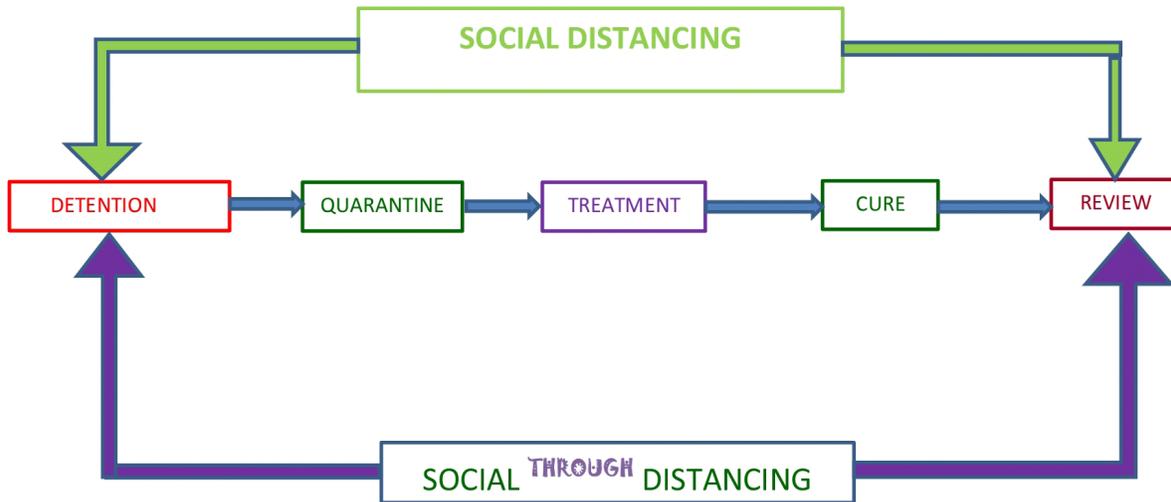
nonfactual information is very high, especially on social media. Social workers can take the help of “Programme Media” in ensuring that more logical and rational disseminated information reaches the public. The Indian government has prepared the Aarogya Setu app on the model of the South Korean app to enhance contact testing and provide emergency alerts in case an individual comes in contact with an affected person. Social workers can educate and bring awareness among the communities in procedures for downloading and using this app and its advantages. They can explain the concept of social distancing to the public and the steps involved and how it can be beneficial. If social workers understand the process in a detailed way that they can convey in layman’s language, their clients would be more likely to adhere to quarantine time limits and not fail to comply with needed distancing and other guidelines during self-isolation. The Corona Prevention Cycle Model, developed by Dr. Sanjoy Roy, can bring awareness to the fight against COVID-19.

The Corona Prevention Cycle (Figure 2) consists of five steps, interlinked through the process of social distancing. They are:

- Detention
- Quarantine
- Treatment
- Cure
- Review

Community social workers generally have a strong rapport with those they work with and can encourage their communities to listen and take the proper steps. Social workers need to explain to community members that the 14-day quarantine is all-important if someone has tested positive. They may be subsequently treated in the hospital, and then after they have recovered, a review test will be done to check the recovery. This is necessary because of the recent experiences in China, when the virus was found to have returned in some recovered patients. Obviously, there is the risk of having a second wave of asymptomatic coronavirus infection as there was in China. The patriarchal mindsets and the caste system operating in many communities can hamper

**Figure 2: Corona Prevention Cycle**



the process of social distancing, so a community social worker’s role can be indispensable in helping everyone to accommodate to this new situation in their homes.

**Charity, Relief and Voluntary Action as Part of the Social Welfare Administration Method of Social Work**

We as social workers are aware that the pandemic and essential actions such as social distancing and quarantine will have social, emotional, financial, and social justice repercussions now and for some time to come. Under Charity, Relief and Voluntary Action in India, social workers are already playing a vital role in ensuring that basic necessities like food, water, sanitary napkins for women, and other essentials are being supplied to the needy. For example, after the lockdown was announced, the most severely affected were daily wage laborers who are mostly migrants and away from their homes. Social workers in collaboration with their respective organizations such as Goonj, Youth Feed India, Give India, and Robin Hood Army are ensuring that basic supplies like masks, food and rations, and temporary living space are made available to the households of the disadvantaged sections of society.

Social workers are sending advisories and joining in with government efforts through various initiatives such as setting up online donation virtual funding systems, through which willing citizens can donate to this entire relief and charity process. Social workers are doing fundraising at individual levels in their respective hometowns or the areas where it is easy for them to operate and are encouraging people who have a good income to provide donations to help others.

Now, Lockdown-2 in India is familiar to most people in India, and the public is aware that the worst sufferers are people living in the unorganized sector especially, as said before, the daily wage migrant labourers. This is leading to problems of basic sustenance for the poor. Therefore, it is very vital that the organizations working on the issues of hunger, labour welfare, and the livelihood of migrants must be brought to the same table for a collective effort. Social workers and national social work organizations should be a part of the national advocacy movement to enact these precautionary and responsive changes in large numbers. Some of this advocacy can even be done from home through writing letters or making phone calls. This is not merely a social justice reform issue, but a public health response. What has been listed here are not all of the issues being raised. Others include treatment for those with substance use disorder who

need continued access to methadone (NIDA, 2020), as well as help with alcohol withdrawal for those in states where access to liquor stores has been unexpectedly ended (Whelan, 2020). Homelessness, or the plight of those who risk losing their homes when they cannot afford rent after losing their jobs, is another very serious issue. Domestic violence cases have increased in the homes with addicts and those whose way of living has become precarious. There is no limit to the number of issues that need social work advocacy. We must rise to the challenge and help with the coordination and networking to help in providing support services for those in need.

### **Research and Advocacy as Part of the Social Research Method of Social Work**

The role of social workers can be highlighted by sending action plans to the government for tackling the virus outbreak, after doing fieldwork visits and bringing out ground realities to form a collective effort. The NAPSWI president listed ways in which social workers can collect information and data in their communities on different aspects of the crisis – financial, social, educational, and health. Such organization of fact-based information can help in designing appropriate intervention, monitoring, research and planning to be better prepared and equipped for a catastrophe such as this pandemic (Bhatt, 2020). Countries like Germany have been able to manage the spread of the disease more efficiently because of their excellent healthcare and infrastructure facilities, which we sadly lack in our country, and thus social workers working in Ministry of Health and other departments at state and local levels can surely provide ideas and make efforts in providing advocacy towards getting more funds for healthcare settings. They can collaborate with the civil society organizations, as they are best suited to check the spread of the infection into communities.

### **Conclusion**

Following the COVID-19 crisis, the world will not be the same as before, scientists, social

scientists and economists all predict. As a profession comprising millions of highly skilled professionals, the united voice of social work must support and facilitate a vision beyond this crisis – a vision of better, more respectful, and sustainable societies, a vision where our social systems can actively work to eradicate the conditions that have led to the severe consequences of this disease. Social workers are engaged all over the world in carrying out what can be seen as their responsibilities to save the world from the pandemic by making all the difference they can. This is truly our role as social workers. Our Social Work Code of Ethics obligates us to practice our social work values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). Social workers can make a huge impact at the administrative levels as well as the fieldwork levels, carrying out their role in providing service and advocacy. There is no doubt that the social workers' fraternity will come through in this situation as it has in others and will help the profession overcome the COVID-19 crisis.

### **References**

- Andrews, C. M., Darnell, J. S., McBride, T. D., & Gehlert, S. (2013). Social work and implementation of the Affordable Care Act. *Health & Social Work, 38*(2), 67–71.
- Bhatt, S. (2020). *Social work education not profession: A response*. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340448782\\_Social\\_work\\_education\\_not\\_profession\\_A\\_response](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340448782_Social_work_education_not_profession_A_response)
- Carlucci, K. M. (2020). The art of adaptability—the social worker's superpower. *The New Social Worker*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/adaptability-social-worker-superpower/>
- Fraser, M. W., Lombardi, B. M., Wu, S., Zerden, L. D., Richman, E.L., & Fraher, E.P. (2018). Integrated primary care and social work: A systematic review. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 9*, 175–215.
- Grobman, L. M. (2020). The importance of human relationships in a time of human distancing.

- The New Social Worker*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworker.com/extras/social-work-month-2020/world-social-work-day-2020-human-relationships-social-distancing/>
- NAPSWI. (2020). *COVID-19 Mental Health Resource*. Retrieved from [http://www.napswi.org/pdf/covid-19\\_mental\\_health\\_resource.pdf](http://www.napswi.org/pdf/covid-19_mental_health_resource.pdf)
- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *NASW code of ethics*. Washington, DC: Author.
- NIDA. (2020, April 6). COVID-19: Potential implications for individuals with substance use disorders [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/03/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>
- Wickramanayake, J. (2020). Coping with COVID: A webinar series on young people and mental health. [Webinar]. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2020/04/copingwithcovid-a-webinar-series-on-young-people-and-mental-health/>
- Zerden, L. S., Lombardi, B. M., & Jones, A. (2019). Social workers in integrated health care: Improving care throughout the life course. *Social Work in Health Care, 58*(1), 142–149.