



# Systematic Thinking on Psychological Crisis Intervention for Major Sudden Infectious Diseases — Taking the Sudden Outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic as an Example

Xinglin Li\*, Li Liu, Xuehua Wu, Haiyan He, Rui Chen

Sichuan College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Mianyang 621000, Sichuan, China

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**Abstract:** The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound psychological impact on the population, necessitating a more scientifically oriented role for psychological crisis intervention within the anti-pandemic system. Drawing upon the principles of system theory, including influence, growth, resources, cooperation, and openness, this paper elucidates the ideas and perspectives that should be embraced in order to enhance psychological crisis intervention during an pandemic situation like COVID-19. These insights aim to facilitate more effective implementation of such interventions.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, psychological crisis, intervention system thinking

## 1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has swept across the nation, it has not only posed significant challenges to people's daily lives but also continuously tested the resilience of public psychological defenses. Confronted with the suddenness, infectivity, lethality, and uncertainty surrounding treatment methods for this pandemic, coupled with the incessant influx of online information, people at all levels are prone to experiencing stress reactions in terms of cognition, psychology, physiology, and behavior. These reactions include emotional numbness, anxiety disorders, mental breakdowns as well as depression among infected patients; while frontline medical staff face immense relief pressure leading to psychological and physical exhaustion along with self-blame tendencies, heightened tension levels and pessimistic outlooks. In fact, no one can remain unaffected by this pandemic. Public inquiries related to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic have revealed common responses such as anxiety disorders, depression symptoms, insomnia issues, anger outbursts, feelings of helplessness along with various physical ailments among those seeking consultation services. Therefore, at times of major public health crises like these, in addition to combating the virus itself in order to save lives, it is equally crucial that we provide warm-hearted and compassionate psychological assistance interventions tailored towards diverse populations and individuals.

A positive, peaceful, and rational attitude can facilitate a more effective societal response to the pandemic situation. Consequently, under the unified command of the Central Leading Group for Response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the country issued a Notice on Guiding Principles for Emergency Psychological Crisis Intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasized the need to enhance local psychological rescue teams' establishment in order to guide and standardize scientifically sound psychological crisis intervention efforts related to COVID-19. These measures aim at providing psychological intervention services for affected persons, mitigating potential psychological interference and harm caused by the pandemic, as well as fostering social harmony and stability.

Scientific prevention and control, along with precise policy implementation, serve as the fundamental principles for combating pandemics and are equally applicable to psychological crisis intervention within the context of COVID-19. To enhance its effectiveness during the pandemic, it is essential to integrate pandemic-related psychological intervention practices and relevant supervision in Sichuan through a systematic thinking approach. The concept of a systemic view encompasses the interconnectedness between individuals, events, society, and nature while acknowledging the interrelationships and interactions among various systems. It serves as both a theoretical framework and methodology that can guide our cognitive processes and actions [3] [4].

## 2. Observing the psychological effects brought about by the current COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the system's impact

With the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, several provinces have implemented first-level responses to major public health emergencies, indicating that the pandemic has wide-ranging and profound impacts across personal systems,

microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems [5]. Without exception, all these levels have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to be impacted for an extended period. From a psychological perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a substantial test for the nation as its ability to prevent and respond directly influences the public's psychological well-being. Inadequate or improper prevention measures can induce psychological panic among the population. However, considering the current situation under strong leadership from both Party and national authorities, appropriate prevention policies have been introduced. These encompass not only effective control measures against COVID-19 transmission but also comprehensive medical treatment strategies along with promotion efforts aimed at maintaining national morale amidst potential future challenges affecting people's mental states.

However, the psychological impact and destructive power of the pandemic itself on the public cannot be overlooked. The majority of people seeking consultation through the COVID-19 Psychological Assistance Hotline organized by West China Hospital and professional supervisors expressed concerns related to catastrophic cognition, anxiety, fear, helplessness, hypochondriasis, anger or addictive behavior induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, there was a notable increase in patients with pre-existing psychological disorders such as generalized anxiety and obsessive-compulsive symptoms seeking assistance due to exacerbated symptoms caused by the pandemic environment. These observations highlight that outbreaks of pandemics inevitably induce varying degrees of psychological changes among the general population including diminished control, loss of security, and subsequent stress reactions and behaviors. Nevertheless, without a scientific understanding and comprehension of these phenomena among the public can lead to erroneous analysis and judgments which may amplify anxiety levels and tension while potentially triggering panic-driven behaviors. This is particularly concerning in today's era dominated by internet connectivity where unscrupulous persons exploit public fears surrounding COVID-19 to disseminate false information causing disturbances such as rumors about "Academician Zhong Nanshan being infected" or claims that "the virus can be transmitted through ocular contact". Such misinformation disrupts societal harmony impeding effective anti-pandemic measures thereby undermining social stability.

Therefore, it is imperative for the nation to prioritize the psychological ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to fortifying social mentality, integrating psychological crisis intervention into the pandemic prevention and control system is crucial in addressing individual-level psychological impact and aiding in stabilizing societal and public sentiment. Under the centralized coordination of the National Health Commission, this endeavor has been promptly organized and implemented. Taking into account the establishment of psychological assistance hotlines in Sichuan as an illustrative example, various authoritative institutions within the province have effectively established comprehensive systems, formed dedicated organizations, executed proactive measures, and actively deployed professional teams to engage in pandemic-related psychological intervention work aligned with objectives, principles, and requirements outlined by these assistance hotlines.

### **3. Conducting psychological crisis intervention work from a systematic classification perspective**

Before conducting psychological crisis intervention work, it is essential for psychological intervention personnel to possess a clear awareness. Among the various population systems impacted by the pandemic, only a minority of people necessitate emergency intervention. Even if most people experience traumatic reactions, they still exhibit normal responses in abnormal circumstances, which also offer certain protective effects. With the amelioration of the pandemic situation, reasonable self-adjustment and support from social resources enable many persons to gradually progress towards psychological adaptation. Consequently, psychological intervention workers should proactively assess the mental well-being and safety of the population, differentiate those genuinely requiring assistance based on evaluation outcomes, and refrain from approaching their work with an assumption that all populations require intervention.

Psychological interveners providing assistance need to categorize the population based on the extent of impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, there are six categories of affected persons: confirmed patients, medical and related personnel, individuals associated with patients such as family members, colleagues or friends, those who prefer not to seek medical treatment publicly, susceptible populations and the general public [7]. Subsequently, targeted interventions will be implemented based on specific mentalities of each population type while taking into account factors such as age, gender and cultural background along with one's experiences and types of psychological stress reactions in order to effectively assist others. For instance, feedback from doctors participating in psychological emergency work on the front line indicates that young COVID-19 patients have more negative attitudes compared to elderly ones with mild-to-moderate symptoms. This could be attributed to different crisis experiences encountered by various age groups leading to significant differences in mindset when viewing crises.

Furthermore, psychological aid providers should also categorize and address persons based on their psychological response stages. Following significant stress events, most persons typically undergo three phases: the acute phase, early shock phase, and recovery phase [8]. It is crucial to tailor psychological intervention methods for each stage instead of employing a one-size-fits-all approach to manage all pandemic-related psychological stress reactions, as this may have adverse effects. Currently, the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic remains ongoing, with various groups of people still in the initial and intermediate stages. Therefore, intervention services should primarily focus on stabilizing emotions, enhancing feelings of security, exploring available resources, and providing practical assistance. For persons who may encounter traumatic experiences during this period, systematic treatment should be implemented in later stages [8].

#### **4. Conducting psychological crisis intervention work from a systematic growth perspective**

When conducting specific psychological crisis interventions, it is imperative for psychological aid providers to maintain a positive belief that despite the inevitability of unpredictable crises, they present opportunities for growth and development. Throughout history, any system that has successfully navigated through crises - be it a person, family, group, country or society - has experienced growth and advancement at various levels. Taking the COVID-19 pandemic as an example, effective management of the crisis can enhance the population's ability and quality in responding to such situations on a macro scale. It can also elevate scientific research capabilities and foster a balanced approach towards human-nature relationships. At an individual level, personal systems are likewise enhanced through improved experience and crisis response capacities [10]. Therefore, as psychological interveners, apart from alleviating stress responses and addressing other concerns of those seeking assistance, it is crucial to possess discerning eyes that actively observe them. By employing professional attitudes and technical methods during hotline assistance sessions, every seeker should be able to perceive confidence, strength and hope for personal growth throughout the process of psychological support. The author employs techniques such as active listening, empathy-building exercises questioning strategies empowerment approaches transformational practices stability promotion normalization discussions goal-oriented conversations encouragement towards action-taking in order to assist callers in discovering their own inner resilience while effectively perceiving and managing their unique stress reactions.

#### **5. Implementing effective psychological crisis intervention work from a systematic resource perspective**

Psychological interveners aiming to assist helpers in effectively managing psychological crises and facilitating personal growth must activate and establish connections with available resources. In essence, they acknowledge the potential resources and strengths within helpers, helping them harness these assets. The initial step involves activating the existing internal and external resources of seekers that may have been overlooked or unknown to them. Internal resources encompass one's own cognitive abilities or past experiences in crisis management, while external resources stem from the support and assistance provided by significant others or social entities such as parents, friends, classmates, colleagues, educational institutions, companies, communities, etc. For instance, those seeking help for insomnia triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic can draw inspiration from their previous encounters with insomnia and explore successful examples and methods employed during those instances. Furthermore, there are avenues to develop accessible resources that can be utilized by helpers. These encompass information resources, material provisions, and spiritual support which may not readily come to mind or be obtained without guidance from interveners. To illustrate this point further: those experiencing excessive tension due to suspecting a COVID-19 infection can alleviate their distress through interventions such as education on COVID-19 knowledge dissemination techniques promoting psychological stability or recommendations from healthcare professionals leading to a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19. This highlights the necessity for psychological interveners to possess comprehensive mastery over objective authentic authoritative resource systems enabling them to better support callers.

#### **6. Conducting psychological crisis intervention work from a systematic perspective of cooperation**

To achieve ultimate victory in the fight against the pandemic, it is imperative to establish close connections and collaborations across multiple systems, fields, and departments. Therefore, maintaining a closely cooperative relationship with other systems becomes an essential prerequisite for effectively carrying out psychological crisis intervention. At the onset of the pandemic outbreak, only when various security systems that safeguard people's lives and safety are firmly established and efficient can the psychological crisis assistance system intervene more effectively. As the battle

against the pandemic progresses, psychological crisis assistance also assumes an increasingly pivotal role in stabilizing social attitudes and responding adeptly to this global health crisis. Furthermore, within the framework of psychological intervention system, it is crucial to foster a mutually supportive alliance relationship while establishing a professional team comprising leadership group, expert group, and volunteer group (including doctors, psychologists professionals social workers volunteers etc.) who collaborate harmoniously to collectively accomplish diverse tasks related to psychological assistance amidst COVID-19. Currently, under the unified coordination of government leaders, the psychological expert group has conducted several professional training and supervision sessions for the established psychological service team through various communication channels, thereby enabling the service team to carry out their work under the guidance of professional institutional organizations. Simultaneously, during the supervision process, the expert group will also analyze and summarize advancements in frontline psychological services and provide evidence-based recommendations to assist the leadership group in establishing future work deployment.

## 7. Viewing Psychological Crisis Intervention from a Systematic and Open Perspective

As a psychological crisis intervener, it is crucial to adopt an open perspective towards oneself and the challenges encountered in this line of work. Timely psychological intervention serves as a significant protective measure for mitigating adverse reactions during crises; therefore, interveners must conscientiously carry out their responsibilities. However, it should be acknowledged that psychological crisis intervention does not always yield immediate solutions to any person's problems. Moreover, within the specific rescue process, helpers may discover that many of their own issues are unrelated to their professional role. When confronted with such situations, it is common for helpers to experience suspicion, helplessness, or even guilt. In these instances, it becomes essential to remind oneself about maintaining an open and rational outlook on both assisting others and personal well-being while relinquishing any sense of omnipotence or expert identity. Recognizing the limitations inherent in helping others without expecting excessive effectiveness [11] is vital while also remembering one's identity as an ordinary person. Additionally, constant self-awareness is necessary; when faced with confusion or uncertainty, reminding oneself that doing what can be done within one's capabilities constitutes the best outcome rather than attempting everything at once is important. Lastly, while wholeheartedly attending to those seeking help, self-care should not be neglected—establishing internal boundaries and reasonably organizing service hours along with maintaining a regular daily routine are imperative steps towards consistently providing effective assistance to others.

Although it is not feasible to fully resolve all the challenges faced by ones seeking assistance, given the systemic nature of psychological responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, comprehending the role of diverse counseling theories and technologies in addressing psychological crises aids in developing an integrated perspective towards understanding stress responses triggered by this global health crisis and identifying systematic solutions. Moreover, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, various schools and approaches have interacted and collided, giving rise to a wave of psychologically counseling characterized by systematic thinking [12].

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