

## The Suno India Show

### Dealing with Post-COVID mental health issues

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**Host:** Dr. Kaustubh also is a psychiatrist by training. And he is a practicing Psychiatrist in Pune since the last 15 years. He has a special interest in common mental health issues like depression and anxiety. He also has interest in community mental health research ethics in research and rights-oriented clinical practice. He works as a senior research fellow at Center for Mental Health Law and Policy, Indian Law Society Pune. He co-leads a large community based mental health intervention called Atmiyata. He's also completed the international Diploma in mental health, human rights law at Indian Law Society. So thank you very much. And welcome, Dr. Kaustubh, would you like to sort of start off by maybe telling us a bit about what depression is? And what is anxiety? And what is the difference between the two or maybe the commonalities also?

**Dr. Kaustubh:** I think to start with depression and anxiety, I think these are common terms which are used many times by people referring to mental issues or mental conditions, health conditions also refer to them directly as depression and anxiety. And that's why I think it's, it's important to understand the difference and, and the difference is important because I think they're, you know, the course of maybe the treatment or therapy varies with both these conditions and plus the kind of self care which you have to take also varies, but basic difference between these two, though they are both basically what we call them as a common mental health disorders. By that I mean that they are very frequently occurring, they are very common and they can basically, you know, happen with anyone around us. So, nobody is immune to depression and anxiety to be specific. Depression at its core basically has, you know, classically three sets of important issues or symptoms, which is basically low or sad mood. So, your emotions or your mood is low and sad. The second important point is having a lack of energy or fatigue and lack of interest, these are the second when I say lack is the reduced energy interest rather than lack. And the third point is, you know, the thought process which is very typically in depression. There is what we call a triad of thoughts, which is helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. So, these are the three, like what you can say is the characteristic of depression in that sense. On the other side, anxiety is basically all about more of a worry, or more of what you can say the worrisome thoughts about everything, basically, it can be about anything about your own self future, your health, different situations, social situations, performance-related, and so on and so forth. So anxiety is basically the cornerstone of anxiety is worrisome thoughts or negative thoughts in a common term. Again, I don't like negative-positives, but that is how they have been referred to. And the second important point in anxiety is that and that is how I think as you said, we are going to talk today about maybe more we will talk about anxiety today, because anxiety does affect your physical health also, in different ways. When I say it affects your physical health, when you have anxiety, you can have some physical symptoms. And in the longer run, also, anxiety has been known to have an impact on your physical health. Typically, lifestyle issues like hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, and so on. So that anxiety is something which is I believe, that's the difference or there's the cornerstone, another just

difference I wanted to say, and then maybe I'll stop. From the course perspective, commonly depression appears, or you know, people go through depression in a very episodic manner, that means depression comes as episodes and goes. While many times anxiety can stay for a long period. And that's, that's why I think, you know, in the very medical language we say depression. You know, from a disease perspective, depression is more severe than anxiety. But if you say from a duration perspective, that anxiety can stay longer and you know, have kind of a regular kind of track in your brain than depression which may come and go as an episode so that's another important point to remember. But these are the few I think points which are important to understand when we talk about depression and anxiety.

**Host:** Just a follow up question to that. Is it possible for people to have depression and anxiety at the same time?

**Dr. Kaustubh:** Yeah, absolutely means, you know, again, I always, am I always hate diagnosis. Frankly, I don't like diagnosis because there is a different issue about stigma and how diagnosis, you know how diagnosis labels, people and how we know what happens after labeling. That's a separate issue. But from a diagnosis perspective, sorry, so from this question, I think it's a good question. Because I understand that all these are groups of, all these terms of diagnosis are more for clinical terminologies are more for professionals to be specific, obviously, for people, they need to understand what I'm having. That's important, but the more important diagnosis is from a treatment and therapy perspective. That's one point I wanted to make. Second, to answer your question directly, absolutely means depression and anxiety, always, or most of the time goes hand in hand. So that means people who have depression can have anxiety and vice versa. And again, the intensity may vary. Sometimes, some people have high levels of depression and low anxiety. And sometimes people have a, you know, kind of high levels of anxiety and maybe depression is secondary. So it can vary, but commonly, I will say, both coexist, and both basically then become stress to each other in another language. So, because depression makes you inactive, and that inactivity can lead to more anxiety, and anxiety, similarly, can reduce your confidence, and then that can lead to depression. So one of the examples. So that's how I will say, kind of anxiety and depression coexist.

**Host:** Now talking about the post COVID phase, like I said, you know, we have set up this, India COVID, I set up this India COVID survivors group. And I just want to briefly tell why I started this. So I got COVID, last April. And this was during the time when there was hardly, you know, any proper sort of, I mean, tests were difficult to find, you know, we were in the middle of a national lockdown. And post that I actually got to your post COVID complications. But one of the things that I experienced during that 21 day-24 day isolation by myself in the house was severe, more severe anxiety, I did not like the isolation, I'm a very social person. By nature, I think all of us are, but, and I just could not cope. And one of the things that I noticed was I became very anxious. And a few months later, I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and apart from the whole post COVID complications. And just to sort of shorten a very long story, it probably took like nine months for the doctors to basically find out what is happening within my body physically. And in fact, I was told repeatedly, that is only anxiety, this is nothing else, when

actually there are also actual physical changes manifesting in my brain because of the post COVID complications. So I sort of realized that there was one a mixture of this patients, one being told, you know, being invalidated your experiences being invalidated by doctors saying that this is nothing, you just have anxiety, but also just telling a patient you have anxiety and not helping them out, I feel sort of you know, literally in the ocean, trying to swim by myself. And only after I found a good doctor who figured out what was happening, and you know, could I get the help that I required. And that's because I have the access, and I can sort of fight for myself and advocate for myself honestly, in all honesty, I'm very aware of those privileges, too. And so then I decided, you know, it's one thing to stop sort of share my experience and to start a support survivors group, because the seemed to be like a very recurring experience for many people where people are saying that, you know, we are being told to lose weight, or we are being just being told it's anxiety. So just talking about that, because you also mentioned how anxiety manifests itself in physical forms. Could you sort of talk about this, like, do you think Have you seen that there's an increase in the incidence of these mental health issues? And also, what are some of the factors that lead to these things?

**Dr. Kaustubh:** So if I, maybe I'll just reframe your question basically, maybe we shouldn't discuss the post COVID complication and post COVID as anxiety basically. Yeah. And I think yeah, that's how I will try to pitch it because you know, there are other post COVID issues also. So there is a depression also there is a sleep issues what we are seeing but we may discuss it next as a next question. So yeah, may the commonest form or commonest now issues mental health issues what we are You know, as you said already, that what we are seeing as professionals also is anxiety basically, largely, again, multifactorial, and the list is not exhaustive, what I'm saying but as you said, obviously, the first thing is about quarantine when you get COVID. Before getting COVID obviously, there is anxiety that whether I will get COVID and then whether my family will get COVID and my parents who are old will get COVID. So, so that anxiety always prevails, and it's still there. Third, obviously, anxieties around, you know, basically lockdown impacts of lockdown and lack of maybe lack of, I will say the lack of health system capacity basically to accommodate all people. And that's typically when we have seen particularly in last April and May, when there was a second wave when the way it exhausted our health system and that again creates a lot of anxiety for people still, that whether if I get COVID, I will get proper help then obviously, current time post current time, as you said, long COVID the way COVID then unfolds, it doesn't leave your body, even if you are out of quarantine, when you are out of core physical symptoms of COVID it still there are you know, there is a data which says that it either direct impact on your brain as you're saying or there can be indirect effects of COVID like fatigue, lack of overall energy, and overall the you know, kind of for many people with long COVID particularly what I have also observed or I've seen at least in my experience, there are two three months of almost duration which you know, they continue to have a restricted lifestyle, which definitely impacts you know, their confidence. So, all these factors, I will say, lead to anxiety. Anxiety, you know, at the outset both depression and anxiety, we know, you know, have some amount of physical health issues or a physical impact or impact on your physiology and physical health. Anxiety is more because, you know, anxiety technically has a continuous impact on your physical health, what does that I mean, so, whenever you have a very high levels of anxiety, again, I'm not talking a very mild levels of anxiety, which is a day to day anxiety of

running around, but when you have something which is little longer little you know, something which you continue to think continue to you know, get indulged into for a little longer period maybe three-four weeks continuously you are preoccupied with something then that kind of anxiety definitely in a very biological terms have an impact on your physical health, it can impact your even immunity also it impacts you know, your digestion, it impacts your blood pressure, it can impact your overall temperature regulation to be specific, and so on basically, and it can lead to obviously reduces your pain sensitivity. Another issue commonly known in anxiety is that your pain sensitivity reduces so that you know there is a common issue like a back pain or leg pain, which gets triggered more, or even if you have a history of migraine, then there is a high potential that migraine can increase in intensity. So I think these are the direct physical effects of anxiety. And again, related to more or less post COVID what we are seeing right now, obviously, the other common symptom, I will just say about this and stop and because it's related to again, anxiety is insomnia. So again, what we are seeing is many people who are coming forward, again, multiple factors, as I already said, directly related to COVID, or indirectly related to COVID. But there are a lot of issues with sleep regulation, and having proper sleep. And that that obviously eventually, you know, if you don't have a good sleep for a few days, that's fine. But if you don't have a good sleep for now few weeks, then definitely it interferes with your overall lifestyle. And again, that's why I brought out the sleep issue because again, anxiety and not having sleep is a kind of you know kind of a not a good combination to have for your physical health also, and again, there are a lot of studies from about COVID and sleep, that how good sleep is important. good sleep is important to for a recovery for a full recovery from COVID. And how you know that proper sleep has a good impact on your immunity. And that is how it helps recovery from COVID. So so that's why I think sleep is anxiety and sleep both are important, you know, issues to be tackled. The last sorry, the last point I will mention is definitely the thing that's made very unfortunate obviously being in a part of a medical community the way the response of other health professionals to anxiety is I think I feel always unfortunate with two things obviously, there is a lack of training and awareness about anxiety among other medical professionals. And that's why, you know, they just brush it off saying that it's anxiety and basically saying that this is your weight and you take care of your weight, that kind of thing, as you said, which is completely a not a very, you know, kind of what I will say, not a very good response or a not a very proper response to have. Because what I've seen in my practice, also, it doesn't help frankly, it just increases the, what we call as the multiple doctors, you can say, basically, going to multiple doctors. What I mean by that, if somebody says you have anxiety, then people don't A they don't agree or they don't understand if there is anxiety, then what needs to be done. So, then again, go to another doctor and say the same thing, another doctor also says the same thing, they go to a third doctor, I think what happened with you also the as you said, because then you don't get a solution ultimately, and then you continue to go to different doctors, which unfortunately, again going to increase the burden on health system. So, I believe that there has to be a different response and I hope that doctors will get aware about anxiety, as they show more or at least they know whom to direct at least if they are confirmed, that if there is anxiety. Last point one more I remember as I talk is definitely anxiety and physical health symptoms many times are very similar. So I think you know unless and until you are 100% sure that there is no physical health symptom, you should not be jumping on anxiety and I have seen this many times not now related to COVID. But I have seen this is related to thyroid issues related to many other issues of

you know, stomach or gastric issues, many other issues like arthritis, where, you know, there is a symptoms, which are mimicking anxiety, and they have been brushed off for many years, basically, anemia is a common thing like anemia is missed commonly saying it is just anxiety. And nobody investigates or nobody, you know, believes the physical symptoms. So I think my take always is unless and until you have 100% confidence that this is no, there is no physical health issue, then only you should return it as anxiety and then, you know, take a proper course of action after that. That's what I will say.

**Host:** One of the earlier points that you raised is how you dislike the whole concept of diagnosis and the stigma sort of attached to it. And one of the common things that comes up even when I'm discussing with other people who are having post COVID complications is that, you know, one is that they're not I mean one they're not being believed about their symptoms, but also when they have anxiety and when they're being told anxiety there is some amount of resistance that is coming to actually seek help. So at what point do we does a patient you know, I mean, apart from of course, you're medically ruling out all the possibilities, like you rightly pointed out the thyroid you know, anaemia and so on, at what point should a person take help from a professional say like yourself or a counselor or a psychologist at what point should that happen?

**Dr. Kaustubh:** So, I think there are four to five factors which are very important as we always say in our general mental health and there is a basic data to suggest that also. So first important point is your biological rhythms. So basically when I say biological rhythms, typically sleep and appetite, that's the common thing. So, these are the two things which are affected a lot because of your, you know, kind of a mental health issue or a stress what you are going through, basically, so if your sleep is completely disturbed your as I said, if you are, you know, not able to sleep for two days, then that's a different issue. But if you're not sleeping for three to four weeks, then that's something which you know, needs to then tackle with the professional. Similarly, if you have lost appetite, but you are okay, your energy levels are fine, you're working, okay, you're not losing weight too much, then that's fine. But if the, you know, your lack of appetite is causing a lot of weight loss, and for example, in a month's time, you have lost five to six kgs and there is no physical health issue you have, as I earlier said, then definitely that's something which again, goes to professionals, very clear cut demarcation is if somebody has a severity of symptoms, like whether it's a depression, whether it's anxiety. So in depression severity is generally when you are completely hopeless, helpless, worthless, and maybe you are having suicidal thoughts, then I think that requires professional help. Similarly, in anxiety, if somebody is having, you know, a lot of panic attacks, they are not able to, you know, do anything. It's what we call a completely paralyzing anxiety, then again, you need to go to a professional. The fourth thing I will say any kind of any kind of depression or anxiety which is from a duration perspective, if it is more than two months or three months, so, you have tried your own, you know self care techniques, you have tried all the self help, you may have reached out to support from, you know, friends or families. And, and still, after two-three months, you are not able to get out of it. So the duration wise generally remember, three months, I will say should be the maximum deadline you should have. In three months of self-care if you're not getting out of symptoms of depression and anxiety, it's better to take a professional opinion. Then I will say the important other point is if it is completely, so again, if it is not duration wise, but if depression and

anxiety symptoms are impacting your day to day functioning, so for sometimes what may happen is sometimes the anxiety is so severe that in four weeks, it suddenly you know impacts your day to day functioning so much that you can't go to office or you can't do any work from morning to evening, or you can't do any of your responsibilities, then definitely I think you should seek our help, because there is no point in because then it's a vicious cycle because you're not working, it will increase your distress and anxiety and depression. So these are a few indicators where I believe you should take help. And again from I completely agree that from a diagnosis perspective, and this is again, unfortunately, a lot of people again, may or may not be in this group, but there are a lot of people I know who don't do now Google access to internet, continue to self diagnose themselves with the different conditions. And that's not a healthy thing to do, because again, as I said very clearly, diagnosis is more for professionals and more for you know, clinical terms to be used. So, so, self diagnosis is one thing I will say you should not get into, you should just see your symptoms and then as I said all these criterias and then decide whether to you know, go ahead with any professional. So, that's how I put it.

**Host:** You spoke about self care now, what are some of the things that one can do to deal with anxiety and depression in this post COVID. I mean, the ongoing COVID phase that we are currently in. So, what are some of the tips that you know, somebody can do at home apart from of course, you know, if it gets very severe then they seek professional help, but also what is it that one can do sort of cope?

**Dr. Kaustubh:** So, from a self care perspective, I think there are a few what I can say ground rules are basic rules like what we know and what we have and that holds true for our physical health also, which are basically what you can say which are basically around your daily schedule. So, again, in anxiety, it is very important, how much you can able to carry your daily schedule. So, when I say daily schedule, or a daily activity schedule, that means you know, starting from your getting up time in the morning and then what you are doing throughout the day whether you have scheduled activities throughout the day, you know you have fixed timings not fixed but at least regular timings for your meals and then your sleeping time. So, you know something which is known as a schedule activity or daily activity schedule as we call. So, unless and until you have this and I understand that people who go through anxiety many times their daily activity schedule get disturbed. So as a self care what you should be doing I think and typically in first or second week of anxiety, when anxiety is not that maybe you know at a moderate intensity, it is a minimal or mild you should try to get back to your daily activity schedule as early as possible. I will say particularly for people, you know, like young people, because sometimes with you know, kind of older people or middle-aged people who have a job, maybe that that, you know, kind of that naturally they get into daily activities it will because they have a job it forces them. But for younger people who you know may not have a routine and particularly in COVID times what we are seeing with online education happening there is no strict schedule the young people have and there is a high possibility that your daily activity schedule goes for a toss. You don't sleep at night, you sleep in the daytime, you don't know how to interact with anyone, you don't do any productive work and that has a I think from a self care perspective, I will say this has a huge impact or negative impact on your anxiety. The second point I will say definitely is that you know for getting anxiety you there are reasons you get

anxiety because you are thinking or you are you know getting triggered by something. And it is important I think as a self care for every person to reflect and to understand what are these triggers and then basically either you know, it's typically like we do for our physical health. Try to resolve these triggers by your own or try to address these triggers by your own or either seeker helper immediately if you seek a help either from your partner friends, family members or any anybody you know who you trust, if you seek help and try to get out of this triggers, I think that's a very important I will say a good self care technique, you can you know, immediately have and reduce your anxiety or actually get out of your anxiety. The third I will say, which is common sense is about exercise or either a physical or some form of relaxation exercise, which we know has a direct impact on your anxiety or distress. So, again getting involved into regular physical exercise or having regular relaxation exercise, commonly people term it as a meditation, a very famous term but again relaxation, it's meditation is nothing but relaxation exercise. So, any form of exercise again, many people ask me that only meditation will help. So, again, I say no, it's not the case basically any form of physical exercise and particularly, many times I think people may have experienced that when you are having moderate levels of anxiety, it is difficult to do meditation or relaxation exercise, because you can't focus basically. So, then a physical exercise is always a better way, whatever physical exercise starting from home based exercise or walk, jogging, or you go to gym or you, you know, go to some sports, whatever you like, basically, I think, physical exercise, I will say in self care should be there made it one of the greatest tool, what you can have in your armory is a physical exercise, which can be can, you know, again, I understand there is a issues about consistency with physical exercise, but as much as you can, I think it will be always going to help you for your mental health. Also, that's how I will say, and the fifth I will say in the self care always, you know, I think it's important that as we say, some amount of preparedness as we always feel, again, as as I understand that access to mental health professionals is, you know, is a big issue and largely access is more in urban than in, you know, rural India. But, but at least if people who are from urban India, at least they can have some amount of preparedness when I say preparedness means they should know whom to approach, you know, what has happened over a period of time is we have our family doctor who we approach for our physical health issues, but, again, we don't know whom to approach for our mental health needs, and that that becomes a problem. So I have seen, you know, many people when they reached out to me, they said, yeah, we are trying to reach out to someone for the last month or two months. And this is what I am saying in the city of Pune, with, you know, 200 odd psychiatrists and 500 odd counselors. That's the situation in the city of Pune, and then you can imagine what must be happening in remote areas or in the rural area. So, the point I'm making in the near selfcare, I think it is important that you should have a preparedness, that means you should have contact with professionals, at least even if you don't need them, that's a different issue. But, you know, at least you should know whom to approach if you, you know, reach at that stage. So I will say these are five, five points in self-care, which are important. And it's important that people do apply that another point, obviously, it's obviously it's not a point but, you know, being aware about your mental health, actually, that maybe I have missed, because many times people are very much aware about their physical health issues, but what I have seen that people don't consider mental health as an issue or mental health as a health condition, and they just ignore their mental health symptoms. I think that's another you know, though it's not a self-care technique, but I will say it may be the pre self-care technique, you know, before self-care what

starts is you are aware about your mental health and then only the self care makes sense because if you are not aware, then there is no self-care basically, that's how I think.

**Host:** One of the common symptoms that a lot of patients report COVID and are recovering are experiencing something called as brain fog. Now, how do you differentiate between brain fog and the lack of focus that also comes with anxiety? And I think or are they similar? Or you know, what's the difference from your point of view?

**Dr. Kaustubh:** No, there is a difference when you say lack of concentration, lack of concentration can be you know, due to different issues like as you said already, you know, anxiety and if you have a lot of worry and a lot of thoughts in your mind you can focus in something and second anxiety the lack of concentration can be because of depression can we because you are not sleeping well. Maybe because, you know, our energies are less, you are fatigued, because of COVID again, so, lack of concentration can be because of various issues. Brain fog, I think, is a kind of a different condition completely when I say different condition as in its proper, you know, different mental health issue. There, it can be experienced, again, post-COVID. It's a common thing, but we are noticing earlier also, again, it's related to high levels of anxiety, brain fog more commonly than depression. And when I say brain fog, it's, I think the experience that people always share is there is something which is like they are either blank, they feel. So why, again, the term self-explanatory is a fog basically. So you feel like there is nothing you can think about or you can, you know, don't have anything in your head, basically, it's like completely blank, or you can't do anything. And obviously, in that condition, you can't focus or you don't can't have to pay attention to something. So definitely these both are different conditions, I think. And typically, how do you differentiate? Brain fog is something which many times it does both are episodic. But brain fog is something that may stay a little longer in the daytime, it can occupy slowly more many hours of your day. And you can't get over brain fog. Many times what happens brain fog, you know, stays with you for a little longer, you can just immediately get off. Many times when you have a lack of attention or concentration due to anxiety, you can you are still aware basically, or you are not able to focus and you can, you know, kind of shake yourself up and say, Now let's focus on this task basically. So that's the difference, I will say, again, may clinically, I don't want to say but clinically, brain fog can be kind of dissociation as we always feel. Or maybe it can be something related to depersonalization and realization. These are the clinical terms again for a brain fog, basically, brain fog is more or more or less than a person's term.

**Host:** What helped me when I experienced this kind of anxiety where I'm unable to focus has been coloring. So I basically now taught myself how to color and draw pictures. And I find that more meditative than meditation itself.

**Dr. Kaustubh:** 100% and that's why sorry, sorry that's why I'll say ki you know, this fad or this influence about meditation I think should go means I don't think meditation means that you sit down at one place and you start having those techniques taught by different people. And there we know there are different cults who did you know, do meditation, I think meditation is

something basically your exercise. Can you imagine a physical exercise can be or meditation as you said, coloring can be meditation, gardening can be meditation, cooking can be meditation, your work can be meditation. So meditation is everything. Basically, the principle of, you know, relaxation is when you focus on activity. And when your focus is very good that you are actually enjoying that activity and you are, you know, into that activity completely. I think that is where we know that scientifically, brain-wise, that's the relaxation for your brain. That's how I think it reduces your anxiety.

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