

# Psychological assistance during the coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak in China

Journal of Health Psychology  
1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/1359105320919177

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## Abstract

Disaster psychological assistance has become an important part of the disaster relief system, playing a crucial role in restoring and maintaining emotional stability and security of people and reducing trauma-related stress. As the first country to experience the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), China actively adopted psychological assistance measures in response to the panic caused by the epidemic. These measures are expected to help the Chinese government and governments in other parts of the world to better respond to the outbreaks of COVID-19.

## Keywords

COVID-19, health psychology, mental health care, prevention, psychological assistance, public health

The human response to a crisis, whether caused by war, pandemic or natural disaster, is a strong desire for a return to normalcy: stability, security and equilibrium (Marks, 2018). This crisis response is never more apparent than in response to a virulent pandemic when there is a need for an orderly, systematic and scientifically based service of physical and mental health care. The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, triggered a war with an invisible enemy. A total of 42,000 medical, mental health and psychological staff from all over the country were enlisted to support the population, staff and patients dealing with the epidemic in Hubei province, especially Wuhan. To date, a total of approximately 67,801 patients and members of the public have been assisted by these services.

There is a report that states that mental health care for patients and health professionals directly

affected by the COVID-19 epidemic has been under-addressed (Xiang et al., 2020). However, that suggestion is misleading. In fact, the National Health Commission of China and the Departments of Psychology and Mental Health fully realize the importance of psychological assistance in disasters. Special psychological and psychiatric services have been fully

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implemented to deal with the COVID-19 crisis over the entire country. Chinese mental health care providers have launched psychological ‘first aid’ and mental health care in parallel with the necessary medical action against COVID-19. The ongoing psychological assistance during this outbreak can be summarized on the basis of the following four aspects.

### **Policies and proposals for psychological assistance during the epidemic**

First, the National Health Commission of China (2020a) released guiding principles for emergency psychological crisis intervention for the COVID-19 outbreak on 26 January 2020. Two principles are proposed. The first principle emphasizes the integration of psychological crisis intervention into the overall deployment of epidemic prevention and control. Psychological crisis intervention should be based on the premise of reducing the psychological damage caused by the epidemic and promoting social stability. The second principle recommends that psychological intervention should be implemented based on the characteristics of different populations. Medical staff working in epidemic areas in Hubei and patients diagnosed as critically ill with COVID-19 have been chosen as the first targets of psychological crisis intervention.

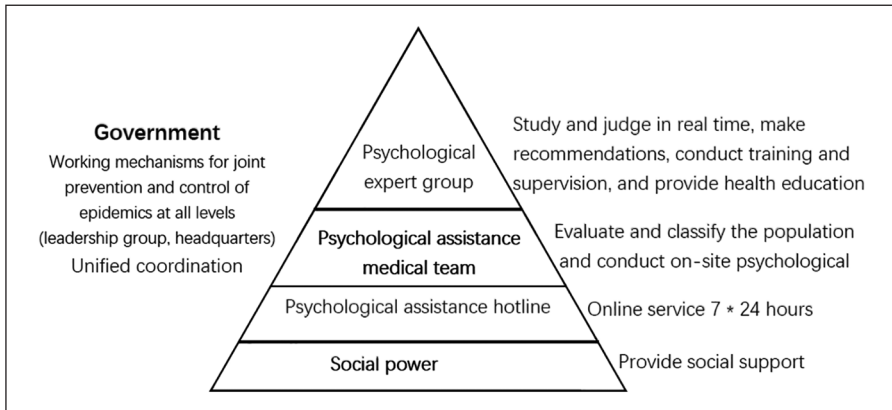
On 2 February 2020, the National Health Commission of China (2020b) issued an announcement about the creation of an outbreak psychological assistance hotline. The announcement requires 31 provinces to create psychological assistance hotlines to respond to the epidemic on the basis of the original psychological assistance hotline. The purpose of this new hotline is to provide psychological support, psychological counselling, crisis intervention and other services for different groups of people during epidemic prevention and control. At the same time, it helps people prevent and reduce the psychological distress caused by the epidemic, find and use social support resources.

Second, two associations composed of professional mental health professionals: the Chinese Psychological Society and the Chinese Association for Mental Health issued proposals to national mental health care workers on 26 January 2020.

The Chinese Psychological Society put forward the proposal, ‘Psychological Assistance is Imperative’, which emphasizes that COVID-19 not only damages people’s bodies but also causes psychological distress including panic in different populations. The Association recommends that mental health professionals participate in psychological assistance in a scientific, orderly and standardized manner. Such psychological assistance includes psychological hotlines, the popularization of disaster rescue science, the preparation of manuals for psychological intervention regarding disaster events and the provision of counselling/treatment.

The Chinese Mental Health Association has released a proposal for psychological counsellors across the country, stating that psychological services are part of crisis intervention. Safety guarantees take precedence over psychological services, which must not affect the saving of lives. Mental health care providers should act as disseminators of scientific psychology knowledge and practitioners of scientific psychology services. They should disseminate effective knowledge and methods for alleviating stress, managing emotions and maintaining mental health through various channels. Whenever possible, the Internet and telephones can be used to carry out psychological services.

Third, on 11 February 2020, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2020) released a notice regarding the improvement of the working conditions of front-line medical staff in the epidemic area, stating that the State Council earnestly cares about the physical and mental health of such staff. The notice stipulates that psychological crisis intervention and psychological counselling for medical staff should be strengthened. Psychological assistance, targeted interventions and psychological counselling should be strengthened to reduce psychological pressure on medical professionals.



**Figure 1.** Organizational structure.

## Guide to psychological assistance/mental health services

The National Health Commission uses diagrams to show how to organize and carry out psychological assistance. The target population is divided into four levels, and targeted interventions are formulated based on the population level. For example, a working framework on how to organize psychological intervention has been developed as follows (National Health Commission of China, 2020a) (Figure 1).

The National Health Commission of China (2020b) also developed a document concerning ‘Guidance for the Psychological Assistance Hotline During the Prevention and Control of COVID-19’. It was recommended that hotline/online work should focus on the principles of ‘adhering to public welfare, professionalism, and abiding by ethics’. Each hotline has at least two seats and provides 24 hours free psychological services in accordance with local public needs.

The Chinese Psychological Society also released guidance concerning ‘Hotline/Online Psychological Counselling Ethics’ emphasizing that psychological assistance for epidemic prevention will be carried out in stages. Psychological assistance should be provided to different groups in accordance with the actual needs.

## The practical progress of psychological assistance during the epidemic

Based on guidance from the government and professional psychological and mental health organizations, psychological assistance for COVID-19-related populations was conducted in an orderly manner.

Six specialized mental health care institutions in China published popular science books on ‘epidemic-resistant psychology’ for different groups within 1 month, such as the books *Guidelines for Public Psychological Self-help and Counselling for COVID-19* (Chinese Mental Health Association, 2020), *Anti-epidemic Relief-Pandemic Psychological Self-help Rescue for All* (Zhao and Liu, 2020) and *Handbook of Psychological Protection For Primary and Middle School Students and Parents during the Epidemic* (Shen and Wang, 2020). Hotline/online mental health services have been widely adopted (Liu et al., 2020). The popularity of the Internet and smartphones provides convenient conditions for the dissemination of resources related to psychological crises to the public. WeChat, livestreaming video and QR code make it possible to deliver psychological intervention resources to people in need through video and audio. Based on the principle of orderly organization, psychological assistance for medical staff in epidemic areas has mostly been carried

out through the Internet and hotlines in the early stages of fighting this epidemic. Many professionals mentioned that they did not need a psychologist but more rest without interruption and enough protective supplies (Chen et al, 2020). E-books and psychological assistance skills are provided to the front-line medical staff in audio format. Some well-known psychologists and psychiatrists in China have also recorded a large number of online video courses to help front-line medical staff alleviate their own disaster stress and deal with patients' common psychological problems (Chen et al., 2020).

### **Introduction of psychological assistance in the Wuhan epidemic area**

There are two types of hospitals in the epidemic area of Wuhan. The first type is a designated hospital that treats patients with moderate to severe illness. The second type is the mobile cabin hospital, which mainly treats patients with relatively mild illness who do not need intravenous fluid replacement.

In the mobile cabin hospital, the target groups for psychological assistance include medical staff and patients. Since such hospitals have been put into use, approximately one to two psychiatrists have been arranged in each area. Psychological support hotlines and WeChat groups composed of social workers and psychological counsellors were established across the country to provide public welfare counselling and social liaison work for both groups. Mental health-related scientific materials, including articles, audio and video and simple psychological measurement self-evaluation tools, are regularly provided to them through WeChat. In addition, face-to-face psychological interventions are also being carried out in an orderly manner. The psychiatrists regularly conducted face-to-face group psychological interventions for medical staff. For patients with COVID-19, psychiatrists usually obtain information about those patients who need psychological intervention from physicians and nurses. Then,

they enter mobile cabin hospitals to provide patients with face-to-face psychological intervention services and counselling. Psychological training for nurses is also underway to improve the ability of front-line nurses in clinical psychological intervention.

As the fight against the epidemic has progressed, more than 500 psychiatrists from all over the country have been sent to Wuhan to provide on-site psychological assistance for front-line medical staff and critically ill patients.

The main problem for medical staff is the emotional response (mainly anxiety and helplessness) caused by the outbreak. Most people have been unable to meet with their families for a long time because they work in isolation wards and they lack sufficient emotional support. Patients are predominantly anxious, including feeling uncertain about their condition, rehabilitation process and future. Psychological intervention for these two groups can be summarized on the basis of the following three aspects. One is to provide psychological education for patients and medical staff, including self-psychological care and relaxation skills. The second is to provide one-on-one psychological counselling for patients and medical staff in need. A QR code for appointment consultation is posted in the medical office and ward of each floor so that counsellors can be found at any time they are needed. Third, when any patient in the ward has a psychiatric emergency, the psychiatrist wears personal protective equipment (PPE) and provides a face-to-face mental assessment and bedside treatment.

In conclusion, under the guidance of the National Health Commission and the Mental Health Association in China, all mental health care workers, including psychological counsellors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists with varying qualifications, are conducting psychological assistance in an orderly manner. Psychiatrists in health institutions, clinical psychologists in educational institutions and psychological counselling and psychotherapy practitioners in social institutions are working together. These measures are expected to help the Chinese government and governments in

other parts of the world to better respond to infectious disease outbreaks.


### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Outstanding Clinical Discipline Project of Shanghai Pudong (PWYgy2018-10) and National Nature Science Foundation of China (funding no. 81301154).

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