

# Journal Pre-proof

Nationwide suicides owing to alcohol withdrawal symptoms during COVID-19 pandemic: A review of cases from media reports

Nabeel Kashan Syed, Mark D. Griffiths



PII: S0022-3956(20)30932-8

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.08.021>

Reference: PIAT 4022

To appear in: *Journal of Psychiatric Research*

Received Date: 8 August 2020

Accepted Date: 14 August 2020

Please cite this article as: Syed NK, Griffiths MD, Nationwide suicides owing to alcohol withdrawal symptoms during COVID-19 pandemic: A review of cases from media reports, *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.08.021>.

This is a PDF file of an article that has undergone enhancements after acceptance, such as the addition of a cover page and metadata, and formatting for readability, but it is not yet the definitive version of record. This version will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form, but we are providing this version to give early visibility of the article. Please note that, during the production process, errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

© 2020 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Title page**

**Nationwide suicides owing to alcohol withdrawal symptoms during COVID-19 pandemic:**

**A review of cases from media reports**

Authors' names and affiliations:

**Nabeel Kashan Syed<sup>a,c\*</sup> & Mark D. Griffiths<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>Pharmacy Practice Research Unit, Department of Clinical Pharmacy, Faculty of Pharmacy, Jazan University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (K.S.A)

<sup>b</sup>Psychology Department, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham, NG1 4FQ| Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom.

**Correspondence:**

nsyed@jazanu.edu.sa, syedahmed381@outlook.com

<sup>c</sup>Current Address:

**\*Nabeel Kashan Syed,**  
Pharmacy Practice Research Unit,  
Department of Clinical Pharmacy, Faculty of Pharmacy,  
Jazan University, K.S.A.  
Phone Number: +966542996815

Orcid I.D: 0000-0003-1315-8985

Letter to the Editor:

**Nationwide suicides due to alcohol withdrawal symptoms during COVID-19 pandemic:**

**A review of cases from media reports**

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; COVID-19 suicides; unavailability of alcohol; alcohol withdrawal symptoms; media reports.

By the first week of August 2020, the novel coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) had spread to over 275 countries, regions or territories, with over 19 million confirmed cases, and over 700,000 confirmed deaths worldwide (Worldometer, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people from all walks of life and all ages (Mamun & Griffiths, 2020a). Anxiety as well as emotional anguish is known to be associated with widespread outbreaks of infectious diseases such as COVID-19 (Montemurro, 2020). In 2003, during the SARS epidemic, social isolation and disengagement amongst the older adult population were reported to be among the probable reasons for an increase in their suicides (Cheung et al., 2008). Strict spatial distancing measures, social isolation, and enforced quarantine can have a negative impact on an individual's mental health. Such seclusion as well as societal disconnect associated with public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, clearly have the potential to impact several indices related to the psychological wellbeing of the general public (Satici et al., 2020).

In India, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a surge in cases of individuals suffering from symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. Sudden and strict movement restrictions along with the closure of shops and bars selling alcohol due to the lockdown meant that alcohol could not be bought. The unavailability of alcohol caused extreme despair among those individuals with alcohol use disorder and pushed a minority of them towards suicide. According to national media reports, there was an

apparent (and unprecedented) increase in the number of suicide attempts and suicides in India because of alcohol withdrawal symptoms.

Consequently, we examined reports of alcohol-related suicides from India that were extracted from recent media reports. The search terms ‘COVID-19 pandemic’, ‘COVID-19 suicides’, ‘unavailability of alcohol’, and ‘alcohol withdrawal symptoms’ were used in the *Google News* search engine to retrieve suicide cases from English language online newspapers from India between March 25 and May 17, 2020 (duration of the national lockdown in India). We were able to retrieve relatively complete details of 27 cases of alleged suicide or suicide attempts. We excluded duplicate reports of the same cases being reported in multiple sources along with the cases of suicide not related to COVID-19, unavailability of alcohol and/or alcohol withdrawal symptoms. These 27 cases are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of alcohol-related suicides during COVID-19 lockdown in India

| Case | Name and age of the victim      | Location and date of suicide               | Gender | Mode of alleged suicide or suicide attempt | Source                          |
|------|---------------------------------|--|--------|--|---------------------------------|
| 1    | Mr. KVS<br>(Age - 38 years)     | Thrissur, Kerala<br>(March, 27)            | Male   | Hanging from a tree                        | <a href="#">The Week (2020)</a> |
| 2    | Name – NR<br>(Age - 50 years)   | Hyderabad,<br>Telangana(March, 27)         | Male   | Jumping from a building                    | <a href="#">The Week (2020)</a> |
| 3    | Mr. M<br>(Age - not reported)   | Kochi, Kerala<br>(March, 27)               | Male   | Not Reported                               | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>  |
| 4    | Tomy Thomas<br>(Age - 50 years) | Dakshina Kannada,<br>Karnataka (March, 28) | Male   | Hanging at his home                        | <a href="#">The Week (2020)</a> |
| 5    | Name – NR<br>(Age - 70 years)   | Kodimbala, Karnataka<br>(March, 28)        | Male   | Hanging from a tree                        | <a href="#">The Week (2020)</a> |
| 6    | Mr. V<br>(Age - not reported)   | Kannur, Kerala<br>(March, 28)              | Male   | Not Reported                               | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>  |
| 7    | Mr. B<br>(Age - not reported)   | Kollam, Kerala<br>(March, 28)              | Male   | Not Reported                               | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>  |
| 8    | Mr. S<br>(Age - not reported)   | Kollam, Kerala<br>(March, 28)              | Male   | Not Reported                               | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>  |
| 9    | Mr. V<br>(Age - not reported)   | Kochi, Kerala<br>(March, 28)               | Male   | Not Reported                               | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>  |
| 10   | Mr. N<br>(Age not reported)     | Kayamkulam, Kerala<br>(March, 28)          | Male   | Consuming shaving lotion                   | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>  |
| 11   | Mr. K K<br>(Age - not reported) | Thiruvananthapuram,<br>Kerala (March, 29)  | Male   | Not Reported                               | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>  |

|       |                                       |   |      |  |                                   |
|-------|---------------------------------------|---|------|--|-----------------------------------|
| 12    | Mr. S<br>(Age - 32 years)             | Thrissur, Kerala<br>(March, 29)                   | Male | Drowning in river  | <a href="#">The Week (2020)</a>   |
| 13    | Mr. N<br>(Age - 34 years)             | Thrissur, Kerala<br>(March, 29)                   | Male | Drinking aftershave lotion   | <a href="#">The Week (2020)</a>   |
| 14    | Name not reported<br>(Age - 46 years) | Kottayam, Kerala<br>(March, 29)                   | Male | Attempted to commit suicide by jumping from a building, but survived             | <a href="#">News18 (2020a)</a>    |
| 15    | Mr. V<br>(Age - 62 years)             | Hyderabad, Telangana<br>March, 29                 | Male | Hanging at his home  | <a href="#">Newslick (2020)</a>   |
| 16    | Name and age not reported             | Hyderabad, Telangana<br>(Date of suicide - NR)    | Male | Cutting his wrists   | <a href="#">Newsmeter (2020a)</a> |
| 17    | Mr. D<br>(Age - 45 years)             | Sangareddy, Telangana.<br>(March,30)              | Male | Hanging at his residence   | <a href="#">Newslick (2020)</a>   |
| 18    | Mr. S. V<br>(Age - 58 years)          | City NS,<br>Telangana<br>(March,30)               | Male | Electrocuting himself by climbing onto an electricity transformer                | <a href="#">Newslick (2020)</a>   |
| 19    | Mr. C. R<br>(Age - 45 years)          | Vikarabad, Telangana<br>(March,30)                | Male | Drowning in a well   | <a href="#">Newslick (2020)</a>   |
| 20,21 | Names not reported<br>(Two cases)     | Jorhat, Assam<br>(Date of suicide - NR)           | Male | Consuming a concoction of water and soft drinks spiked with industrial chemicals | <a href="#">News18 (2020b)</a>    |
| 22    | Name not reported<br>(Age - 40 years) | Kothur, Telangana<br>(Date of suicide - NR)       | Male | Electrocuting himself  | <a href="#">News18 (2020b)</a>    |
| 23    | Mr. S<br>(Age - 33 years)             | Chengalpattu district,<br>Tamil Nadu<br>(April,3) | Male | Consuming a mixture of varnish and paint   | <a href="#">India.com (2020)</a>  |
| 24    | Mr. P<br>(Age - 25 years)             |   |      |  |                                   |
| 25    | Mr. S<br>(Age - 25 years)             |   |      |  |                                   |
| 26    | Mr. E. B<br>(Age - 35 years)          | Coimbatore,<br>Tamil Nadu (April,11)              | Male | Consuming hand sanitizer   | <a href="#">News18 (2020c)</a>    |
| 27    | Mr. B<br>(Age - not reported)         | Hyderabad, Telangana<br>(May, 4)                  | Male | Hanging at his home  | <a href="#">Newsmeter (2020b)</a> |

\*Only the initials of the deceased are mentioned for ethical reasons. NR - Not Reported

A report published in the Economic Times (2020) claimed that a round 45 cases of alleged suicide to have taken place during the lockdown related to alcohol withdrawal symptoms. However, we were only able to retrieve relatively complete details of 27 such cases. All the 27 reported victims of alleged suicide or suicide attempts were males (n=27), with ages ranging from 25 to 70 years (although a few

ages were not reported). All of the aforementioned cases were from the states of Kerala (n=11), Karnataka (n=2), Telangana (n=8), Tamil Nadu (n=4), and Assam (n=2). All were alleged cases of completed suicide (n=26), except one case from Kottayam, Kerala, which was an alleged suicide attempt. Consumption of a poisonous liquid was the most common mode of alleged suicide (n=8). Hanging (n=6), electrocution (n=2), cutting of wrists (n=1), drowning (n=2), and jumping from a building (n=1) were the other reported modes of alleged completed suicides. The fact that more suicides were due to the consumption of a poisonous liquid raises the question of whether the individuals drank the liquid thinking that it contained alcohol or an alcohol equivalent (meaning that it was death by misadventure) or whether it was a genuine suicide. There were some further cases from Kerala, as reported by News18 (2020a) wherein the mode of alleged suicide was not reported (n=6). Moreover, there was just one case of attempted suicide wherein the victim allegedly tried to commit suicide by jumping from a building, but survived.

A recently conducted retrospective study by Dsouza et al.(2020) examining aggregated cases of alleged suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic in India found that one of the reasons of committing suicide during the lockdown was the non-availability of alcohol. However, they reported only two such cases of alleged suicide out of 72, wherein non-availability of alcohol led the individuals to commit suicide. Additionally, a study conducted by Ahmed et al.(2020) also noted inaccessibility of alcohol along with alcohol withdrawal symptoms as being a reason for alleged suicide and suicide attempts during the lockdown. There have been many explanations for COVID-19-related suicides in previous studies including (i) the fear of contracting the disease, (ii) the fear of spreading the disease to others (e.g., family, friends, hospital patients), (iii) mental instability caused by financial problems (e.g., losing job, not being able to earn money during lockdown, etc.), (iv) depression caused by social isolation, quarantine, etc., (v) extreme difficulties in accessing food, (vi) xenophobia, and (vii) being unable to buy alcohol (Dsouza et al., 2020; Goyal et al., 2020; Mamun & Griffiths, 2020a; Mamun & Ullah, 2020;

Thakur & Jain, 2020). The stress associated with unemployment, feelings of despair, despondency, vulnerability, unable to provide sufficient support to one's family, have also been reported as increasing the likelihood of suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and suicide itself (Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Griffiths & Mamun, 2020; Mamun & Ullah, 2020). The movement restrictions associated with the nationwide lockdown in India has had serious repercussions for individuals with addiction problems. The unavailability of recreational drugs, alcohol and other addictive substances has caused psychological anguish among such individuals and in extreme cases, has led them to self-harm. Similar cases of self-harm and suicide associated with addiction to online videogames have also been reported (Mamun & Griffiths, 2019).

Some potential limitations include the case reports being taken from media reports which cannot always be independently verified. Also, we only examined stories from Indian news published in the English language which means cases not published in English could have been missed. The cases reported here come from only a few Indian states and they are unlikely to constitute the incidence of all cases of suicide related to alcohol withdrawal symptoms caused by the national lockdown. Also, given the stigma attached to suicide in south Asian countries, many cases may go unreported. (Griffiths & Mamun, 2020; Venkatesh et al., 2015).

Preserving and safeguarding the psychological wellbeing of the general population in India is as significant as controlling the disease itself. Like Cheung et al. (2008), we also recommend that particular care, attention, and emphasis should be paid to the economically vulnerable as well as those with known histories of addiction and mental disorders, to help them control their fears and anxiety for the complete duration of the pandemic, in order to prevent any needless suicide-related loss of human life.

### **Financial disclosure**

The authors declare no sources of funding.

### **Declaration of conflict of interest:**

With regards to the above article the authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **Acknowledgements**

The corresponding author would like to express his heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Zia Nadeem (Consultant Psychiatrist, St John's Hospital, Livingston, Scotland) for his expert advice in the write-up. The author would also like to thank Prof. Zamri Chik, Dr. Pallela Ravishaker, Prof. Otilia Banji and Prof. David Banji for their continued guidance throughout his career and also during this work.

### **References**

Ahmed, S., Khaium, M.O., Tazmeem, F., 2020. COVID-19 lockdown in India triggers a rapid rise in suicides due to the alcohol withdrawal symptoms: Evidence from media reports. *Int. J. Soc. Psychiatry* 002076402093880. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020938809>.

Bhuiyan, A.K.M.I, Sakib, N., Pakpour, A.H., Griffiths, M.D., Mamun, M.A., 2020. COVID-19-related suicides in Bangladesh due to lockdown and economic factors: Case study evidence. *Int. J. Mental Health Addict.* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00307-y>. Epub ahead of print.

Cheung, Y.T., Chau, P.H., Yip, P.S.F., 2008. A revisit on older adults suicides and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in Hong Kong. *Int. J. Geriatr. Psychiatry* 23, 1231-1238. <https://doi.org/10.1002/gps.2056>.



Dsouza, D. D., Quadros, S., Hyderabadwala, Z. J., & Mamun, M. A., 2020. Aggregated COVID-19 suicide incidences in India: Fear of COVID-19 infection is the prominent causative factor. *Psychiatry Research*, 290, 113145. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113145>.

Goyal, K., Chauhan, P., Chhikara, K., Gupta, P., Singh, M.P., 2020. Fear of COVID 2019: first suicidal case in India!. *Asian J. Psychiatry* 49, e101989. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.101989>.

Griffiths, M.D., Mamun, M.A., 2020. COVID-19 suicidal behavior among couples and suicide pacts: Case study evidence from press reports. *Psychiatry Res.* 289, 113105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113105>.

India.com (2020). Desperate For Alcohol Amid Lockdown, 3 Men in Tamil Nadu Die After Drinking Paint Varnish. <https://www.india.com/news/india/craving-alcohol-amid-lockdown-3-men-in-tamil-nadu-die-after-drinking-paint-varnish-3992726/> (Accessed 3 August 2020).

Montemurro N. (2020). The emotional impact of COVID-19: From medical staff to common people. *Brain, behavior, and immunity*, 87, 23–24. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.03.032>.

Mamun, M.A., Griffiths, M.D., 2019. The psychosocial impact of extreme gaming on Indian PUBG gamers: The case of PUBG (PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds). *Int. J. Mental Health Addict.* Epub ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00102-4>.

Mamun, M.A., Griffiths, M.D., 2020a. First COVID-19 suicide case in Bangladesh due to fear of COVID-19 and xenophobia: possible suicide prevention strategies. *Asian J.Psychiatr.* 51, e102073. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102073>.

Mamun, M.A., Ullah, I., 2020. COVID-19 suicides in Pakistan, dying off not COVID-19 fear but poverty? – The forthcoming economic challenges for a developing country. *Brain Behav. Immun.* 87, 165–168. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.028>.

News18 (2020a). A Different Tragedy Strikes Kerala During COVID-19 Lockdown Due to Non-Availability of Alcohol. <https://www.news18.com/news/india/a-different-sort-of-tragedy-strikes-kerala-during-covid-19-lockdown-due-to-non-availability-of-alcohol-2556049.html> (Accessed 3 August 2020).

News18 (2020b). Amid Coronavirus Lockdown, States Across India Witness Surge in Suicide Cases Due to Alcohol Withdrawal Symptoms. <https://www.news18.com/news/india/amid-coronavirus-lockdown-states-across-india-witness-surge-in-deaths-due-to-alcohol-withdrawal-symptoms-2561191.html> (Accessed 3 August 2020).

News18 (2020c). Unable to Get Alcohol in Lockdown, Tamil Nadu Man Dies After Consuming Hand Sanitiser. <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/unable-to-get-alcohol-in-lockdown-tamil-nadu-man-dies-after-consuming-hand-sanitiser-2575487.html> (Accessed 3 August 2020).

Newsmeter (2020a). Liquor ban spurs suicides, withdrawals and bootlegging in Telangana. <https://newsmeter.in/liquor-ban-spurs-suicides-withdrawals-and-bootlegging-in-telangana/> (Accessed 4 August 2020).

Newsmeter (2020b). Unable to get liquor, head constable commits suicide in Hyderabad. <https://newsmeter.in/unable-to-get-liquor-head-constable-commits-suicide-in-hyderabad> (Accessed 4 August 2020).

Newsclick (2020). COVID-19 Lockdown: At least 25 dead owing to alcohol unavailability across Telangana. <https://www.newsclick.in/COVID-19-Lockdown-25-Dead-Owing-Alcohol-Unavailability-Telangana> (Accessed 5 August 2020).

Satici, B., Saricali, M., Satici, S.A., Griffiths, M.D., 2020. Intolerance of Uncertainty and Mental Wellbeing: Serial Mediation by Rumination and Fear of COVID-19. *Int. J. Ment. Health Addict.* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00305-0>.

Thakur, V., Jain, A., 2020. COVID 2019-suicides: a global psychological pandemic. *Brain, Behav., Immun.* <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.04.062>. Epub ahead of print.

The Economic Times (2020). Suicide leading cause for over 300 lockdown deaths in India, says study. [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/suicide-leading-cause-for-over-300-lockdown-deaths-in-india-says-study/articleshow/75519279.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/suicide-leading-cause-for-over-300-lockdown-deaths-in-india-says-study/articleshow/75519279.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst) (Accessed 5 August 2020).

The Week (2020). Tiplers in trouble: How lockdown has triggered an unprecedented crisis, suicides - <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/03/31/tiplers-in-trouble-how-lockdown-has-triggered-an-unprecedented-crisis-suicides.html> (Accessed 5 August 2020).

Venkatesh, B.T., Andrews, T., Mayya, S.S., Singh, M.M., Parsekar, S.S., 2015. Perception of stigma toward mental illness in South India. *J. Family Med. Prim. Care* 4 (3),449–453. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.161352>.

Worldometer (2020). Coronavirus cases. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (Accessed 6 August 2020)

Journal Pre-proof