

COVID-19 AND MENTAL HEALTH

THE POST-PANDEMIC PANORAMA

Fear, anxiety, isolation, stress, loneliness, burnout, depression, insecurity, and disengagement are just some of the mental health concerns of the global population as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ There is precedent for this; previous outbreaks of highly communicable diseases such as SARS led to reports of anxiety, irritability, fear, confusion, and emotional exhaustion.² Fear of contracting the virus, feelings of isolation during lockdowns, anxiety concerning loved ones, and burnout related to upended working situations have been experienced by millions of people worldwide since the pandemic began in late 2019.²

Situations having an impact

There are various elements of COVID-19 and the subsequent measures imposed to mitigate its effects that can provoke psychological problems and have an adverse effect on our mental health.

COVID-19 safety measures and restrictions

Existing and newly created terms have become part of our everyday lexicon over recent months. Isolation requires those unwell or potentially infected to keep themselves separate from others, voluntarily or otherwise. Quarantine refers to restrictions of movements for those who may have caught the virus; on arrival to a country, for example. Shelter-in-place orders, or lockdowns as they have also been called, require citizens to limit movement to essential needs.³ And shielding refers to the extra steps that are recommended for those who are clinically more vulnerable.⁴ All of the above involve a person's separation and isolation from others.

The isolation and protection of older generations in particular has been a priority due to their high risk of severe COVID-19 symptoms upon infection. But lack of social connections is believed to increase the risk of both depression and anxiety among older people, creating cause for concern.⁵ And that is not to say that younger generations are by any means exempt; a 2020 Cigna pre-pandemic loneliness report found that members of Generation Z and millennials were lonelier than their older counterparts.⁶ And recent research suggests that young adults in particular have suffered from the COVID-19 restrictions.^{7,8} The percentage of this demographic reporting loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, substance use, and suicidal thoughts increased during the pandemic.^{8,9}

The effects that isolation can have on both physical and mental health can be expansive, substantial, and long-lasting.² There is high correlation between isolation and loneliness,¹⁰ and when we feel lonely, our body responds in a physical way. Messages sent within our brains provoke the release of both cortisol and adrenaline, which put us into "fight or flight" mode; our standard stress response designed to protect us from danger. When this state is sustained for days or even weeks or months at a time, it can lead to an increased



risk of cardiovascular disease, impaired immunity, and psychiatric conditions.¹¹ Social isolation has therefore been linked to higher mortality rates, increasing risk of death from conditions such as cardiovascular disease and cancer, in similar ways to physical inactivity and obesity.¹² Physical contact is believed to mitigate the adverse effects of loneliness; a 2020 study found that people who had physical contact felt significantly less neglected and reported better heart rate results.¹³ While this can be difficult during a pandemic, particularly for those living alone, there are other measures that can be taken. An understanding of the situation and the reasons for the restrictions; along with partaking in hobbies and exercise, has been found to provide perspective and encourage a practical approach to the limitations in place.¹⁴

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Working situation

For many of us, the pandemic has upended the way we work. For those who continued to go to the workplace, restrictions were implemented and precautionary measures taken. For employees whose offices were closed, our homes became our workplaces; and for others, projects dried up or employment was terminated.

Extensive research confirms that unemployment can cause both psychological and financial trauma; and lead to anxiety and depression.¹⁵ Meanwhile, concerns regarding job instability, along with the clashing of work and home; and the challenge to juggle numerous responsibilities have been seen to have a severe negative impact on mental wellbeing.¹ Healthy working from home setups can be negatively or positively impacted by factors such as the support offered by employers, level of autonomy, non-work socialising, and other demands on time and resources within the home.¹⁶



Burnout, defined as lack of motivation, energy, satisfaction, and efficacy in the workplace in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, has become more prolific during the pandemic.^{1,17,18} Intensified job demands and amplified disengagement have combined with growing feelings of isolation, a decline in wellbeing, and increased stress issues to create an unsurprising increase in feelings of burnout among workers.¹

It is important that the effects caused by the changes in working situation experienced over the last 12+ months are having on our mental health are assessed, and that measures are taken where

appropriate to mitigate negative consequences in the workplace and beyond. As Michelle Leung, HR Officer for International Markets at Cigna, explains: “The future of work would be one where employee wellness becomes a priority. One positive impact of the global pandemic is that it has allowed mental health and wellbeing to rise up the corporate agenda.”

Financial concerns

For some, financial concerns are a day-to-day occurrence. And for many, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing worries, particularly where employment has been terminated or where self-employed professionals have been unable to find work. In the fourth edition of the COVID-19 Global Impact Study, released in December 2020, financial issues were the primary cause of stress among respondents.¹⁹

Lower socioeconomic groups generally report poorer mental health; a trend that begins in childhood and continues into adulthood and into the workplace. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has highlighted the potential impact that the pandemic-provoked economic downturn may have, particularly on those in already precarious financial positions.²⁰ The hardest hit are expected to include low-income groups, women, and young workers, as well as those with pre-existing mental health conditions.²⁰

Accompanying financial support with mental health support may be key in helping the newly unemployed overcome this situation.²¹

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Caregiving

The pandemic has put additional stress on caregivers around the world. For those looking after others, the outbreak of COVID-19 has led to increased risk of exacerbated stress, anxiety, and depression. Additional responsibility, long-



distance caregiving, and concern about the potential implications of the COVID-19 virus can all play a part. Now and always, it is vital that caregivers are supported, both physically and psychologically, and that they are given the time and resources to look after themselves, connect with others in similar situations, and seek support when needed.²²

Bereavement

Losing a loved one is never easy; and during a pandemic, regulations and restrictions can further intensify the situation. Given the highly transmissible nature of the coronavirus, some people have been unable to visit, care for, or say goodbye to loved ones; many have found themselves grieving in isolation; and restrictions have limited grieving rituals. These factors can all have a profound impact on our mental health as we come to terms with losing someone close to us.²³

For those who have lost a loved one to coronavirus, there may be additional trauma. Common reactions and emotions include guilt, distress, and shock, and in some cases, a sense of injustice at someone being taken from them earlier than expected. Seeking comfort from family members, joining online support groups with others who have experienced similar losses, and communicating thoughts and emotions can facilitate the processing of feelings and grief.²⁴

Two-way risk: mental health and COVID-19

A connection between poor mental health and the COVID-19 virus has been made on various levels; not only in terms of virus infection, but also concerning susceptibility to emerging or deteriorating mental health conditions.

Risk factors for mental health conditions

Numerous aspects of the pandemic are contributing to both the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health issues and the emergence of new conditions among the global population. And there are various risk factors that have been identified as increasing a person's risk of anxiety, depression, and symptoms of trauma associated with COVID-19. They include being younger and living in a city, as well as having high levels of concern for personal safety, suffering from pre-existing health conditions, and living with children.²⁵ Research suggests that the impact an infectious disease pandemic can have on human behaviour can in fact alter the course of the pandemic, and therefore ultimately affect mortality rates, essentially becoming a matter of life and death.²⁶



Mental health conditions caused by COVID-19 infection

Initial investigations into people who have recovered from COVID-19 have looked into the prevalence of mental health conditions among these patients. It is understood that suffering from coronavirus during this pandemic has led to risk of symptoms related to stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Studies show a correlation between respiratory symptoms and PTSD; with those suffering more acutely and requiring ventilator support reporting greater levels of PTSD. In one study, a third of those put on a ventilator cited extensive PTSD symptoms.²⁷

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In addition to respiratory and other symptoms, one of the prevalent indicators of contagion of COVID-19 is the loss of taste and/or smell. This can have a profound impact on psychological state. A strong, concerning correlation between loss of taste and smell and major depressive symptoms has recently been identified, particularly among adults between the ages of 40 and 65.²⁸

Neurological complications associated with COVID-19

The virus itself can also cause neurological complications, including delirium, agitation, brain inflammation, nerve damage, and stroke.^{29,30} Initial research suggests that these complications may be caused by the immune system overreacting to the virus within the body and prohibiting blood from flowing to the brain.³⁰ Causes of such complications are being further researched by the medical community, and recommendations have been made for wider initial analysis of symptoms.³¹

The impact of pre-existing mental health conditions

In addition to the mental health concerns arising as a result of the pandemic, experts believe there is a connection between pre-existing mental health conditions and catching COVID-19. There is also discussion regarding whether underlying psychological conditions can lead to more severe clinical consequences and death.²⁹

Mental health services

Mental health needs to be looked after; just as physical health does. And individuals and entities have a role to play in prioritising the world's mental health in a post-pandemic world.

On a personal level

Recent research identified direct correlation between higher levels of coronavirus-related anxiety and physical symptoms, including fatigue, pain, and gastrointestinal issues.³² Looking after ourselves and taking steps to practice self-care are key. Following a healthy lifestyle, with a nutritious diet, plenty of exercise, and sufficient sleep, is a positive step in the right direction. Practising mindfulness, acknowledging gratitude, and seeking social support can also all support positive mental health.³³

Understanding the situation, recognising the need for restrictions, and being aware of our mutual social responsibility can encourage adherence to rules, and relieve some of the associated anxiety and stress. And looking forward, maintaining hope, and thinking of plans for the future have been found to be instrumental in helping us maintain a positive outlook.³⁴

Employer approach

The mental health problems that are expected to emerge as the COVID-19 pandemic eventually draws to a close should be neither underestimated nor ignored. Employers and employees alike have a role to play in prioritising both the physical and mental health of professionals in the workplace.

"In 2020 mental health and wellbeing has become front-of-mind. Looking ahead, it is crucial that we recognise the importance of building one's mental resilience as a key component in achieving positive health outcomes," comments Michelle Leung.



Prioritising employee wellbeing with workplace initiatives doesn't just benefit the individual employees, but also the organisations themselves. In the UK alone, poor mental health was estimated to cost business up to £45 billion a year.³⁵ "Employers now realise that looking after their workforce's health goes well beyond simply providing a traditional health insurance package," continues Michelle. "They recognise that employee mental health can make a huge difference to work performance and productivity."

Pandemic-induced disruption

Extensive disruption to mental health services across the world has been seen as a result of the pandemic. This includes those that focus on vulnerable populations and people with substance dependencies, as well as those undergoing therapy and counselling sessions.²⁹ Virtual telemedicine services have gone some way to bridge the gap, but in doing so have exposed limits in reach and coverage; primarily among those in less technologically-aware and lower socioeconomic groups.^{29,36}

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Opportunity for dialogue

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a handful of silver linings. The opportunity to begin a conversation and facilitate dialogue surrounding mental health may well be one of them. There is still stigma associated with psychological health problems³⁷ and this global pandemic may be our chance to begin to deconstruct this stigma, and pave the way for open, honest conversations about mental health.

In the same way there is a medical need to assess and treat those suffering from long Covid and other physical repercussions of COVID-19, we also need to address both short-term and long-term mental health problems associated with the pandemic. This is vital for the health and wellbeing of society. And not only that; experts believe that psychological conditions provoked by the pandemic have the potential to hinder social and economic progress as we navigate our way out of the current situation.²⁵ And as with the curbing of the spread of the COVID-19 virus itself, the healthy psychological wellness of the world will require a global, united effort.

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