

The impacts of COVID-19 on mental health: Considerations, tips and supports.

Learn facts about the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health and how to reduce these impacts. Pieces of information for the general public.

The COVID-19 virus can cause fatigue and difficulty breathing in persons who contract the virus. However, the current pandemic is affecting the physical health, mental health and the well-being of people everywhere. Because of the pandemic, you may have felt anxiety, sadness or worried about the future, and these are normal feelings. Health care workers who treat people with mental health concerns are thinking about new ways to help. Many people are having these same feelings of worry and sadness, and health professionals will need to be ready to help even more in the coming weeks and months.

Some people have compared this pandemic to a natural disaster. But COVID-19 is not just happening in one place: it is happening all over the world at the same time. **This means there are 4 groups of people who are at risk during the pandemic:**

- people who are infected, or are in contact with them
- people who have other medical problems. These other problems can put their physical and mental health at more risk.
- health professionals, and
- people who follow the news of the pandemic on television, in newspapers, and on social media channels

Quarantine, social distancing and self-isolation are all risks for our mental health. The fears and doubts from these new ways of living can increase and trigger fear, depression and anxiety. There may be a shortage of health professionals due to burnout, mental fatigue and the stigma associated with caring for those with COVID-19. But there are things we can do to help each other.

Some tips for reducing the harmful effects of the pandemic on mental health include:

- **Stay away from fake news or too much screen time focused on the pandemic** You may want to restrict the time spent watching the news.
- **Stay in touch** Try to video-chat or hold group calls with family and friends.
- **Make a new and healthy routine** Be sure to keep regular sleep-wake rhythms and good eating habits to help you stay healthy and active.
- **Look for the positive in the current situation** It is important to remember isolation helps to protect everyone by stopping the epidemic.

- **Ask for professional help if you need it** Please talk to your doctor or therapist if your stress level is getting too high.

The effects of the pandemic on mental health will continue even after it is over. We hope some of the **positive results of this crisis, such as learning to cope, working together, and helping others** as we look ahead forward to returning to more traditional forms of mental health care.

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The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and implications for clinical practice. *European Psychiatry*, 63(1), e32, 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1192/j.eurpsy.2020.35>

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic not only affects physical health, but also mental health and well-being. This has included shifting the priorities of mental health professionals to guarantee care and support to those with ongoing mental health concerns, but also to the broader population suffering from the psychosocial consequences of the pandemic. While comparisons have been made to natural disaster events, the current pandemic represents a new global but potentially covert threat. Accordingly, there are potentially four vulnerable groups: 1) those who have directly or indirectly contacted the virus, 2) those with premorbid vulnerabilities of their physical or mental state, 3) health professionals, and 4) people following the pandemic news on multiple media channels. Of particular concern is the detrimental effect of the pandemic containment measures – that is, quarantine, social distancing, and self-isolation – on mental health. The related fears and uncertainties can exacerbate or trigger fear, depression and anxiety disorders. Health workers may be in short supply because of burnout and mental exhaustion, and the stigma associated with caring for those with COVID-19. The flood of information and misinformation needs to be stemmed, and resources for ongoing mental health services and supports need to be enacted.

Key messages for the general public to reduce the potential burden of the mental health consequences of this pandemic include limiting stress from media over-exposure, reducing isolation, maintaining routine, looking for positive aspects of the current situation, and asking for professional help when needed. The pandemic will end, but its effects on mental health will persist. We look forward to resuming more traditional forms of mental health care, but recognize the resilience and cooperation as positive outcomes of this crisis.

There is a wide consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic not only affects physical health, but also mental health and well-being [1,2]. The current pandemic is changing priorities for the general population, but it is also challenging the agenda of health professionals, including that of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals [3]. Everywhere in the world, psychiatric

clinics are modifying their practice in order to guarantee care and support to persons with mental health problems, but also to those who are not mentally ill and are suffering from the psychosocial consequences of the pandemic. The number of those who will need psychiatric help is going to increase in the next weeks or months, requiring a reconsideration of our current practices. From a psychopathological viewpoint, the current pandemic is a relatively new form of stressor or trauma for mental health professionals [4]. It has been compared with natural disasters, such as earthquakes or tsunamis [5]. But in those cases, the emergencies are usually localized, limited to a specific area and to a given time; people know that they can escape, if they want to or if they have the possibility to do so [6]. It has also been compared with wars and international mass conflicts. But in those circumstances, the enemy is easily recognizable, while in pandemic the “threat” can

be everywhere and it can be carried by the person next to us [7].

We consider that the mental health and psychosocial consequences of the COVID-19

pandemic may be particularly serious for at least four groups of people: (a) those who have been directly or indirectly in contact with the virus; (b) those who are already vulnerable to biological or psychosocial stressors (including people affected by mental health problems); (c) health professionals (because of higher level of exposure); and (d) even people who are following the news through numerous media channels.

The pandemic and the related containment measures—namely quarantine, social distancing, and self-isolation—can have a detrimental impact on mental health. In particular, the increased loneliness and reduced social interactions are well-known risk factors for several mental disorders, including schizophrenia and major depression. Concerns about one’s own health and that of their beloved ones (particularly elderly or suffering from any physical illness), as well as uncertainty about the future, can generate or exacerbate fear, depression, and anxiety. If these concerns are prolonged, they may increase the risk of serious and disabling mental health conditions among adult males and females, including anxious disorders including panic, obsessive–compulsive, stress, and trauma-related disorders. A group at a particularly high risk is represented by infected people, physicians, and nurses working in emergency units and resuscitation departments. It is likely that in the next months —when the pandemic is over—we may have a shortage of health professionals due to burnout and mental exhaustion [8]. Another aspect which should be considered is related to stigma and discrimination toward infected people and their family members.

Fighting social stigma toward those treating and caring for people with COVID-19 should be another priority for mental health professionals in the next months. Finally, Internet is spreading very rapidly a large amount of uncontrolled news. This information overload has been defined “infodemic,” with the risk of fake news running faster than the virus itself, and creating uncertainties and worries. This should be regulated by a continuous interaction with media and also by national regulations. Another consequence of the pandemic on mental health practice may be that psychiatric problems will be considered less important than physical ones. We should continue to advocate for our patients and their caregivers; our patients often need

longterm treatment, continuous support and advices, personal meetings with their physicians or therapists. Their rights to be treated, also in a period of social distancing, should be preserved even though mental health services may be overloaded by a considerable number of requests for psychiatric consultations.

Many of these psychosocial and mental health consequences of the pandemic will have to be addressed by psychiatrists and mental health professionals in the months to come. Most probably we will face an increase of mental health problems, behavioral disturbances, and substance-use disorders, as extreme stressors may exacerbate or induce psychiatric problems. In order to reduce the risk of developing mental health problems, simple advice may be provided to the general population:

1. Limit the sources of stress: to rely on a limited amount of official information sources only and to limit the time of the day devoted to this activity, disregarding those which come from unofficial channels and uncontrolled sources.
2. Break the isolation: to increase the communication with friends, family members, and loved ones, even if at a distance. Video-chat or group calls with family members may help to reduce loneliness and precariousness. In case of insufficient social network, professional helplines are particularly useful, if managed by qualified trained professionals.
3. Maintain your usual rhythm: keep a regular routine, by having regular sleep–wake rhythms and diet patterns. Addictive behaviors might be particularly at risk of rebound or relapses, therefore intellectual, physical, and social (even if virtual) activities will be useful.
4. Focus on the benefit of the isolation: we should indeed be conscious that this is a transient period and that this isolated

time is needed as we are not only saving our health, but also protecting all others by stopping the epidemic, and therefore shaping our own future.

5. Ask for professional help: getting a psychiatric help or consultation, if the effects of stress is becoming too invasive, is always possible, even if with different modalities. Almost all psychiatric clinics are now equipped for providing support, emotional defusing, problem-solving strategies, and psychiatric consultations—also at a distance.

The pandemic will be over, but its effects on mental health and well-being of the general population, health professionals, and vulnerable people will remain for a long time. We hope that all of the mental health community will have very quickly the opportunity to take care of patients in more conventional and personalized ways. Crises also reveal resilience skills and quality of links, the solidarity observed between European countries for severe cases (exchanging patients, material, and competencies) is a nice example to follow.

Conflict of Interest. The authors declare no potential conflict of interests.

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