



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE GENERAL POPULATION: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the mental health and presented hitherto unprecedented difficulties for public health worldwide. This review explored the effects of COVID-19 on mental health of the general population. This study comprehensively analyses the mental impacts, contributory variables and coping mechanisms associated with the pandemic's influence on mental health in general population without a history of mental illness through the existing literature. In addition, it also explored various factors contributing to the exacerbation of mental health issues during that crisis. This review intended to provide insights into the particular issues experienced by the general population and suggest techniques for increasing mental resilience during such times. The COVID-19 pandemic had not only posed a severe threat to physical health but also led to significant repercussions on mental well-being globally. Through the scrutiny of existing literature, this study discussed the effects of the pandemic on different populations including healthcare workers, frontline responders, individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions and the general public. Furthermore, it examined the role of social isolation, economic stressors, misinformation and fear of illness in aggravating mental health challenges. Additionally, this study highlighted the importance of addressing mental health concerns amidst the pandemic and proposes strategies for alleviating the adverse effects on mental well-being.

Key Words: COVID-19, mental health, general population, pandemic, illness

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic has ignited a paradigm change in our knowledge of mental health and shown a nuanced relationship between mental well-being and global health concerns. This study explored this complex link in depth by providing a thorough exploration of the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on the mental health of the general population. This review examined a number of aspects of the pandemic's emotional effects on various societal groups. It shed light on the complex nature of the crisis by clarifying the inner consequences felt by frontline responders, healthcare providers, those with pre-existing mental health disorders and the broader public. This study also identified and examined the contributory factors—such as social isolation, economic burdens, misinformation and fear of illness - that aggravated mental health issues during the epidemic. By synthesizing findings from diverse studies, it elucidated coping mechanisms, strategies and avenues for intervention to alleviate the adverse effects on mental well-being. This review aimed to provide insights into the unique challenges faced by the general population and highlight strategies for promoting mental resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic had not only posed significant challenges to global public health but also had profound implications for mental well-being. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought unrivalled difficulties to societies worldwide, surpassing mere physical health concerns. While efforts to control the spread of the

virus had primarily focused on medical interventions and public health measures, it is essential to recognize the profound impact of the pandemic on mental health. Ultimately, this study underscored the imperative of integrating mental health considerations into pandemic response efforts and fostering a holistic approach to healthcare in navigating the unprecedented complications posed by the COVID-19 crisis.

Scope: The scope of this review included the multidimensional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the population. It explored the various psychological effects, contributing factors and coping mechanisms associated with stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health consequences of the pandemic. The review examined empirical research, theoretical implications and practical interventions aimed at understanding and addressing the complex interaction between the pandemic and mental well-being.

Methodology

This study conducted an initial comprehensive search using the main quest terms to identify a wide range of relevant articles. The studies were filtered by publication date to include articles published in a specific time period (e.g. from the beginning of the pandemic to date). Articles published in peer-reviewed journals, empirical studies, reviews and literature on the effects of COVID-19 on mental health in different population groups were included in the study. Non-English language publications, studies - not directly related to mental health outcomes or the COVID-19 pandemic and articles unrelated to the study - were excluded from the study.

Selection criteria: Relevant articles and Peer-reviewed articles published in prestigious academic journals which directly address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health outcomes were encompassed. The studies that looked at different aspects of mental health such as stress, anxiety, depression, psychological distress, coping mechanisms and resilience were also included. This review study also incorporated multiple populations affected by the pandemic as healthcare workers, frontline workers, people with mental health problems and the general population. This study was conducted using the primary search terms to identify a wide range of relevant articles and are filtered on the basis of publication date to comprehend articles published within a specified time-frame (e.g. from the onset of the pandemic until the present).

Results and discussion:

The COVID-19 epidemic became a major stress factor affecting mental health globally in addition to posing a serious threat to physical health. Although the direct health effects of virus were well known, its indirect effects—particularly on the mental health of the general population—had drawn more attention. In order to highlight the complex effects of the pandemic on mental health, this review examined the emotional effects of COVID-19 on the people who did not already have mental health issues. Typical mental health consequences, such as stress, worry, sadness and feelings of fear and uncertainty, were examined. Review results were compiled from surveys, empirical studies and qualitative research to provide readers a thorough grasp of the mental toll the pandemic. Factors contributing to the mental impact of COVID-19 on the general population were examined. These included social isolation, economic uncertainty, disruptions to daily life and exposure to media coverage of the pandemic. The review analysed the interplay between these factors and mental health outcomes, highlighting the complex web of challenges faced by individuals due to the pandemic. The review also explored coping mechanisms adopted by individuals to improve the mental impact of COVID-19.

Mental health impact on healthcare and frontline workers had consistently highlighted increased stress, anxiety, depression and burnout. Lai et al. (2020) found that healthcare workers in Wuhan, China, reported high levels of depression, anxiety, insomnia and anxiety symptoms early in the pandemic. Similarly, Kisely et al. (2020) demonstrated high levels of psychological distress among Australian healthcare workers which highlighted the need for targeted support and interventions to

address their mental health. People with pre-existing mental health conditions had faced unique challenges during the pandemic, including disruptions to treatment and support services, increased social isolation and heightened concern about the virus. Yao et al. (2020) and Pfefferbaum and North (2020) emphasized the importance of maintaining continuity of care for this vulnerable population and implementing strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on their mental health. In addition, the population experienced various psychological reactions to the pandemic including fear, uncertainty, sadness and loneliness. Brooks et al. (2020) and Pierce et al. (2020) highlighted the psychological stress caused by factors such as social isolation, economic hardship and exposure to misinformation. In addition, Holmes et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2020) examined the psychological impact of quarantine and social distancing measures, highlighting the need for social support and coping strategies to mitigate negative mental health outcomes. Social isolation, financial strains and fear of illness have emerged as important factors in psychological distress. The factors contributing to mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic were multifaceted and include a variety of individual, social and environmental factors.

Understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective interventions and support strategies. Here are some key contributing factors:

Social Isolation and Loneliness: Social distance and withdrawal increased social isolation and feelings of loneliness, which were known risk factors for poor mental health outcomes. Lack of personal social interaction, reduced social support networks and feelings of loneliness worsened depression, anxiety and stress.

Financial stress and financial uncertainty: Job losses, reduced incomes and economic instability caused by the pandemic increased financial stress and uncertainty for many individuals and families. Financial worries such as not being able to pay bills, housing insecurity and worry about future financial stability lead to increased anxiety, depression and other mental health problems.

Interruption of daily routine and structure: Disruptions to daily routines, such as changes in work or school schedules, distance learning and working from home, disrupted people's sense of structure and stability. A lack of structure and routine had led to a sense of purposelessness, reduced productivity and difficulty coping with stress and uncertainty.

Fear of illness and death: Fear of contracting COVID-19 or of serious illness or death, either personally or among loved ones, had a significant impact on mental well-being. Constant exposure to the media, misinformation and uncertainty surrounding the virus increased fear, anxiety and hypervigilance.

Information overload and misinformation: The rapid spread of information through various media channels and social networks led to information overload and exposure to false information. Sorting through large amounts of information and distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources was overwhelming and increased anxiety and uncertainty.

Access to Health Care: Disruptions in health care, including limited access to mental health services and resources, had made it difficult for individuals to seek support and treatment for mental health problems. Barriers to accessing health services, such as financial constraints, lack of transportation and stigma associated with seeking mental health support exacerbated existing mental health problems.

Pre-existing mental health conditions: People with pre-existing mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety disorders and substance use disorders, experienced worsening or recurrence of symptoms due to the stressors and uncertainty of the pandemic. Limited access to treatment, disruptions in medication programs and reduced social support networks aggravated mental health problems.

Disgrace and discrimination: Stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19, including racism and stigmatization of people infected with the virus or of frontline workers, harmed mental health a lot.

Addressing these contributing factors requires a holistic approach that reported the social, economic and structural determinants of mental health, as well as individualized interventions designed to

promote coping skills and access to support services. Killgore et al. (2020) investigated the psychological consequences of social distance and economic insecurity and emphasized the importance of considering these factors in mental health measures. Raj Kumar (2020) and Ripp et al. (2020) examined strategies to promote psychological well-being during the pandemic. These included access to mental health services, social support networks and adaptive coping strategies to meet the challenges of a public health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread stress in various populations around the world, prompting extensive research into the mental impact of the crisis. This review synthesized the literature on the relationship between COVID-19 and mental health and examined the different stressors and mental health impacts of the pandemic. Many studies had documented increased stress levels in various population groups during the pandemic. In particular, health workers faced major stressors such as high workload, exposure to the virus and fear of infecting loved ones. Shechter et al. (2020) and Spoorthy et al. (2020) emphasised the psychological distress experienced by healthcare workers, highlighting the need for organizational support and mental health interventions. Similarly, studies have examined the impact of COVID-19 stress on the general population, revealing increased levels of anxiety, uncertainty and fear. Gonzalez-Sanguino et al. (2020) showed that social isolation, financial difficulties and fear of illness affect mental well-being. The literature examined factors affecting stress from COVID-19 and social isolation, information overload and uncertainty emerged as the most important factors. A study by Galea et al. (2020) investigated the psychological consequences of prolonged quarantine and exposure to conflicting information and highlighted the importance of clear communication and social support to reduce stress during a pandemic. Cohen et al. (2020) and Humer et al. (2020) emphasized the role of social support, problem solving skills and positive coping strategies in buffering the mental health effects of stress. Overall, the literature on COVID-19 and stress emphasized the need for targeted interventions and support services to address the psychological consequences of the pandemic. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health underscored the urgent need for targeted policy and practical action to address the growing mental health crisis. Here are some key implications for policy and practice:

- Policy makers must recognize mental health as a central component of public health and consider mental health aspects in pandemic responses.
- Develop and implement comprehensive public health strategies that prioritize mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention in addition to preventing the spread of the virus. Improve access to mental health services and resources including telehealth services, online counselling platforms and community-based support services.
- Initiate public education campaigns to destigmatize mental illness, increase awareness of mental health resources and promote self-care and help-seeking behaviours.
- Provide mental health training to health care providers, educators, employers and community leaders to help them to identify and respond effectively to mental health needs.
- Prioritizing support for vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by the pandemic including healthcare workers, care workers, older adults, and people with pre-existing mental health conditions and marginalized communities.
- Implement targeted interventions, support programs and culturally sensitive support services to address the unique mental health needs of these populations.
- Ensure basic needs and social support systems to reduce the impact of economic hardship and social isolation on mental well-being.
- Promote collaboration and coordination among government agencies, health systems, community organizations and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive, multidisciplinary approaches to mental health issues.
- Build partnerships between public health, mental health, education, employment and social service sectors to provide integrated support and resources to individuals and communities.

- Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate mental health outcomes during and after a pandemic to assess the effectiveness of interventions and inform evidence-based decision-making.
- Collect and analyse mental health indicators including depression, anxiety, substance use, suicidality and help-seeking behaviour to identify new trends and gaps in service delivery.
- Allocate funding for research into the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and qualitative studies to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic on mental well-being.

As world crosses through these challenging times, promoting social support and prioritizing mental health services are paramount in building a healthier and stronger society in the post-pandemic era. By implementing evidence-based policies and practices that prioritize mental health, policymakers and practitioners can reduce the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental well-being for the future. Overall, the literature on the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes the urgent need for targeted interventions and support services to address the emotional consequences of the crisis. By integrating mental health into pandemic response efforts can improve the long-term impact of the COVID-19 on mental well-being.

Conclusion: This review critically examined the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, using a systematic approach to assess the quality of studies and derived the relevant insights. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the interconnectedness of physical and mental health. This study also emphasized the critical need for a holistic approach to health care. By recognizing the pandemic's profound impact on mental well-being and implementing targeted interventions, policymakers, health care providers and communities can work together to lessen the negative mental health effects of this crisis. This review highlighted the significant impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of the population. It is necessary to prioritize mental health support and robust resources to reduce the long-term impact of the pandemic on mental well-being and promote holistic health and well-being in communities around the world.

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