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COVID-19 AND ITS EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH AROUND THE WORLD

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic from December 2019 it has brought waves of obstacles for countries and its population around the globe while it is necessary to analyse how it has impacted the political, economic arenas, the need to understand its implication on the mental health becomes crucial too.

Lockdown and social distancing though obligatory and indispensable can have an adverse impact on mental health for which researchers from previous pandemic crisis can act as a specimen, it is proved by many studies that such situations are likely to increase anxiety and fear among the general public, in consonance with these researches, recent studies also points out that covid-19 has caused widespread distress that might result in developing many psychological disorders like PTSD, Depression, stress and worsening of pre-existing psychiatric disorders.

For children and adolescents all this might take a huge toll on their routine which will further lead to behavioural and emotional distress. Many studies point out that adverse effects of the pandemic can manifest itself in the form of pervasive community anxiety, generalized fear, collective hysteria, feelings of hopelessness and desperation which is associated with negative outcomes like suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, it was also pointed out that among those who were quarantined, symptoms like emotional disturbance, mood alteration, insomnia, irritability, anger and confusion were common.

Early and timely interventions might help prevent worsening of the mental health crisis. This paper seeks to know about how the different age groups around the world have been affected psychologically.

Keywords: Mental Health, Anxiety, Psychological Disorders, Depression, Stress, Collective Hysteria, Emotional Disturbance, Mood Alteration, Insomnia, Irritability.

INTRODUCTION

After the covid forced the Government to lock the country down, many economists and industrialists were dissatisfied with the decision, although lockdown did impact the economy negatively, but far more than that it impacted the mental health of the general population. Generally, people tend to ignore their mental health which can have detrimental effects in the long run, that is why it is imperative that we not only look at the political and economic implications of the pandemic but also at the psychosocial impact that it has burdened us with. People from all walks of life have undergone a phenomenon which is quite new to the modern world. In the following paper I have tried to unravel how covid has impacted different demographics differently by studies done all around the world. It can be assumed that one cannot know about the whole phenomenon in its totality but efforts can be made to counter the adverse effects to an extent.

CHILDREN

Let's start with children, they are possibly at the most vulnerable state during this crisis, having inadequate understanding of the virus, limited communication skills and coping strategies the difficulties they face could be manifold. They are prone to several psychological issues like anxiety, depression, insomnia among many others. In a recent survey child were particularly at risk of developing anxious symptoms, parents observed that because of the quarantine their children changed behaviorally and emotionally; signs of defiant behavior like irritability, aggression, intolerance to rules, excessive demands and decreased attention span due to sedentary lifestyle and boredom.¹

There could be an aggravation in behavioral problems and symptoms of children who are already dealing with mental health issues there is also a possibility that they might experience developmental regression.¹⁵

According to Jena Lee, medical director at University of California, daily structure, or routine is of vital importance to children in their emotional and psychological development and due to the pandemic, their routine is negatively affected. "Clinically, we often see an exacerbation of behavioral problems in our pediatric patients when their routine or structure is disturbed" In this case it also becomes the responsibility of the caregivers or parents to help their children in providing them with a structure and assistance.² One research also suggests that children who were quarantined have 30% chance of developing PTSD.³ It is also evident that sexual, psychological, and physical abuse have shown a significant rise which if not taken care of can have adverse effect on children,



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particularly those coming from marginalized sections are more prone to be exploited and abused.⁴ The frustration due to covid, may manifest itself in the form of violence towards children, this can make the child more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and in extreme cases suicide.^{5,6,7} Children whose parents are frontline workers or are quarantined might also experience adjustment difficulties. During the early years of development of the children the role of parents is quite crucial and if a child is separated from their parents for a long duration, it can have a significant impact on their psychosocial abilities.^{8,5,9} The children may develop fear of death or that of their parents which can have adverse effect on their psychological development.^{11,12,13}

ADOLESCENTS

Teenagers can be equally affected because of this pandemic. Having high spirits, desire to try new experiences and constant craving for social interaction might make it difficult for them to cope with the change in situation because of the pandemic. A recent internet poll conducted by UNICEF shows the mental health impact on young adults and adolescents, among the participants, 27% reported feeling anxiety and 15% depression in the last seven days. For 30%, the main reason influencing their current emotions is the economic situation.¹⁰ In yet another study 9/15 healthy adolescents exhibited clinically meaningful increases in self-reported anxiety and depression, it also points that increased screen time in adolescents too might serve as a risk factor for adverse mental health outcomes.

In another study administered in Turkey it was found that high emotional reactivity due to the fear of covid has resulted in increased risk of depression, anxiety, and OCD. Individual may also engage in hoarding behavior as well as emotional and behavioral changes like Insomnia, anger, and loneliness can worsen mental health.¹⁹

Older teens are stressed about their academic events, cancellation of examination etc. Oosterhoff derived that adolescents and youth view precautionary measures due to the pandemic as a social and collective responsibility.¹⁵

Restriction of movement leads to long term negative effects on their overall psychological wellbeing, some of the teenagers have also shown signs of lower levels of affect for not being able to meet their friends and not engaging in social activities at school.^{15,9,16}

In a study it was shown that compulsive use of social media has increased during the pandemic hence making teenagers most susceptible to online bullying and watching objectionable content.^{8,14}

According to Sarah k. Lipson “The closing of schools and colleges have shifted how many of the youngsters or students think about their sense of belonging... The uncertainty regarding the coronavirus is something we really need to be worried about since it has the potential to amplify already high rates of anxiety”.²

Besides these studies there was an outlier study done in China which found that the depressive and anxious symptoms in adolescents dropped after home confinement, the findings of this study were different as it doesn't cite any significant impact in overall population but only in population who were at a high risk of exposure.¹⁷ A recent finding is that Substance use has increased among adolescents during the pandemic, which is associated with poorer mental health. Suicidal thoughts are yet another major concern for adolescents during the pandemic.¹⁸

ADULTS

As the covid-19 pandemic saw a Surge in the number of cases, fear of the unknown and stress because of the threat was not only due to social isolation and restriction of movement but also because businesses were shut down and jobs were disrupted resulting in unemployment and financial strain this majorly affected the working class or adult population of the world.

Common reactions among adults and the population were pervasive community anxiety and generalized fear which were also increased by disturbing information provided by media. There were varying range of psychological reactions to covid, from collective hysteria to feelings of loneliness and desperation and panic behavior.^{20,21,22,23}

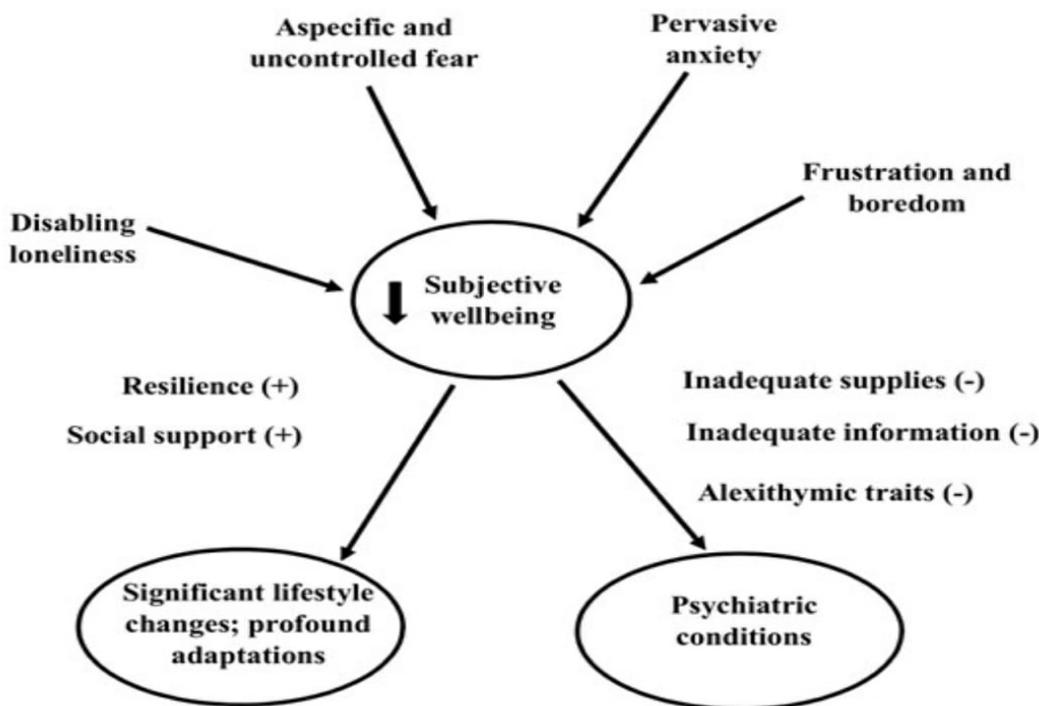
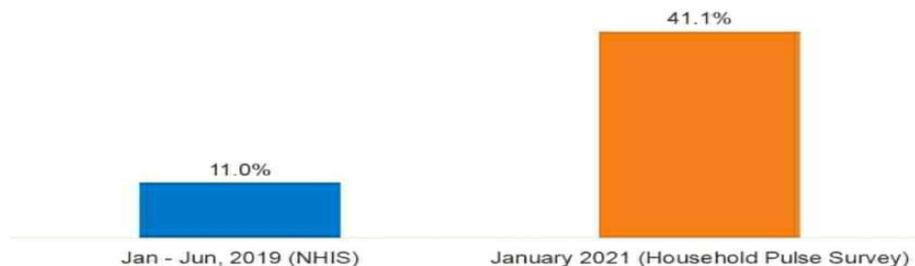


Figure 1 summarizes the most relevant reactions in the population because of the pandemic. Aspecific and uncontrolled fears related to the virus, pervasive anxiety, disabling loneliness, frustration and boredom had a negative effect on subjective well-being. Although there are certain risk factors involved like developing alexithymia, inadequate supplies and inadequate information related to the pandemic, social support and resilience are factors which might help in coping with lifestyle changes in the long run.²⁴ The main causes of psychological issues in young adults can be loss of income/employment to closure of universities, travel related stress for essential workers, it has been put forth by many studies that compared to older adults, younger adults have reported more symptoms of psychological disorders.^{26,27,28,29} In a study adults aged 18-24, 24-49, 50-64 and people over 65 showed signs of depression and anxiety the percentages of their share were 56.2%, 48.9%, 39.1% and 29.3% respectively.³¹

During the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the US have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder. In a poll conducted online, it was found that many adults are reporting disruption of sleep (36%), negative change in their eating pattern (32%), worsening chronic conditions (12%), there has also been reports of increased use of alcohol consumption and substance abuse.³¹

Average Share of Adults Reporting Symptoms of Anxiety Disorder and/or Depressive Disorder, January-June 2019 vs. January 2021



NOTES: Percentages are based on responses to the GAD-2 and PHQ-2 scales. Pulse findings (shown here for January 6 – 18, 2021) have been stable overall since data collection began in April 2020.
SOURCE: NHS Early Release Program and U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey. For more detail on methods, see: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhs/earlyrelease/ERmentalhealth-508.pdf>



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The present figure shows a comparative analysis of average share of adults who reported signs of depressive and anxiety disorder between January- June 2019 vs January 2021. As we can infer there has been a significant increase.

A survey conducted in US evidently shows that stress related to Covid 19 was manifested in the form of substance use disorder. Nearly 13% of adults reported new or increased substance use, what is more concerning is that 11% of adults also reported thoughts of suicide.²⁵

Essential workers are also more likely to report symptoms of anxiety or depression (42%) compared to (30%) of the overall population.^{25, 31}

It was also found that adults in household with children and teenagers are slightly more likely to report symptoms of anxiety (45%) and depression (41%), particularly women are more prone to have poor mental health conditions.³¹

A study of the MENA region found that covid was associated with mild psychological impact among adults in the MENA region. But it also encouraged some positive impacts on family support and mental health awareness.³⁰

OLDER ADULTS

For knowing how covid has impacted the older age group we have to understand the one simple thing that with aging innumerable vulnerabilities comes into play be it physical, social, or psychological.

Some of the studies administered in different countries observed that older adults were least effected psychologically during the pandemic. It was noted that participants aged 65 years or older reported lower percentage of trauma or stress (9.2%), anxiety (6.2%) and depressive disorder (5.8%). Older adults compared with other age groups also had lower rates of new or increased substance use (3%) and suicidal thoughts (2%).²⁵

TG Van Tilburg and others administered a longitudinal study on the older population of Netherlands, it was observed that loneliness and isolation increased after the pandemic, but mental health level remained unchanged before and after the start of the pandemic.²⁶ These results could be explained by the fact that older adults are more motivated to regulate emotions than younger adults. This may be because of the culmination of many internal factors like personality, cognitive ability, wisdom, stress coping mechanisms and external factors like financial resources, status in society.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Due to the pandemic every age group has been psychologically affected to a degree, some age groups are more at risk, particularly teenagers and children, to minimize the negative effects parents should actively engage in spending more time with them, they should exercise, avoid compulsive use of social media, and should stay away from negative news and disturbing content. People from all the age groups should focus more on non-pharmacological approaches like compassion training and engaging in spirituality. The studies in this paper though not completely immune from certain caveats, provide insights about the mental health of different age groups, there is an urgent need for more research and studies from different countries, to have a more profound understanding of the mental health of different age groups.

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