

COVID-19: The Pandemics Influence on Mental Health

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Abstract

The need for better mental health education and services has been a serious issue in the past few years. Many ignore their mental health needs to focus on work and becoming successful, but in the process start to experience issues with their mental health, such as burnout. This can be seen in a wide range of demographics, from students in high school to adults working in different industries. With the COVID-19 pandemic currently happening, people of all demographics are under even more stress, due to issues such as fear of losing their source of income to fear of getting infected with COVID. This paper will discuss some of the issues surrounding mental health, and will also examine the confirmed and potential effects of the pandemic on overall mental health for different demographics. From the information gathered, a call to action will be made, asking for more focus on mental health sciences.

Intro

The current COVID-19 pandemic has pushed everyone to all sorts of limits: many have lost loved ones to the virus, many are currently on the frontlines in hospitals fighting this virus, and many are doing their part by preventing the spread of COVID. This pandemic has demonstrated that we were underprepared. Society was both mentally and physically unprepared to handle this pandemic. Shortages can be seen from medical supplies to making plans to help businesses with the economic crisis. While some countries have successfully contained the virus, others are struggling to flatten the curve. This pandemic has also shown the shortage of mental health understanding. Due to following recommended COVID preventional activities, such as social distancing, many people are now confronting their mental health, but not knowing how to.

Mental health has been misunderstood for centuries. The media over-exaggerates and even glamorize mental illness in movies and television shows, such as *13 Reasons Why*. Preconceived notions, such as schizophrenic patients shouting at the top of their lungs outside on the streets, have only worsened people's feelings of wanting to dissociate from them. This has only added to people perceiving mental illness as a negative in life. Many people have also ignored their mental health needs to keep focusing on their work. They experience illnesses such as burnout and depression, and lose touch with their purpose/why they wanted to do their job in the first place. But due to lack of education, cultural upbringings, or simply just not caring, one may not even know that something is wrong. They may acknowledge something is off, but they would just play it off as nothing.

Mental health awareness has only started to become an important topic that many have finally started to take heed to. Recently, many psychologists, mental health organizations, and

mental health specialists have utilized social media to spread knowledge of mental health and self-care. Media influencers have also attempted to draw attention to this issue by sharing their stories and partnering with mental health organizations. Although these efforts have been successful, it still has not been enough.

Mental health is a topic that too many people still brush off as something not deserving attention. Especially with the pandemic going on, where there is high stress and anxiety, a better understanding of mental health is needed for the population. People need to be educated with the “tools” to confront their mental health. This paper will discuss some of the pre-existing issues surrounding mental health as well as how COVID has only inflated the need for more focus on mental health science. Ultimately, this paper will make a call to action to focus more resources on mental health sciences and education.

Mental Health With and Before COVID

Statistics

In the U.S., one-fifth of adults and one-sixth of children experience mental illness. Half of patients who do experience mental illness do not receive help. When a patient finally decides to get help, it is an eleven year average from when they first notice something is wrong (Mental Health By Numbers, 2018). These numbers, while most likely have seen improvement in the past two years due to the push for more focus on mental health, can be better. Half the population is trying to cope with the mental illness without knowing how to properly do so. Without proper help, their mental health can become worse. For example, they may think the only answer to the issue they are facing is suicide. Without the proper education of mental health, half the population is at risk of hurting themselves and the people around them.

Similar Trends with the “Triumph Narrative”

When someone may want to seek help, they may end up being belittled by their peers, getting told phrases such as “it is all in your head” and “you’re choosing to feel that way”. In a way, people’s experience with mental illness parallels Kathlyn Conway’s “triumph narrative”. For example, in western culture, it is expected that when one is faced with adversity, they are expected to overcome it. The same is expected of someone experiencing anxiety: when faced with immense fear, they are expected to just stop being afraid.

The “triumph narrative” is about how “[those who are] ill can confront their illness as a battle, do so with courage, and finally triumph and share with others the lessons they have learned” (Conway, 2013). Like any other ‘physical’ illness, mental illness also follows this narrative. Those who end up getting help are mainly met with western standards of medicine, where they meet with a health professional and tend to be talked to in a cold manner. The patient’s experienced symptoms are then used to categorize them into an illness and then given a solution, such as medication. Similarly to the “triumph narrative”, this process skims over the important parts of what the patient is individualized experiencing; health care workers are just checking boxes to label a patient’s illness. This type of cold behavior adds to the fear of continuing to seek help and also further stigmatizes mental health. Mental illness is an individualized experience because everyone will understand their mental health differently. Since everyone’s case is different, physicians and health professionals should treat cases in a better manner that reflects the different approaches to healing.

Education

Due to the workaholic environment that society has depicted as success, this has influenced how people of all ages treat their mental health. I have worked at *Stanford's Clinical Neuroscience Virtual Experience* as a staff mentor for the summer of 2019 and 2020. This program is meant to enrich high school students on topics of neuroscience, behavioral sciences, and mental health. My role in this program is to help students with their capstone projects and facilitate group conversations from lectures. Each year, students tell me the same things: their high schools provide services for mental health needs, but do not truly elaborate on what mental health and mental illnesses are. These students have stated that the school curriculum provided on mental health does not teach topics such as self-care and more prevalent illnesses such as burn out, because the class selections at their schools are more academic/STEM-focused. When asked if a class that did cover these topics were an option, would they take it, they said no; them and most of their friends would not take it because it would be presented as less competitive in the eyes of college admissions officers, since they believe admissions want to see a course load with a lot of AP and honors classes. These students have expressed that they would like to have a better understanding of mental health. However, because they must prioritize their future, students put this want aside and choose classes that make them look more appealing to colleges. Thus, they are left with a lack of understanding of their mental health.

With this all-work-type atmosphere, teens have become overstressed and put under a lot of pressure to succeed. Some have even felt the need to take their lives to free themselves of this pressure, as seen with the suicide clusters in Bay Area high schools back in 2015. When these suicides happened, people thought it was because these students were simply outcasts in their schools. But the truth was, these students were ordinary high school students under constant

stress, trying to excel in academics and extracurriculars (Rosin, 2015). These students sacrifice their mental health in order to live up to current societal standards as well as making their parents proud.

COVID and Mental Health

The importance of increasing focus on mental health science has been further emphasized with the research and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. During any infectious disease outbreak, people's psychological reactions shape the spread of the disease and mental distress and social unrest (Cullen, Gulati, Kelly, 2020). The impact of COVID has led to a variety of responses from people, ranging from excessive substance abuse to non-compliance with public health 'recommendations'. Currently, there is not a lot of precise statistics for the relationship between COVID and mental health, but many studies beginning to explore this connection. As the pandemic progresses, and even after the pandemic ends, a rise in data and research in this field will be seen.

With recommended activities, such as staying at home and self-isolation, research has shown that these social distancing practices have strong associations with anxiety, depression, and self-harm, and can lead to suicidal thoughts/attempts (Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, et al. 2020). In their study on how the combination of rumination, which is when one is fixated on certain thoughts, and fear of COVID-19 impacted mental health, Begum Satıcı, Mehmet Sarcalı, Seydi Ahmet Satıcı, and Mark D. Griffiths, concluded that these two aspects triggered intolerance of uncertainty and thus negatively impacted mental wellbeing. This all relates to each other because rumination can bring upon or worse anxiety. With people fixating their thoughts on fears, such as needing to clean all surfaces to kill COVID particles, these constant thoughts can build up. While

these fears are reasonable because of the pandemic, one can take it too far and anxiety can kick in. However, only people who understand mental health would know this. The average person currently experiencing this may not see anything wrong.

Aside from those who are affected by public health measures at home, those working on the frontlines to keep the virus at bay will also be affected as well. Health professionals who are exposed to the virus and witness traumatic events, such as death and dying, are also at risk of stress responses due to having to make highly challenging decisions while working. Their mental health is under constant duress because they may be affected by fear of contamination, moral injury, and work stress (Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, et al, 2020). These workers work tirelessly to save lives affected by COVID. Once they get their break and go home, they can't even enter their house and hug their loved ones because they want to protect them; they don't want to spread the virus to their family if they have contracted it. Health care workers make mental and physical sacrifices for society, and they deserve the resources and understanding to help them cope mentally with the new demands they are meeting.

Regarding students, the pandemic has also inflated the issue of mental health within this age group. With the closure of schools, students lost many resources that were once available to them. Schools are often the first place where students seek help, and also provide resources for special needs and such (Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, et al, 2020). Being at home, these students may be exposed to other mental stressors presented by their families, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, and child maltreatment (Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, et al, 2020). A study with college students during the beginning of the pandemic, when all educational institutions went to remote learning, showed that compared to other academic terms, students were overall more

sedentary, anxious, and depressed. During midterms and finals week, there were higher reports of self-reported depression and anxiety (Huckins et. al, 2020). All students have had to deal with the constant changes due to COVID; they've lost the system they were once comfortable with and have been trying to find a new normal that can work for everyone. Currently, many institutions are trying to return to in-person learning if safe and possible, which will only further impact the mental health of students. Students are undergoing constant mental stressors because of the lack of stability there currently is; they need to be provided the means, whether that be education or resources, to cope with these constant changes.

Solutions Needed

The issues discussed above have demonstrated that action must be taken. Many of the research papers studied display a need for intervention and prevention solutions, especially for people who are now experiencing mental illness because of COVID. These papers suggest more immediate research to better understand and display correlations of mental health with the pandemic. They also urge us to provide resources to the demographics that are predicted to experience mental distress.

One way that has helped people realize the importance of mental health is the utilization of social media as a means of education, especially during this pandemic. Since many common activities have been disrupted, people are constantly on their phones for updates and to stay in contact with friends. Many psychologists and mental health professionals have made infographics, videos, and reminders. These posts provide information about self-care on social media platforms, such as Instagram. This has been seen as useful because the audience who

views these images end up sharing them with their friends and family. Although these posts are useful, they do not resolve the full issue.

To emphasize the need for maintaining healthy mental wellbeing, schools should implement courses that teach common mental illnesses that students may face at some point in their life. These classes should also teach student tools on how to cope with those illnesses. These courses should be available to college and high school students and should have incentives that may inspire students to take these classes.

Overall, a cultural shift in society is needed. We need to step away from a work-a-holic/cutthroat environment. This solution seems idealistic but should be the ultimate goal society works toward. Hopefully, the experiences of mental health during this pandemic will show people that this change is needed.

Conclusion

This paper has displayed some of the present issues surrounding the need for more focus on mental health. The effects of COVID on certain demographics were also discussed. From the issues presented, some possible solutions were presented that may help with mental health illness prevention. Ultimately, the effects of COVID on mental health are still being examined, and since the pandemic is far from over, the long-term effects will not be known for now. However, from the experience of COVID so far, people can understand the need for more mental health education because of the stress people have been put under. Not all of the issues surrounding mental health were covered, but hopefully, some of the solutions suggested can help with those that were not discussed. Future papers and research should examine the resilience of different demographics from widespread infectious disease.

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