COVID-19 under the Lens of Sudden and Substantial Event-Induced Trauma

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The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic serves as an atypical example of a sudden and substantial event-induced trauma. Unlike prolonged forms of trauma such as domestic violence, childhood abuse, addiction, or long-term maltreatment, the outbreak and rapid spread of COVID-19 occurred explosively and upended the normal functioning of societies within an extremely short period. However, since the pandemic persisted for nearly three years—and continues to affect people's lives today—the psychological trauma it has caused is further complicated by the element of duration. Humanity's collective sense of safety and stability was completely reshaped, encompassing experiences of bereavement, enforced isolation, unemployment, and social disconnection. Scholars have come to recognize that COVID-19 is not merely a public health crisis but also a form of collective trauma that transcends individual experience and requires systemic, trauma-informed responses (Watson et al., 2020; Barton et al., 2024). This review synthesizes four scholarly articles, situating COVID-19 within the theoretical framework of sudden and substantial trauma to examine its psychological, social, and structural impacts.

Conceptualizing COVID-19 as Collective Trauma

Watson et al. (2020) point out that the outbreak of the pandemic acted as a catalyst, exposing the deep-seated vulnerabilities embedded in social structures—such as environmental degradation, health inequity, economic insecurity, and environmental injustice. The authors proposed a framework grounded in the concept of collective trauma, emphasizing that this is a global event that not only exists within individual memory but also operates across families, communities, and societies, carrying long-term temporal effects. In addressing trauma arising

from the pandemic, it is crucial to pay attention to the ways cultural values may reinforce systems of oppression and privilege. In response, Barton et al. (2024) introduced a model that integrates the trauma-informed care (TIC) framework into clinical practice. This model places particular emphasis on cultural, historical, and gender-related factors, helping practitioners recognize the diverse manifestations of trauma across populations. By maintaining non-coercive, calm, and collaborative approaches throughout the caregiving process, the TIC framework fosters emotional safety for patients while gradually building trust and partnership over time. Together, these two studies demonstrate that when healthcare professionals address trauma extending beyond the individual level, adopting a broader perspective and engaging in critical reflection on both their own and their patients' cultural values are critical.

Psychological and Societal Impact

By synthesizing nineteen studies from eight different countries, Xiong et al. (2020) further verified the profound global impact of COVID-19 on mental health. Their results show that rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and stress-related symptoms rose sharply among the general public, healthcare workers, students, and infected patients. The effect was particularly severe among groups with lower socioeconomic status or limited psychological resources. Such changes stemmed not only from fear of infection but also from the cumulative effects of government control measures, including social isolation, economic crises, and disruption of social relationships. At the same time, Ba et al. (2023) discussed the impact of China's "dynamic zero-COVID" policy from a policy-implementation perspective. The authors observed that, while infection and mortality rates in China dropped dramatically compared with those in the United States and European countries, the psychological

consequences of isolation—such as loneliness, frustration, and loss of autonomy—together with the potential economic risks of prolonged restrictions, should not be overlooked. Both studies underscore that COVID-19 itself and the societal changes resulting from containment policies compounded fear and uncertainty, becoming major sources of trauma for populations around the world.

Multi-Layer Responses of Trauma-Informed Practices

The trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic extends beyond the physical level, calling for the establishment of a systemic response mechanism that spans from individuals to entire communities. Barton et al. (2024) proposed a trauma-informed care (TIC) framework centered on four core principles—safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, and empowerment. This model encourages healthcare professionals to view patients' symptoms such as anxiety and guardedness as adaptive responses to trauma rather than merely pathological manifestations. From a macro-level perspective, Watson et al. (2020) emphasize that supporting individuals in recovering from the collective trauma of the pandemic requires an awareness of structural inequities within society. They argue that healing efforts should not be confined to family therapy or traditional clinical interventions, but rather be expanded to include community-based initiatives and policy reforms grounded in principles of social justice and cultural humility. Ba et al. (2023) add a governmental policy perspective by comparing the pandemic strategies and outcomes between collectivist Eastern nations and individualist Western countries. Their analysis illustrates how these differing cultural and political approaches not only influenced the effectiveness of infection control but also shaped public emotions and the collective psychological climate. Taken together, these studies suggest that trauma-informed care must

recognize how trauma emerges within different social structures while demonstrating cultural adaptability and political sensitivity. In facing collective trauma, trauma-informed care requires not only individual-level cultural humility but also systemic collaboration and shared responsibility to promote genuine recovery and resilience.

Future Suggestions

Existing research indicates that COVID-19 has multi-level and multifaceted impacts on individuals and societies. Xiong et al. (2020) provided some of the earliest quantitative data on the pandemic's effects on mental health, revealing widespread psychological distress across various populations. However, most current studies have primarily focused on short-term psychological responses, while Barton et al. (2024) and Ba et al. (2023) emphasize the need for longitudinal and cross-cultural research to better understand the long-term trajectories of trauma recovery. Future research should also focus on extending the principles of trauma-informed care beyond the clinical context—into education, public health, and social policy—to build a comprehensive framework for societal resilience. As a global traumatic event, COVID-19 has not only challenged humanity's public health and mental health systems but has also reminded practitioners and researchers alike that trauma recovery must be human-centered and system-oriented, integrating empathy, collaboration, and structural reform as essential components of recovery.

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