How COVID-19 is affecting people with mental health disorders

Dr.Anish Shah, MD

Mental health disorders are frustrating even in the best of times. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, people with mental health issues may experience increased symptoms and, as a consequence, are at higher risk for negative outcomes, even if they don't get sick with COVID-19 themselves.

Most psychiatric disorders are associated with reduced tolerance of stressful events, and some mental health illnesses include diminished awareness of social events. These traits may cause someone to fail to follow isolation and quarantine instructions, which puts them and others at risk for exposure to the coronavirus.

Direct effects of COVID-19 on patients with psychiatric disorders

The direct effects of COVID-19 affect everyone, but people with mental health disorders face unique challenges and additional risks for negative outcomes.

Unemployment

COVID-19 has upturned life as we know it, and tens of millions of Americans are experiencing newfound unemployment. For people with psychiatric disorders, the consequences of job loss can be even more devastating than for healthy people. Job loss represents an interruption in access to healthcare (including prescription medications) that reliably allow people with psychiatric disorders to maintain healthy, productive lifestyles.

The stress of unemployment, financial hardships, loss of trusted providers, and a near complete loss of access to healthcare is clearly more than enough to drive even the healthiest of people to a state of confusion, fear, and despair. Studies have shown that joblessness and financial hardship significantly increase the risk for impaired mental health and depression, and a reliable predictor of poor mental health is unemployment [1].

Homelessness

Untreated mental health disorders have long been recognized as key factors in homelessness, and an estimated 30% of chronically homeless people have a psychiatric illness [4]. More recent data has specifically identified stunted psychosocial development as predictive of homelessness [3], but deriving accurate and precise statistics on the relationship between new or preexisting psychiatric disorders and homelessness is challenging.

What is clear is that rising homelessness and substance use are expected as COVID-19 continues to devastate communities, and people with mental health illnesses are at increased risk.

Social isolation

People with psychiatric disorders who have been able to maintain employment and housing are also at increased risk for negative outcomes associated with COVID-19. As social distancing, travel restrictions, and isolation become the status quo, access to healthcare providers, counselors, friends, and loved ones drops quickly. The result is an abrupt loss of access to support structures and mental health services, which are often requirements for people who are successfully managing their symptoms. Studies have

shown that social isolation can contribute to anxiety and depression, and the relationship between isolation and mental health disorders seems to be bi-directional [5].

As a direct result of COVID-19, we can expect to see increasing prevalence and severity of psychiatric disorders as people struggle to access healthcare and prescription refills. Social isolation will further exacerbate symptoms. Unfortunately, this population will also face serious, even life-threatening indirect effects as well.

Indirect effects of COVID-19 on patients with psychiatric disorders

The indirect effects of COVID-19 can be as (or more) dangerous than COVID-19 itself. Social distancing, isolation, quarantines, and fear of coronavirus infection can all increase stress levels and may worsen serious psychiatric symptoms [6].

Substance use

It is well known that people with mental health disorders are more likely to develop a substance use disorder (SUD) than the average person. Emotional stress and uncertainty regarding COVID-19 increases the risk that someone will turn to drugs or alcohol to help them manage their symptoms, especially if they lose access to their prescription medications. Boredom and loneliness that are caused by social isolation may also increase substance use.

Consequences of COVID-19 on the homeless

People with psychiatric illnesses are at increased risk for homelessness, which is incompatible with social distancing, isolation, and quarantines. Being homeless increases exposure risk while simultaneously reducing access to healthcare and financial support, and experts predict that homeless populations will grow as a result of COVID-19. Furthermore, COVID-19 deaths among the homeless will be more frequent than in other populations.

The fact that we, as a society, fail to provide even rudimentary healthcare or basic support (e.g. access to food and social programs) to homeless people is consistent with the prediction that both long-term and newly homeless people will face significantly more severe consequences from COVID-19 than the rest of us [7].

Stigma

People who develop COVID-19-like symptoms or are frequently stigmatized, which can be devastating for someone with a psychiatric disorder. There are three important harms that stigma can cause [8]. First is that people may be shunned by members of the public, friends, and even family, which increases social isolation. Second is that people who have been stigmatized may feel ashamed and internalize disrespectful stereotypes, which contributes to depression and anxiety.

The third important harm that stigma causes is "label avoidance." This is when people are so afraid of being labeled as infected that they actively avoid being tested and treated for COVID-19. Label avoidance increases morbidity and mortality because when sick people hide their condition, they don't receive appropriate treatment and are more likely to transmit the virus to others.

COVID-19, mental health, and the general public

Clearly, COVID-19 poses a very serious challenge to people with mental health disorders. However, people without pre-existing psychiatric illnesses are also at increased risk for worsening mental health status, which may push them into a serious mental health illness such as clinical depression, anxiety disorder or substance use.

Loss of access to friends and family are reliable predictors of depression and anxiety. Making matters worse, social distancing has closed gyms, movie theater, sports events, parks, and other recreational areas, making it more difficult to exercise, which is one of the most effective ways to stay mentally and physically fit.

How to protect ourselves

There are steps we can take to limit the stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and protect our mental health:

1. Be proactive about protecting yourself. This reduces stress and anxiety and improves mental health and emotional wellbeing. Follow guidelines issued by the CDC to protect yourself and your loved ones through COVID- 19 [9]. Please avoid using any illicit substances or alcohol during this time.
2. Turn off the news! Our 24-hour news cycle depends on sensational stories that may not deliver accurate information, and studies have found that increased exposure to the media is correlated with increased stress responses and worsening mental health [11].
3. Get COVID-19 information and updates only from reputable sources (e.g. the CDC [10]). This will limit the amount of uncertainty and fear surrounding the pandemic.
4. Avoid social isolation. Beat loneliness by using Audio Visual communication channels such as , Zoom, Skype or Facetime for face-to-face interaction with loved ones. Even texting or talking on the phone can provide the social stimulation we need to protect ourselves from isolation.
5. Stay positive. Worrying about vague predictions and half-truths carelessly tossed around by non-experts will have negative consequences on anyone's emotional wellbeing. Practice gratefulness and mindfulness by being aware of the positives in your life.
6. Keep your doctors' appointments. Many healthcare professionals are turning to telehealth to maintain oversight of patients and make sure prescriptions are being refilled. Even group therapy sessions are successfully being held remotely.
7. Eat a healthy diet. In order for your immune system to protect you effectively, it needs important nutrients that come from fruits, veggies, and healthy proteins. Sticking to consistent mealtimes can also help you maintain mental and physical health.
8. Exercise is more important now than ever, but even getting outside can be a challenge. Luckily, there are plenty of mobile apps and at-home workout routines ranging from yoga and Pilates to strength training. Aerobics in your living room might not be quite as rewarding as it is in a class full of friends, but it will keep your mind and body healthy. If your local public health policy allows walking by taking necessary social distancing precaution than walk atleast 30 minutes two times a day.
9. Develop and maintain a routine. If you're suddenly working from home, you might be tempted to work from the comfort of your bed. However, sticking to a regular bedtime and waking schedule and designating a work area will increase productivity and sharpen the boundaries between home and work life.

10. Be present, and don't worry about things you can't control. We all know we're supposed to practice mindfulness and cultivate inner peace, but the truth is most of us aren't very good at it. Luckily, there are some great resources that can help. For example, the UCSD Center for Mindfulness offers free guided meditations and other resources [12].

Additional resources

If you or someone you love is struggling, help is available [13]:

- Disaster Distress Helpline (SAMHSA)
  Call 1-800-985-5990
  Text TalkWithUs to 66746
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
  Call 1-800-273-8255
  Chat with us at https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/
- Crisis Textline
  Text TALK to 741741
- Veterans Crisis Line (VA)
  Call 1-800-273-8255
  Text 838255
- National Domestic Violence Hotline
  Call 1-800-799-7233

COVID-19 is testing our global community in ways that were unthinkable a year ago. As we re-adjust to our new reality, it's more important than ever that we take care of ourselves and others. Stay safe, but don't let COVID-19 force you into isolation. Make sure you get a healthy diet, exercise, and take steps to maintain contact with your healthcare providers.

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