

Impact of Protests on Mental Health and Coping with the Psychological Effects of Protests

Dr. Anish Shah, MD
CEO , Siyan Clinical Corporation
Project Director , Project Hope

We are currently witnessing large scale protests as a part of the “Black Lives Matter” movement. These protests are for a just cause and have been organized against racism and social disparities present in our society. Protests are an essential part of modern political life and play an important role in instigating social and political change. Some protests may also be accompanied by riots, with reasons for violence often being complex and varied. Much like the well-documented negative psychological impact of natural disasters and armed conflicts, recent studies have demonstrated a similar impact of collective actions such as protests and riots on mental health¹.

A meta-study involving data from 52 studies on protests and riots found that protests involving violence were, in the majority of cases, accompanied by negative effects on mental health¹. The study showed an increase in the prevalence of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder among the local population, regardless of their participation in the protests. Such effects on mental health were generally absent in the case of non-violent protests. However, 2 out of the 52 studies did show a positive impact of protests on psychological health, probably due to an increase in the sense of solidarity among the protesters.

The negative impact of such social unrest on mental health may be due to direct exposure to the events of the protest or the impact of protest on social life, employment, and other aspects of an individual’s life¹. Living, working, or attending school near the location of a violent protest can increase the risk of depressive symptoms. Similarly, witnessing violence or being a victim of looting or physical violence is associated with an increased risk of PTSD. Besides such physical proximity to violence, other forms of connectedness or proximity to violence may also influence the degree of impact of violent protests on mental health. A study conducted in Michigan following the fatal shooting of a Black man by the police found that other forms of proximity such as emotional and personal connection to the events, disruption of daily life by protests, and experiencing fear after the protests, also influenced mental health². For example, White participants were likelier to experience PTSD and depression if their lives were interrupted due to the events. On the other hand, members of the Black community, owing to their emotional and personal proximity to the events, experienced such adverse mental health symptoms, regardless of the disruption of their social life.

In addition to the factors directly associated with the events at the protests, other factors that may lead to depression or anxiety during or after protests include political uncertainty, a decline in employment opportunities, deterioration of social relations, and loss of employment. Increased exposure to news and images of violent protests through television or social media can also increase the chances of experiencing depressive symptoms. For example, during the 2019 Hong Kong protests against the extradition bill, higher use of social media was associated with an increased risk of PTSD, whereas a neutral stance toward political affairs was associated with a lower risk of PTSD³. Social and demographic factors such as lower socioeconomic status, female gender, and younger age can also make individuals more prone to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD as a result of exposure to violent protests. Besides the

aforementioned effects, a multitude of factors, such as the nature of collective actions and the response elicited, may influence the impact of violent protests on mental health.

Most individuals participate in protests as an ethical act – they are unable to stand by silently in response to an actual or perceived injustice, despite the risk of physical or psychological harm. Individuals who fail to participate in protests often experience guilt, further supporting the ethical nature of such an act. Thus, it is almost impossible for individuals participating in protests to distance themselves from the traumatic events at the protests or the news about such occurrences at the protest. Furthermore, even individuals who do not or are unable to participate in protests are often emotionally invested in the protests. These individuals are likely to be exposed to the traumatic events of the protests through news or conversations.

Here are some strategies I recommend, to help safeguard mental and physical health in the current climate:

1. Limit the consumption of social media and television news to reduce the impact of the protests on psychological well-being.
2. Do not engage in violent acts during protests. Violent protests are responsible for psychiatric issues not only in individuals involved in such acts but also bystanders to such violent events.
3. Avoid arguments with family members and friends - while family support can help to mitigate the negative effects of collective action on mental health, a major cause of depression during protests is the occurrence of interpersonal conflicts between family members and friends (or coworkers) regarding the politics of the events. Although a critical reflection of the stances one adopts is essential, individuals would be wise to avoid arguing
4. Seek the company and support of like-minded individuals to avoid conflicts and have productive discussions. Such conversations can also help individuals to cope with traumatic events.
5. Limit discussions on political matters to no more than one hour a day and be respectful of the opinions of others.
6. Practice mindfulness through kindness and gratitude during this difficult time.
7. If possible, pledge to donate something to the most vulnerable individuals in our communities once a week. We are all distressed by repeated events related to racism and police brutality. In addition to these concerns, our community is also affected by long-standing disparities related to healthcare, employment and the economy. Although legislative changes are essential goals of these protests, small actions at the individual level, such as donating, can also help to make a difference.
8. Wear a mask and maintain social distancing during the protests. Close contact with hundreds of protestors raises concerns about spreading the coronavirus infection, and a subsequent spike in COVID-19 cases that may lead to a second wave. It would thus be advisable to wear masks at all times.
9. Do not protest at night. Violence has often erupted at night during the curfew hours; therefore, protesters should avoid venturing out during this time.
10. Focus on good nutrition and exercise during this challenging time. Besides improving physical health, diet and exercise are also useful in coping emotionally with the ongoing stressful events.

In the case of persistent symptoms of depression, anxiety, or PTSD, individuals should seek counseling. Individuals from minority communities may have negative attitudes toward

seeking help for mental health problems. Promoting awareness in minority communities regarding the consequences of untreated mental health symptoms and the availability of mental health is important in making sure individuals get the help they need.

Sources:

1. Ni, Michael Y., Yoona Kim, Ian McDowell, Suki Wong, Hong Qiu, Irene OL Wong, Sandro Galea, and Gabriel M. Leung. "[Mental health during and after protests, riots and revolutions: a systematic review.](#)" *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 54, no. 3 (2020): 232-243.
2. Galovski, Tara E., Zoe D. Peterson, Marin C. Beagley, David R. Strasshofer, Philip Held, and Thomas D. Fletcher. "[Exposure to violence during Ferguson protests: mental health effects for law enforcement and community members.](#)" *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 29, no. 4 (2016): 283-292.
3. Ni, Michael Y., Xiaoxin I. Yao, Kathy SM Leung, Cynthia Yau, Candi MC Leung, Phyllis Lun, Francis P. Flores, Wing Chung Chang, Benjamin J. Cowling, and Gabriel M. Leung. "[Depression and post-traumatic stress during major social unrest in Hong Kong: a 10-year prospective cohort study.](#)" *The Lancet* (2020).