

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health

by

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The blues tells a story. Every line of the blues has a meaning. – John Lee Hooker

Introduction

Bleary-eyed and barely able to stand, I staggered into our bedroom. I looked over to the TV trays where just a few hours ago we had tried in vain to follow along on 8-by-11 canvasses as Bob Ross painted a landscape of mountains and happy little trees in just a half-hour TV broadcast. Paint night had seemed like such a fun idea.

“I’m sorry to have to ask, but I need you to call 9-1-1 because I just did something incredibly stupid and it may be a matter of life and death,” I said frankly to my girlfriend who was sitting up in bed, too angry to look at me.

I had just intentionally overdosed, and the next few hours would be crucial in determining whether I came out of the ordeal alive.

For months prior to this night last December, I had been steadily losing control. Diagnosed with major depression in my late teens, I had struggled for years to balance work, school and my relationships with an illness that seemed to spike and dissipate at its own will.

That night, after an argument where relationship-ending things were said, I stormed out of the apartment and went for a drive to clear my head.

When I got back, I was more manic than when I had left. Embodying that impulsivity that so typifies what I now know to be bipolar disorder, I downed a cocktail of prescription pills that would eventually land me in the ICU at St. Joseph's Medical Center in Yonkers for three days.

The effects came on quickly. My legs turned to jelly as I started to feel a warmth wash over me. Most of all, I was afraid. Why had I done this? What seemed to make so much sense just a few minutes ago now filled me with dread. Was I going to make it out of this?

After explaining what I had done, I watched as my girlfriend's face cycled from anger to confusion to concern in a matter of seconds. Calls were made, vomiting was induced, and I found a comfortable spot on the kitchen floor where I could wait for paramedics to arrive.

From a limited perspective, it may seem as though I simply had a severe overreaction to an argument, but this was a long time coming. After nearly a year of isolation, with worsening, untreated mental illness, I had been experiencing intensifying suicidal ideation for a long time.

Following my stay in St. Joseph's, where a 10-day stint in the psychiatric ward was made mandatory by the powers that be, I began to question whether this pandemic, which had a stranglehold on the entire world for so long, could have contributed to the worsening of my illness. I wondered whether any of this would have happened had the COVID-19 virus not wreaked havoc on an unsuspecting populace for so long. This is not to say that the pandemic was

the direct cause of my suicide attempt, but I began to wonder whether the forced lifestyle changes might have exacerbated my own condition.

Pandemics and Mental Health

More than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the past year on the mental health of a nation remain something of a mystery. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) relaxes its guidelines on mask wearing, and vaccination distribution continues to ramp up, it appears the United States may at long last be in the waning days of the pandemic.

A year of isolation, quarantine and social upheaval has had a far-reaching impact on both the mental health of Americans in general, and of mental health care as an industry. As health care providers and advocates struggled to quickly adjust to a changed landscape, demand for care increased as a populace struggled with the unique stress of a global pandemic. While upticks in reported illnesses like depression and anxiety were expected and did happen, other less expected changes, like the rise of telehealth, might have actually increased access to mental health care for some.

The signs of the pandemic's impact on mental health were present early on. Back in April 2020 [ABC reported](#) that the Disaster Distress Helpline at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) "saw an 891% increase in call volume compared with March 2019, according to a spokesman for the agency, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services." The hotline provides emergency help to those suffering from severe levels of distress.

That same month, [Medscape](#) reported that New York City was experiencing a similar uptick in crisis calls. The NYC Well hotline run by Vibrant Emotional Health, formerly known

as the Mental Health Association of New York City, saw call volumes increase by 50 percent in the early days of the pandemic.

In Los Angeles, [ABC reported](#) that the Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services Center had received 22 calls to their suicide prevention hotline related to COVID-19 in February 2020. One month later the center reported that the number had “soared” to 1,800 calls.

In April 2021, National Institute of Mental Health Director Joshua Gordon [noted](#) that after a year of the pandemic, American suicide rates had not actually increased as they had once been expected to. Despite this, Gordon said that several CDC surveys “have shown substantial increases in self-reported behavioral health symptoms.”

“According to one CDC report, which surveyed adults across the U.S. in late June of 2020, 31% of respondents reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, 13% reported having started or increased substance use, 26% reported stress-related symptoms, and 11% reported having serious thoughts of suicide in the past 30 days,” Gordon said. “These numbers are nearly double the rates we would have expected before the pandemic.”

Gordon also noted that while overall suicide rates may have not increased, “data from states such as [Maryland](#) and [Connecticut](#) suggest that, early in the pandemic, the number of African Americans dying by suicide increased.”

It was not unexpected that the pandemic would so greatly impact our mental health, because this sort of thing is not unprecedented.

In November 2020, India’s Industrial Psychiatry Journal (IPJ), the official publication of the Association of Industrial Psychiatry of India, [released a study](#) analyzing the global history of pandemics and their impacts on the human psyche.

“Catastrophic pandemics have been occurring since antiquity and are frequently mentioned in ancient texts,” the IPJ said. “Pandemics are associated with death, destruction, and devastation. Not surprisingly, pandemics are associated with long-term psychological consequences.”

After analyzing historical pandemics dating back to the Roman Antonine Plague of 165 A.D., the IPJ states that while the majority of people appear to be resilient in cases of extreme distress, “the psychological effects of pandemics are often larger than the medical effects.”

“For instance, during the West African Ebola outbreak (2014–2015), the ‘epidemic of fear’ affected more people than the epidemic itself,” the IPJ said. “Similarly, during the 2003 SARS pandemic, the psychological morbidity greatly exceeded the medical morbidity in terms of both the number and duration of impact.”

As COVID-19 has been far more lethal than those recent pandemics referenced by the study, it cannot yet be said whether the psychological effects of our current pandemic are more widespread than the physical ones. Regardless, knowing what we do about the effects of previous pandemics provides vital insight into what we might expect in the present moment.

“Pandemic-related psychosocial stressors may trigger or exacerbate psychiatric disorders, including mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),” the study reads.

The IPJ study concludes by noting that the psychological effects of pandemics “are complex, variable, difficult to understand, and not yet fully explored.”

The IPJ’s comparisons of the COVID-19 pandemic to previous pandemics provides a useful insight into what we know about the psychological effects of pandemics, but largely

ignores the impact on mental health of the pandemic to which COVID-19 is so often compared: the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 – 1920. This is likely due to the dearth of existing research on the subject.

[Writing for the Psychiatric Times in May 2020](#), Dr. Greg Eghigian of Penn State University provides more insight into the impacts of the Spanish flu on mental health. Eghigian found that, while little research had been done on the topic, historical demographer Sverre Erik Mamelund’s research provided vital insight.

“Looking at asylum hospitalizations in Norway from 1872 to 1929, Mamelund found that the number of first-time hospitalized patients with mental disorders attributed to influenza increased by an average annual factor of 7.2 in the 6 years following the pandemic,” Eghigian said. “In addition, he pointed out that Spanish flu survivors reported sleep disturbances, depression, mental distraction, dizziness, and difficulties coping at work, and that influenza death rates in the United States during the years 1918-1920 significantly and positively related to suicide.”

Eghigian notes that several scholars have suspected that there may be a connection between the Spanish flu and “a pronounced increase in neurological diseases.”

All of this is to say that the effects of the pandemic on mental health were swift and drastic, but not unexpected by those with expertise on the subject. The history of human civilization is littered with outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics that have greatly impacted the human psyche. Our current moment is no different. While the lack of an overall rise of suicide rates was a welcome surprise to experts who predicted a more drastic uptick, the increase in

cases of depression, anxiety, stress-related symptoms, and even suicidal ideation are a constant side-effect of pandemics.

The BIPOC Experience

“When I think about what has been the impact on people's mental health, it's been disconnection,” said Kelechi Ubozoh, a mental health consultant, advocate, and author based in California. “What I have seen happen, or the stories I've heard, are really like, feeling isolated, feeling alone, and then also having to navigate different relationships where you haven't been with someone 24/7 and now you are and so, for some couples, it's been really hard and has been breaking their relationships, and then other people have been thriving.”

Ubozoh referred to COVID-19 as a “collective trauma,” adding that, “wherever you sit, whoever you are, you may be experiencing your mental health in a different way than you have been before and everyone has mental health, regardless of if they have a diagnosis or not.”

Ubozoh is a peer support specialist who often leads group therapy sessions she refers to as “healing circles.” Since 2020 these circles have primarily focused on Black employees reflecting on not only mental health, but also the Black community’s reaction to national conversations surrounding race and the killing of Black people by police officers.

Ubozoh notes that when combined with the stresses of the pandemic, and the disproportionate rates to which Black and indigenous people of color (BIPOC) have been impacted by the pandemic, these developments have had a unique impact on BIPOC communities.

In April 2021, the Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities [published a study](#) regarding the racial disparity of COVID-19-related deaths. The study found that the rates at which BIPOC have died of COVID-19 are disproportionately high.

“People who are Black are dying from COVID-19 at 3.6 times the rate of people who are White, and people who are Hispanic, non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native, and non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander are also experiencing disproportionately high COVID-19 mortality rates,” the study stated. “While racial disparities in health outcomes have always existed, COVID-19 has brought the starkness of these disparities to the public eye in a uniquely visible way.”

Ubozoh explained that a year of civil unrest surrounding racism and conversations regarding what it means to be Black in America have only added to the stress and trauma experienced by Black people, exacerbating the problems brought on by an already stressful pandemic.

“Add in very public murders of Black and brown people that have been going on this entire time, but because everyone is home and watching at the same time, it's so much louder and people are sharing these videos of Black death, which is traumatizing,” Ubozoh said.

Ubozoh noted that while some in her healing circles embrace a new national conversation about race, others see their employers “tweeting hashtag Black Lives Matter” as disingenuous “lip service.” The nature in which the pandemic, coupled with the traumatizing experience of Black death has created a uniquely difficult situation for BIPOC communities.

“It's not about a diagnosis, it's about historical trauma,” Ubozoh said.

Additional Perspectives

While much of the raw data emerging from the pandemic does seem to suggest an overall deterioration in mental health, it is obvious that much research still needs to be done to truly assess the extent and severity of the damage. Add to this some unexpected positive effects of the pandemic on mental health care, and what may be conclusively said about the effects of the pandemic on mental health remains unclear.

“Well, it's still a little bit too early to find out, honestly,” said Manuela McDonough, director of public relations at the JED Foundation, when asked about the impact of the pandemic on mental health.

The JED Foundation is a nonprofit organization whose main goal is preventing the suicide of teens and young adults. JED goes about this by assessing schools’ mental health, substance abuse, and mental health programs, and advising those schools on how best to strengthen them. . The foundation also conducts research on mental health in young adults.

[A JED study](#) conducted in September 2020 surveyed 2,074 parents regarding the mental health of their children aged 2-18. While the study did find that half of teens reported experiencing “mental or emotional health challenges in the past month, most commonly anxiety, trouble concentration and social isolation/loneliness,” it also reported that in 53% of cases, the child’s mental health remained the same as before the pandemic.

“We're seeing a 20- to 30-percent increase in social isolation, but there's also, on the flip side, actually, an increase in social connectedness too, because we're seeing that kids are now spending more time with their family and their parents and so there's more cohesion at the family and unit level than there really has been before,” McDonough said. “We've also seen an increase

in resilience, which is also something that's really kind of a silver lining and really something that we need to study a little bit more.”

Both McDonough and Ubozoh noted that the impact of the pandemic on everyone has reduced the stigma surrounding mental health, with Ubozoh explaining that the universal nature of the shared trauma makes it easier to talk about.

“The one thing I'll say about COVID, in general, is that people are far more open to talking about mental health than I've ever seen,” Ubozoh said.

Technology has been a large factor in not only reducing the stigma surrounding seeking help for mental health related issues, but also in providing access to that assistance in areas where that might not have otherwise been the case.

“The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated very clearly that there are significant inequities in our healthcare system,” said New York State Office of Mental Health Commissioner Dr. Ann Sullivan in [an article for Behavioral Health News](#). “It has also shown that technology – and in particular telehealth — can help address those inequities, expand access to care and lower the costs of providing behavioral healthcare.”

Along with telehealth, personal guided meditation apps such as Calm and Headspace have also seen a spike in users during the pandemic.

“In April, as Covid-19 forced lockdowns around the world, first-time downloads of Calm jumped to 1.6 million, up 36% from a comparatively uneventful January,” said Sarah Todd in [an article for Quartz](#).

[Another Quartz article from January 2021](#) revealed that revenue from the top 100 mental wellness apps increased from \$771 million in 2019 to \$1.1 billion in 2020.

“You don't need to have a diagnosis to engage with mindfulness or checking in on how your thoughts are maybe telling you negative messages about yourself and how you want to maybe reflect and interrupt that,” Ubozoh said on the usefulness of wellness apps. “What I think about these types of apps that are more open and more self-driven is that I can go listen to whatever I want in the app, or I can do a meditation, or I can track my mood and see what's been happening, or I can reflect on a really powerful quote. I think that has been a really useful tool in a lot of the spaces that I've been seeing.”

Conclusion

Following my suicide attempt I spent nearly two weeks inpatient at Saint Joseph's Medical Center and an additional two weeks as a patient in the partial hospitalization program at St. Vincent's Hospital in Harrison, New York. It was during this time that it was decided that I had previously been misdiagnosed. What was once believed to be major depression was now re-diagnosed as bipolar disorder.

A result of this misdiagnosis was that the anti-depressants I had been prescribed might have been worsening the effects of my manic phases of bipolar disorder. Simply put, the medication prescribed to pick me up may have been doing too good a job and could have been exacerbating my more manic symptoms when they arose. It is hard to say definitively, because everyone's brain reacts differently and mental health is so often inexact, but that was the main reasoning given by my health care providers.

It is hard to say to what extent, if at all, the pandemic worsened my mental state. I cannot say with any degree of certainty whether I would have done what I did had I not been forced to quarantine myself for most of the year.

The stress of quarantine and social isolation certainly led to increased instances of depression, anxiety, and feelings of social isolation. This was apparent early in the pandemic and the data reveal the same result one year later. It could very well be true that, combined with an already deteriorating mental state, that these developments made worse what was already there. It could also be true that a misdiagnosis and improper medication simply made me a ticking time bomb.

The pandemic has changed the entire landscape of mental health throughout the country; from how we talk about it to how we access it. It is clear now that much remains to be learned about how severe and widespread the impact of this pandemic has been on mental health, but it is vital to a populace undergoing a collective trauma to examine the effects of that trauma.

“People do and can get better,” Ubozoh said at the end of our conversation. “I think they have to be part of that.”

Source List:

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Manuela McDonough, April 8, 2021; Director of Public Relations, JED Foundation;

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