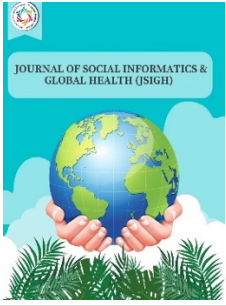



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Crisis within a Crisis: The Invisible Battle for Mental Health amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the overlooked impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health within the broader context of globalization. As globalization facilitates interconnectedness among nations, it inadvertently accelerates the spread of infectious diseases, amplifying their socioeconomic and healthcare ramifications. The emergence of COVID-19 in late 2019 ushered in an unprecedented global crisis, straining healthcare systems and disrupting economies worldwide. While much attention has been directed towards the physical and economic consequences of the pandemic, the profound psychological toll often remains sidelined. This study aims to elucidate the complex interplay between globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic, and mental health, drawing upon data about mobility, economy, healthcare infrastructure, and country-level health susceptibility. The research aims to examine the linked parts to highlight the mental health difficulties worsened by the pandemic and suggest specific interventions to enhance resilience and well-being. The conclusion stresses the critical importance of prioritizing mental health in public health measures, especially focusing on vulnerabilities in children, adolescents, and frontline workers. Societies can become stronger and more resilient by acknowledging and dealing with the hidden struggle for mental health throughout this crisis.



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1. Introduction

Globalization, characterized by economic prosperity and cultural exchange, has profoundly reshaped the modern world, fostering unprecedented interconnectedness among nations (Mir et al., 2014). However, alongside its undeniable benefits, globalization has inadvertently facilitated the rapid spread of infectious diseases throughout history. From the devastating bubonic plague to the catastrophic influenza outbreak of 1918, historical pandemics serve as stark reminders of the dark side of global connectivity (Slone, 2021). In recent times, globalization has only intensified the transmission of infectious diseases, exacerbating their impact on economies and healthcare systems worldwide.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 heralded an unprecedented global crisis, testing the resilience of nations and societies on an unparalleled scale. With millions infected and lives lost, the pandemic has not only strained healthcare systems to their limits. Still, it has also inflicted severe economic repercussions, disrupting trade, travel, and the daily livelihoods of billions (Herbert & Marquette, 2021). In response to the profound uncertainties wrought by the pandemic, governments worldwide have implemented sweeping measures, including widespread lockdowns and significant shifts in workforce dynamics, to contain the virus and mitigate its fallout.

While the attention is mainly on the immediate physical and economic effects of COVID-19, the unnoticed struggle for mental health is as significant. The pandemic's psychological impact, worsened by long-term social isolation, widespread dread, and uncertainty, significantly endangers the well-being of people globally. Amidst the chaos and upheaval, mental health concerns are sometimes overlooked due to the more evident disasters happening around us.

This study aims to focus on the overlooked influence of the COVID-19 epidemic on mental health in the context of globalization. This project intends to analyze data on mobility, economy, healthcare systems, and country-level health susceptibility to understand the problems faced by the pandemic and its impact on mental well-being. This study aims to enhance our comprehension of the complex challenges presented by the pandemic and provide specific solutions to improve mental health during difficult times through a thorough review of interconnected elements.

2. Mental Health

Understanding mental health involves recognizing its multidimensional nature beyond the absence of mental disorders. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health encompasses complete physical, mental, and social well-being, emphasizing the importance of mental health in overall wellness (Lindert et al., 2015). This broader perspective includes subjective well-being, self-efficacy, autonomy, and the ability to cope with life's stresses. Mental health is not solely the concern of individuals with diagnosed disorders; rather, it affects society as a whole and poses significant challenges to global development (World Health Organization, 2022).

Certain groups, such as the poor, homeless, and victims of violence, are at higher risk, highlighting the societal impact of mental health issues. Despite its importance, mental health has often been overlooked or neglected compared to physical health in many parts of the world. This discrepancy underscores the need for greater awareness and prioritization of mental health in public health initiatives and policy-making. Promoting mental health involves preventing mental disorders and enhancing positive emotional, cognitive, and social experiences (Fusar-Poli et al., 2020). Mental health promotion aims to increase individuals' capacity to cope with life's challenges, fostering resilience and well-being across the lifespan. It involves addressing risk factors and protective factors, such as childhood maltreatment or supportive

social networks, to create environments that support mental health (Mehta et al., 2021). Societies can enhance individuals' ability to reach their full potential by seeing mental health as a crucial aspect of overall well-being and tackling the social factors that impact it. This involves investing in mental health education, reducing the stigma around mental illness, and guaranteeing access to high-quality mental health care for everyone.

3. Examining the Psychological Effects of COVID-19 on Mental Well-being

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the profound treatment disparity in mental health on a global scale, intensifying pre-existing inequalities. Emerging needs for mental healthcare intersect with fragile health systems, limited resources, workforce capacity limitations, and social upheaval prompted by COVID-19 containment measures, further widening the gap in equitable access to evidence-based interventions (Gruber et al., 2021). The enduring repercussions on mental health are expected to be especially dire in the least-resourced and most impoverished regions, where access to mental health services was virtually absent before the pandemic.

As asserted by Gruber et al., (2021), “Emerging reports on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health primarily document an increase in symptoms of mental health distress, potentially reflecting a normative response to the extraordinary uncertainties and challenges faced by populations.” Observations have shown an increase in psychological distress among healthcare workers due to stigma and fear related to the condition. However, these stories suggest a possible change in how distress is spread around the community, showing a rise in the occurrence of mental health problems that are clinically serious. A statewide study in Bangladesh found that “33% of over 10,000 adults surveyed had depression, and 5% reported having suicide thoughts” (Mamun et al., 2021). Persistent global unease prevails as uncertainties persist regarding the disease trajectory, the efficacy of containment measures, and the timeline for a return to pre-pandemic norms. These anxieties are magnified by implementing stringent containment protocols, such as widespread global lockdowns, enacted by governments.

The ramifications of these measures are unprecedented, particularly in nations where informal labor markets dominate, resulting in public discontent and occasional outbreaks of violence. As mentioned by Gibson et al., (2021), “Incidents of violence, arrests, and human rights violations have emerged due to Coronavirus containment efforts, intensifying psychological anguish among at-risk populations. Mental health risks are worsened by systemic social injustices related to demographic, economic, neighborhood, and culture factors.” Factors such as “poverty, socioeconomic inequality, and limited access to healthcare and social safety nets” heighten the likelihood of mental health issues, especially in underprivileged populations. Older populations, who are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in terms of illness severity and mortality, also face heightened psychological impacts due to isolation, compounded by pre-existing health issues and reduced access to care (Murphy et al., 2021). Front-line health workers are another vulnerable group experiencing mental health challenges, including stigma, fear of infecting loved ones, and trauma from treating coronavirus patients.

Long-Term Impacts

In the absence of substantial global intervention, the Coronavirus pandemic stands to perpetuate adverse impacts on both economic stability and social determinants of mental health across the globe. Heightened levels of anxiety, mood disorders, and trauma-related conditions, compounded by socioeconomic strains, are anticipated to surge, potentially leading to an increase in suicide rates worldwide (Penninx et al., 2022). Projections suggest a significant uptick in suicides attributed to economic strains and other risk factors.

However, establishing robust monitoring and reporting systems is imperative to gauge the pandemic's toll and formulate targeted interventions comprehensively.

The prolonged closure of educational institutions due to the pandemic is expected to significantly impact the emotional well-being of children, adolescents, and young adults worldwide (Viner et al., 2022). Educational establishments serve as vital hubs for academic advancement, fostering socio-emotional growth, providing crucial social support networks, and addressing food insecurity issues. The shuttering of schools could exacerbate food insecurity among children, exacerbating negative mental health outcomes. In essence, the Coronavirus pandemic presents multifaceted challenges to mental health on a global scale, exacerbating existing inequalities and amplifying vulnerabilities among diverse populations. Understanding both the immediate and long-term effects on mental well-being is paramount to devising tailored interventions and mitigating the pandemic's impact on mental health.

4. Understanding the Factors Influencing Mental Health Impacts during COVID-19

Empirical studies have revealed significant adverse mental health outcomes among patients who tested positive for COVID-19. Studies have found higher levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms among COVID-19 patients. Furthermore, a web-based survey in China identified high prevalence rates of generalized anxiety disorder, depressive symptoms, and deteriorated sleep quality among individuals (Elhadi et al., 2021). Suicidal behavior among COVID-19-positive individuals has also been reported, highlighting a critical mental health concern exacerbated by the pandemic.

Preexisting mental health problems exacerbate the psychological impact of COVID-19 among patients. As highlighted by Cenat et al., (2021), “Research has shown markedly elevated levels of PTSD symptoms, anxiety, despair, distress, and insomnia in psychiatric patients as compared to healthy individuals. Psychiatric patients experienced particularly severe unfavorable psychological impacts during the pandemic.” Healthcare providers have encountered significant mental health difficulties within the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have shown significant differences in “fear, anxiety, and depression between frontline healthcare providers and non-clinical staff” (Ardebili et al., 2021). Frontline workers, particularly those with close contact with COVID-19 patients, have experienced heightened levels of fear, anxiety, and psychological stress. Isolation and psychological stress during the pandemic have also affected healthcare providers. Those who tested positive for COVID-19 experienced psychological stress and emotional changes during isolation (Davis et al., 2021). Healthcare practitioners saw higher levels of burnout than the general population. Frontline personnel reported lower burnout rates but had distinct mental health requirements compared to non-frontline staff. Hou et al. (2020) stated that “several occupational factors, including workload and exposure to COVID-19 related news, have caused mental health problems among healthcare professionals. Gender disparities have been observed, with female healthcare workers showing higher levels of anxiety and depression than their male counterparts.”

Contributing Factors to COVID-19-Related Mental Health Issues

Penninx et al. (2022) found that characteristics such as “age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, income, residence, comorbidities, exposure to Coronavirus news, coping mechanisms, and social support have a substantial impact on mental health outcomes throughout the pandemic.” People with preexisting mental health conditions are more susceptible, whereas strong social support networks lower the chances of negative outcomes. Confidence in healthcare professionals, compliance with safety protocols, and community backing all influence mental well-being. Comprehending these aspects is essential for creating customized interventions and support systems for impacted persons, including healthcare professionals.

5. Effects of COVID-19 on Children and Adolescents

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the lives of children and adolescents worldwide, surpassing previous outbreaks like SARS, MERS, or H1N1 in its scale and disruption. School closures alone affected approximately 862 million children and young people globally, representing half of the student population (Deolmi & Pisani, 2020). Numerous scholars have raised concerns over the psychological effects of the pandemic on this demographic. Research in developmental psychology sheds light on potential focus areas for understanding the psychosocial impact of widespread disruptions on children's lives. It's understood that the effects will vary significantly based on factors such as age and family demographics. For example, infants and toddlers may experience heightened stress due to parental strain, which has been associated with behavior problems over extended periods (Xiang et al., 2020). Middle childhood and adolescence are particularly vulnerable to loneliness resulting from a lack of regular contact with friends, a concern not necessarily alleviated by digital communication. Surveys conducted during school closures highlight challenges such as loss of structure, routine, and social connection, with themes of anxiety, loneliness, and loss of motivation emerging among young people.

Protracted closures of schools and strict lockdown measures have exacerbated detrimental effects on children's physical and mental well-being, resulting in diminished physical activity, heightened screen time, disrupted sleep routines, and suboptimal dietary habits. These adverse impacts are exacerbated when children are confined indoors, with restricted access to outdoor activities and social engagements. Of particular concern are the potential disruptions to essential treatment and support services for children and adolescents grappling with physical or mental health challenges, as prolonged social isolation during these critical developmental stages has been correlated with adverse health outcomes in adulthood (Theberath et al., 2022). A rapid systematic review suggests “that the mental health repercussions of social isolation and loneliness among children and adolescents during and after Coronavirus lockdowns will include higher levels of depression and anxiety” (Loades et al., 2020). Overall, understanding and addressing the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on children and adolescents require comprehensive strategies that prioritize their well-being and provide necessary support services.

6. Mental Health Outcomes in Young People During COVID-19

The ramifications of the Coronavirus pandemic on the psychological well-being of young individuals have raised significant apprehension, prompting research into diverse mental health repercussions. These repercussions encompass a spectrum of conditions, including but not limited to depressive symptoms, anxiety disorders, psychological anguish, stress specifically attributed to the Coronavirus, apprehension regarding contracting the virus, preoccupation with coronavirus, emotional responses, and behavioral challenges.

Depression

Research findings have indicated varying prevalence rates of depression among young individuals, spanning from 22.6% to 43.7% (Nearchou et al., 2020). While a few research studies reported prevalence rates with descriptive statistics included, others used Likert-point assessments to measure the average severity of depressed symptoms.

Anxiety

Anxiety symptoms, as highlighted by Nearchou et al., (2020), “were identified in 18.9% to 37.4% of young people across different studies. Some studies reported Mean scores of anxiety using Likert-point scales, while others did not provide mean scores at all.”

COVID-19 Emotional Reactions and Mental Health Outcomes

Numerous studies have examined emotional responses to Coronavirus, such as health-related fear, infection concerns, and anxiety regarding social restrictions like social distancing. These emotional reactions have been linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). For example, in adolescents, “fear of Coronavirus has been found to predict symptoms of depression, anxiety, and OCD” (Nearchou et al., 2020). Worry about contracting COVID-19 has been positively associated with an elevated risk of depressive symptoms in children, while optimism has shown to be protective. The impact of social distancing behavior on mental health varies, with some adolescents experiencing heightened anxiety symptoms due to peer pressure for adherence, while others report increased depressive symptoms.

7. Mental Health Resilience of Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite concerns about the mental health impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on older adults, emerging evidence suggests that they may exhibit higher resilience to anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders compared to younger age groups. This resilience is evident in various studies conducted across different countries and settings, indicating lower rates of mental health conditions among older adults during the initial phase of the pandemic.

Lower Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders

Research, including studies conducted by the “Centers for Disease Control and Prevention” (CDC), has indicated notably lower rates of anxiety, depression, and trauma- or stress-related disorders among older adults in comparison to younger age demographics. Additionally, older adults have reported lower incidences of new or heightened substance use and suicidal thoughts, underscoring their resilience in managing stressors associated with the pandemic. (Igarashi et al., 2022).

Factors Contributing to Resilience

Factors contributing to the resilience of older adults include better emotional regulation, cognitive capacity, personality traits, and physical health. External resources such as social status and financial stability also play a role in buffering against adverse mental health outcomes (Resnick, 2020). Moreover, the quality of social connections and the ability to use technology for social connectedness are important protective factors.

Role of Wisdom and Coping Mechanisms

Wisdom, characterized by prosocial behaviors like empathy and compassion, may mitigate loneliness and promote greater well-being among older adults. Coping mechanisms such as social connectedness, access to mental health care, and engagement in meaningful activities have been identified as key factors in maintaining resilience during the pandemic.

Need for Continued Monitoring and Support

While initial findings suggest higher resilience among older adults, it is essential to continue monitoring their mental health outcomes, especially among high-risk subgroups such as those from underrepresented minorities or with lower household incomes. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the long-term effects of the pandemic on older adults' mental well-being and to tailor interventions accordingly.

Importance of Nonpharmacological Approaches

Clinicians and caregivers should prioritize nonpharmacological approaches such as cognitive behavior therapy, physical activity promotion, compassion training, and spiritual engagement, which have been shown to enhance coping and resilience and reduce loneliness among older adults (Simon et al., 2020).

Utilizing Technology and Resources

Leveraging technology for social connection and access to mental health services is crucial in supporting the mental well-being of older adults during the pandemic. Clinicians should assess resource availability and provide support to mitigate the absence of material, social, or cognitive resources among older adults and their families. Ultimately, although certain older individuals exhibit resilience to the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, continuous monitoring and study are essential to comprehend the diverse results at both individual and communal levels. Interventions should prioritize improving coping skills, fostering social connectivity, and meeting the specific requirements of older persons to safeguard their mental well-being throughout and after the epidemic.

8. Recommendations for Postpandemic Mental Health Preparedness and Service Delivery

In anticipation of post-pandemic mental health needs, a comprehensive approach is essential. The “Mental Health Preparedness and Action Framework” (MHPAF) serves as a foundation, encompassing five interlinked components (Ransing et al., 2020). Firstly, preparation and coordination efforts must be strengthened to enhance the overall response to mental health challenges postpandemic. Secondly, robust monitoring and assessment mechanisms should be implemented to gauge the evolving mental health landscape and tailor interventions accordingly. Thirdly, ensuring the sustainability of mental healthcare services is paramount, particularly considering the strain on mental health professionals (MHPs) during the pandemic. Strategies to manage infodemics, combat misinformation, and promote responsible media reporting are crucial to mitigate the spread of fake news and polarizing content (Javier, 2020). Finally, establishing telepsychiatry services, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), can provide equitable access to psychiatric care, overcoming barriers such as the digital divide and poverty to make telepsychiatry feasible and accessible.

Additional Interventions for Postpandemic Psychiatric Services

Expanding beyond the “Mental Health Preparedness and Action Framework” (MHPAF), several additional interventions can bolster post-pandemic psychiatric services. Integral to this is the implementation of integrative care, whereby national public health policies are structured to incorporate mental health into various domains such as hospitals, primary care facilities, communities, educational institutions, and workplaces. This integration fosters collaboration between different settings and mental health services, promoting a holistic approach to mental healthcare. Community mental health services play a pivotal role in this framework by being equipped to screen individuals, identify those at risk, offer psychological first aid, and facilitate appropriate referrals. It's crucial to train primary healthcare workers

and organizational gatekeepers to recognize and address psychiatric and psychosocial issues stemming from the pandemic. Additionally, prioritizing the well-being of mental health professionals (MHPs) by addressing challenges related to redeployment and potential burnout is imperative.

Additionally, grassroots medical professionals should be trained to identify and treat pandemic-related psychiatric and psychological disorders. Standardized care requires norms and processes based on common themes like health hazards, loneliness, sadness, and economic uncertainties. Early mental illness screening and treatment and prospective cohort studies to identify risk factors, track outcomes, and compare subgroups are crucial. To reduce stigma and discrimination, especially against minority or vulnerable groups, drivers and facilitators must be identified for targeted interventions. Creating an international network of mental health experts with the “World Health Organization” (WHO) can help share research and therapeutic practices to enhance community and individual resilience. After COVID-19, universal, selective, and indicated mental healthcare prevention and treatment must be implemented while addressing the various requirements of the people to promote mental well-being.

9. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the critical importance of mental health, extending beyond the mere absence of mental disorders to encompass a broad spectrum of well-being. As the World Health Organization emphasizes, health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. Despite this understanding, mental health concerns have historically been overlooked or neglected, often overshadowed by more visible physical health issues. However, the pandemic has underscored the urgent need to address mental health on a global scale. Older adults, who initially faced heightened risks and concerns due to the pandemic, have demonstrated surprising resilience in the face of adversity. While concerns remain about long-term effects, early evidence suggests that older adults may be less negatively affected by mental health outcomes compared to other age groups.

On the other hand, children and adolescents have shown vulnerabilities to the mental health impacts of COVID-19, experiencing heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and other psychological distress. The pandemic has disrupted their routines, social connections, and access to support systems, exacerbating existing mental health challenges and potentially leading to long-term consequences. As governments and policymakers navigate the complexities of the pandemic, addressing mental health needs must be prioritized. Targeted interventions, increased awareness, and improved access to psychological support are essential for mitigating the psychological and psychiatric effects of Coronavirus. Additionally, frontline workers, including healthcare staff, require particular attention and support to prevent burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

In conclusion, neglecting mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic is not an option. Mental health must remain a central focus of public health responses, ensuring the well-being and resilience of individuals and communities amidst this unprecedented crisis. By acknowledging and addressing the invisible battle for mental health, we can emerge from this crisis stronger and more resilient than before.

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